

## **The Perspective of Arabic Muslim Women toward Sport Participation**

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this study is to examine perspective of Arabic Muslim women toward the involvement in sport and physical activity. A sample of 15 Arabic Muslim women (age between 14 to 30 years old) who sojourn in Malaysia (i.e., studying, visiting, or housewife) have agreed to participate in the interview. All of them have signed an informed consent letter to be tape recorded. The recorder interviews were transcript and content analysis processes were conducted to identify the answers given in the semi structured questionnaire. Result shows that the women in this study are strongly influenced by the processes of cultural maintenance and identify with their parent's ethnic group. Twelve Arabic Muslim women from 15 belong to different Arabic countries answered on question 3 with negative aspect as an example of the women who positions themselves clearly within the framework of their ethnic identity. The participating for the young Arabic Muslim woman in sport is seen as a challenge to the boundaries of their ethnic identities. The young Arabic Muslim women who position themselves clearly within the framework of their ethnic identities are not interested in sport because doing sport is not seen as a respectable femininity. Perhaps, these Arabic Muslim women who challenge their ethnic identities by participating in sport have experienced being harassed because they participate in sport. Recommendations for future research were also suggested in this paper.*

**Keywords:** *Islam, Sports, Arabic Women, Participation*

### **1 Introduction**

Within sport research, the focus on race and religiosity from a social science perspective has for a long time been a marginal research area. Today, much of the early research on race and sport has been criticized for being ethnocentric (Fleming 1994) with stereotypes like 'Arabic countries are not interested in sports' or 'Muslim girls are constrained by their parents from participating'. How accurate are those deductions need further groundwork examination. As the insider who understand the Arabic women culture and

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behavior, perhaps, this research will answer all the unforeseen circumstances in the issues of Arab women.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

Sport participation scientifically can provide these benefits: lowers your risk of getting heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, colon cancer, and diabetes lowers high blood pressure, reduces anxiety and depression and improves your mood, helps you handle stress, helps control your weight, gives you more energy, helps you sleep better and helps you look better (Moore, 2007). In spite of the benefits, the nature of women physical and emotional affects their interest in participating in sports as they become older. The girls are active in their younger age, but the attitude towards sports start decreasing as they achieved their puberty aged. Perhaps the sudden feminine body growth and the hormonal un-stability like regular menstruation period among these young ladies change their interest from 'get active' to 'lady-like-person' such as making up, shaping up and doing household works. This feminine attitude was actually a universal phenomenon once a girl became a lady. Thus, it is not only became constraints for a particular religion such as Islam. Even though the concepts of Muslim women in sport considering that sport accommodate the good health and fitness as well as a principle, however it was found that some Arab women still hiding themselves in the house rather than get involved with outside activities (Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation, 2008). According to Walseth (2006) there were two models that link young Muslim women's identity work to their participation in sport and physical activity. First model: Being a young woman and participating in sport is seen as a challenge to the boundaries of their ethnic identities. Second model: among those who regard religion (Islam) as a more important source of identification than ethnicity. Perhaps, by understanding the reasons of sedentary behavior due to ethnic or religious identities among Arab women who sojourn in Malaysia will help the respective authorities to create a more appropriate program so that this particular population can also participated in

sports. Feasibly, it will help them to socialize with other local women that also help to improve their body shape, fitness and health.

The sedentary behavior among those women who dislike sport must also be broken otherwise it could affect a women's input into society, as well as her relationship with her husband and family. The dispute of unfeminine because of their involvement in physical activities should be eliminated because it ruined women vitality. As for that, Prophet Mohammad had also advised his Muslim followers to participate in many forms of sport, which even today are considered of the best form of exercise. The Apostle of Allah himself would engage in archery and horse-riding, racing, wrestling and swimming (Hikmat Beiruty, 2004). In relation to that, Al-baiti Rasulala and Sahaabah were aware of these issues, and would exhort others for the same. Aisha (Prophet Mohammad wife) was on a journey along with the Prophet Mohammad, she had a race with him and anteceded him. As time passed, the Prophet wanted to avenge for his loss, so he raced Aisha. Again in which case he anteceded her, and remarked for that anteceding. Moreover, Ali bin Abi Talib (Muslim Khalifah) said: "Refresh your minds from time to time, for a tired mind becomes blind." Abu Darda` (Muslim ingenious) also commented: "I entertain my heart with something trivial in order to make it stronger in the service of the Truth" (Hikmat Beiruty, 2004).

