ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

Social-Cultural Barriers of Muslim Women Athletes: Case Study of Professional Female Athletes in Iran

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Abstract— The purpose of this research is to identify socio-cultural barriers of Muslim women athletes. A case study on professional female athletes in Iran is carried out in the current study to highlight the barriers that women athletes have to go through in their careers. Qualitative research was performed based on grounded theory. To collect data, the semi-structured interviews were used. The sample was taken from professors of sports management in universities of Iran who were active in the main body of the sport, as well as the chairman and vice chairman of the federations that were selected purposefully. The results of the eleven semi-structured interviews found five categories, namely personal problems, social beliefs, government thought, cultural attitudes, legal-law and customary barriers, all of which included the central issue of social cultural barriers. On the basis of these findings some useful recommendations for policy makers are made which might help them to develop an inclusive and encouraging environment for the athletes and eventually the athletes will be able to overcome the social and cultural hurdles in their career path.

Introduction

Many countries are focusing their attention on women's sports. In the last three decades, while there has been plenty of opportunities for the progress of women in sports, the gap between men's