In spite of the worthiness, the ethnic and ideologies do not always promote exercise and physical activity for women. Perhaps, due to religious misunderstanding and/or a lack of awareness in the society some of them prohibited themselves from sports. Despite, Islam promotes good health and fitness for both men and women, there are several misconceptions regarding Arabic Muslim women participating in sport. Arabic Muslim women are represented as maltreated and unable to engage with society and in sports. However there are guidelines within which sports can be practiced; this entails women following their faith by not engaging in mixed gender sports and by observing a dress code. This consists of covering the hair and wearing modest clothing by covering the arms and legs (Yuka, 2002). Islam encourages building up an integrated personality and stresses sports such as swimming, archery and horse-riding, encouraging both men

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and women to engage in physical activity in order to maintain healthy lifestyles. The practice and interpretation of Islam are affected by nationality, cultural and ethnic factors. Due to religious misinterpretations or simply a lack of awareness, many Muslim women have been prevented from participating in sports (Walseth, 2003). More study on how to improve the rate of participation among Muslim women should be considered (Famida Begum, et al, 2008). What actual reasons Arabic women disinterest to participate in sport, yet be understood. Is it an opportunity or treat for them to participate if their faith will not allow them to mix with other gender and dress code? Or is it because of the society who unable to accept their non-mixed culture and dress code that is uneconomical to entertain?

### **3. The Blue Ants**

#### **3. The Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to focus on the relationship between young Arabic Muslim women and sport. More specifically it also will explore how young Arabic Muslim women are influenced by their ethnic although the Islam religion as a more important source of identification than ethnicity, being physically active is seen as important because of Islam's health aspects? Thus, through this research it helps to doctrine the reason of not participating in sports.

#### **4. Methodology**

The sample of 15 young Arabic Muslim women who came to Malaysia to study as well as becoming housewife and as a tourist. The nationalities of the respondents are from five different Arab countries such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Sudan and Yemen. Their ages are from 14 to 30 years old. Out of that 12 of them wear the hijab.

#### **Interview Schedule**

One of the challenges when doing life history interviews is to make the stories anonymous, as the informants were

promised full anonymity. Presenting one's life history is very personal and it seems obvious that the informants would not have been as personal if they were not guaranteed anonymity. At the beginning the first author organized invitation to meet with our research sample (20 young Arabic Muslim women). However, only fifteen of them agree to participate and have signed an informed consent letter to be tape recorded. She had interviewed each woman alone. The discussion was very candid, truthfulness and honest. The interview was conducted in a mixed languages which are Arabic and English that are accepted by the respondents. The in-depth interview discourse about the wide concept achievement about Muslim women participation in sport experiences, the interviewees often give very extensive explanations and informative interesting information.

The semi-structure interview

The semi-structure questionnaire that was piloted with one of the Arab woman who is not a respondent was finalized. The interviews consisted of two parts, the first part covered personal information including:

Tell me about your personal background (age, family, education, job, interest and hobbies)

The second part of the interview consisted of a more thematic focus where the researcher asked questions about topics of interest related to the purpose of the study, the questions are:

Do you like sport? Why?

What is your explanation about Islam religion encouragement to participate or exercise of women in sport?

You are Arabic what is your opinion about ethnicity? Is your ethnic identity has any impact on your sport participation? Why?

Suppose you like sport, do you think the veil has any impact on your sport participation? If yes, how?

Do you think your engagement with your family or job has any impact on your sport participation? How?

Do you have a hobby? Is the sport one of your hobbies? If no, does it has any impact on your participation in sport?

## 5. Results and Discussions

Results have shown that the respondents have positive values on sports because of their own interest in sports and religion influences, however, their ethnic and culture have prohibited them to get involved in sports (Table 1). The respondents have confirmed that their interests to participate in sport are for health, fitness and wellness. It is interesting to find out also that religious beliefs have sound values on their affection to participate in sports. In general, Islam promotes good health and fitness and encourages both men and women to engage in physical activity to maintain healthy lifestyles. However, their ethnicity (i.e., society, dress code and family) have discouraged their interest in sports participation.

**Table 1: The frequency for young Arabic Muslim women with positive aspect**

Questions	Frequency with	
	Positive aspect	Negative aspect
Do you like sport? why?	14	1
What is your explanation about Islam religion encouragement to participate or exercise of women in sport?	12	3
You are Arabic what is your opinion about ethnicity? Is your ethnic identity has any impact on your sport participation? why?	3	12
Suppose you like sport, do you think the veil (dress) has any impact on your sport participation? If yes, how?	4	11
Do you think your engagement with your family or job has any impact on your sport participation? How?	6	9

Do you have a hobby? Is the sport one of your hobbies? If no, does has any impact on your participation in sport?	12	3
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It was also found that Arab Muslim women religious beliefs give meaning to the ways in which they structure and approach their life. Islam is a fundamental aspect of their identity and their approach to sport is often determined by cultural and ethnic factors. Yet, Women's Sports Fitness and Foundation (2008) said that many Muslim women have been prevented or not felt able to participate in sports this is relation to their religious and cultural. However, this study found that the cultural (ethnic) that includes parents, dress code, and family are the main reasons prohibited them from sports participations (Figure 1, 2 and 3). Islam encourages building up an integrated personality, Islam stresses sports such as swimming, archery and horse-riding, encouraging both men and women to engage in physical activity (Women's Sports Foundation, 2007). The practice and interpretation of Islam are affected by national, cultural and ethnic factors. Due to religious misinterpretations or simply a lack of awareness, many Muslim women have been prevented from participating in sports these contribute to Muslim women's comparatively.

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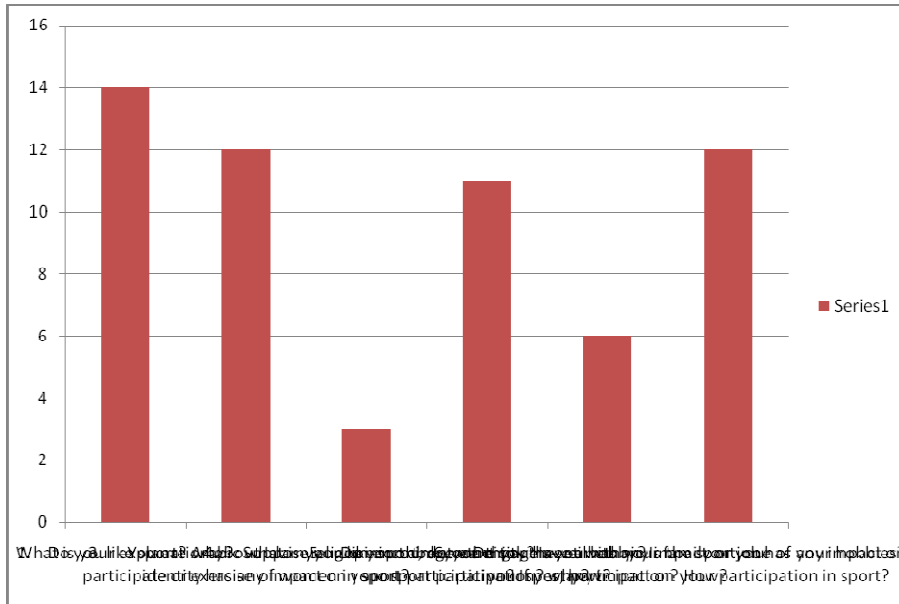


Figure 1. Illustrate the frequency answer for the young Arabic Muslim women with positive aspect.

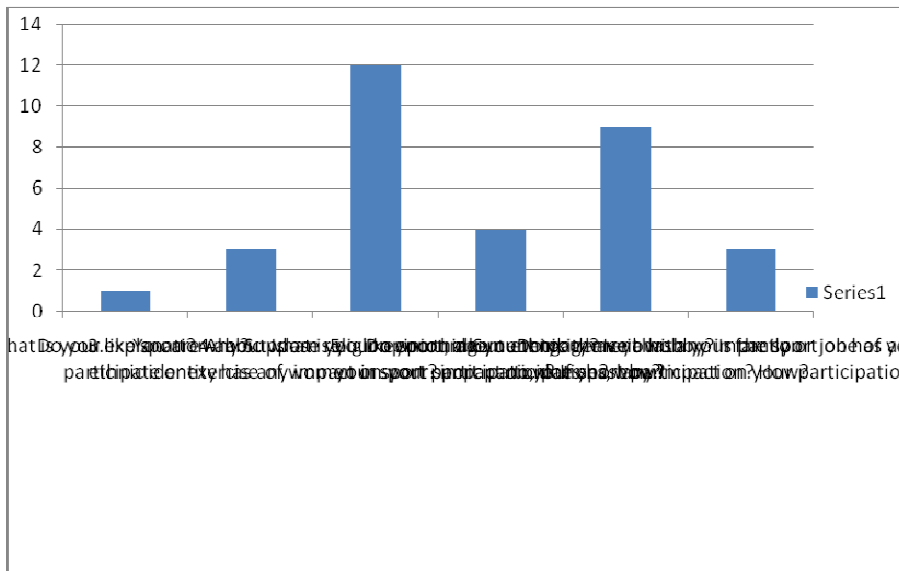




Figure 2. Illustrate the frequency answer for the young Arabic Muslim Women negative aspect.

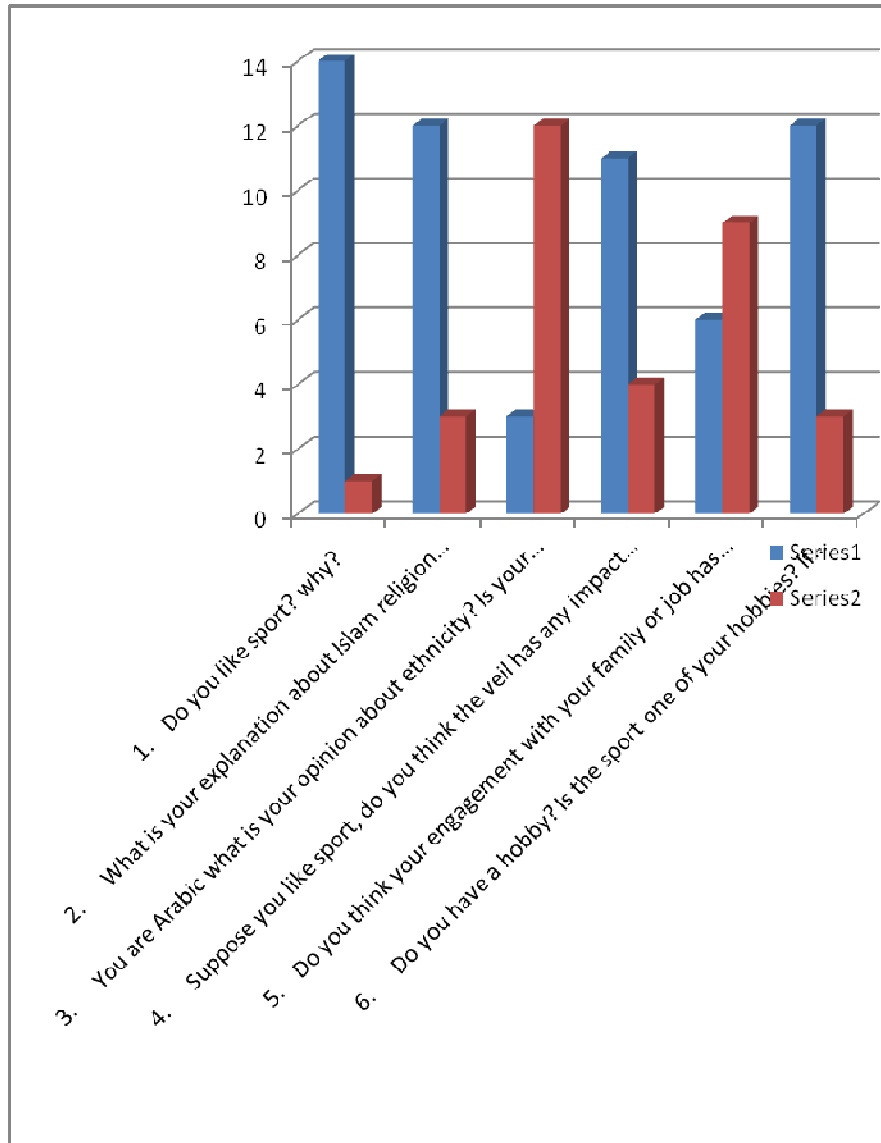


Figure 3. Illustrate the comparison between positive and negative aspects

**Ethnic, dress code and family implications**

The issue of ‘Muslim girls are constrained by their parents from participating,’ that was argued as the stereotypes. This is currently seen as a result of an uncritical and essentialist

use of the concept of culture (Carrington & McDonald 2001). But, this study had found that it is not the religion (Muslim), however it is because of the ethnic, dress code and family.. One of the respondents, Khadeja (Not true name) dictates her experienced:

Khadeja who is religious, but most of her knowledge of Islam is embodied knowledge transferred through traditions. However, she is interested in physical education at school. Khadeja has never participated in any form of organized or non-organized physical activity in her leisure time. From the time when she was 6 until the age of 12 she went to Koran school to learn to read the Koran in Arabic, and spent two hours every afternoon at the mosque. When she was 9 years old she wanted to start doing self defense sport together with her brother, but her parents didn't think it was suitable for a girl. She accepted this and it was not a big deal for her.

Thus, this shows that Khadeja was strongly influenced by the processes of cultural maintenance have developed through socialization an embodied femininity marked by prudence and inactivity. This does not mean that a femininity marked by prudence and inactivity is to be interpreted as an exclusive femininity.

On the contrary, Haifa one of them from Jordan has a very complicated relationship with her family. She is often in conflict with her mother over issues of gender and what is appropriate behavior for a young woman. In her story:

Haifa's mother and some of Haifa's peers (with the same ethnic background as herself) represent the agents who are occupied with Haifa's cultural maintenance. Haifa calls herself Muslim, but does not pray. Haifa's knowledge of Islam is limited to her partial knowledge of her tradition. For her, how to practice one's religion is a question of personal choice. 'I am a Muslim at heart,' Haifa says. Haifa opposes her parents and her ethnic group and operates more disembodied from her family's values. This is seen in her sport involvement. When Haifa was 12 she started to play basketball after her teacher had succeeded in convincing her mother to let her play. Her teacher was also her coach and Haifa played together with girls from her school class. Haifa's mother does not approve of her participation in basketball

and complains that she uses too much time on a sport that this is not suitable for a young woman. She also complains that Haifa is mixing too much with her friends of majority background and that this is not good for her. Her mother's demands resulted in Jess leaving her team at the age of 17, but after a while she started playing again: Haifa is now playing basketball at a high level. Haifa's sport participation is seen as a challenge to the notion of what is implied to be a young woman of Jordan origin. Haifa's sport participation is challenging the boundaries of her ethnic identity.

The life histories of other young women who participate in sport also contain stories of what happens when they are challenging the boundaries of their collective identities.

Two of them dictate:

Noor from Yemen and Aisha from Saudi Arabia talked about the veil (hijab) the wide and length wear how can we play with it and without it this wear that non halal. In our society as well as in our family, as a woman, you must wear hijab to show our feminist. It is unethical if you don't wear hijab.

And others like to participation in physical activities but there are problems about it:

For example, the burqa, a hooded cloak that covers a woman's body from head to feet can limit movement, peripheral vision and choice of physical activities. There are many women refuse the participation in physical activities for this Problem:

With their heads wrapped in scarves, hijab-observing women drape their bodies in long, flowing folds of cloth Mixed-groups - This poses major problems as many Muslim women are put off the Dress code - The question of dress code sport clothes.

Therefore, there's definitely a need for modest sportswear, even beyond Muslim communities (Cutrao, 2009). Perhaps, the advances in sportswear have helped boost the participation of Arab Muslim women, as well. For example, the invention of full-body, wear clothes that cover all her body, wear long trousers to cover all of her legs in swimming will help to improve Arab Muslim women to participate (Murray, 2008). The Arab women parents will certainly disallow their female children to participate without wearing a modest sport wear.

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On the other hand, the family responsibilities also play the unfavorable influence for Arab women to participate in sports. Nine of 15 women said family gave negative impact to them:

Zaynab from Iraq, Sara from Yemen and Aisha from Saudi Arabia talk about their job and family, they said ( It is beginning from 8am to 4pm and for 5 days in week besides children and home responsibility) they also suggest for finding sport Islamic wear that can used in physical activities. Women of Islam are represented as oppressed and unable to engage with society and in sports. In fact Islam promotes good health and fitness for both men and Women.

This study develops the concepts of Muslim women in sport considering that Islam is good health and fitness as well as a principle. It has been to demonstrate the relationship between the young Muslim women and sport. Different nationality, cultural and ethnic traditions create considerable variety in the way Islam is practiced and interpreted. Due to religious misunderstanding and/or a lack of awareness in our society of how to cater for this varied group, many Muslim women have been prevented from participating in sport. In this study explanation of low rate participation, has putting more weight on ethnicity than religion. Thus, Islam religion support good health to men and women, Koran actually encourages physical activity among women - it is the interpretation and extremity of application of the Prophet's words that dictate the practical applications of Islam relative to women. Now, more than ever, we must raise our gaze and open our gaze and open our understanding of women's sports to include the diverse experiences of our Arab Muslim sisters. Further understanding should be considered with other ethnic such as Asian, American, European, or Australia continents on Muslim women perceptions and attitude towards sports participations.

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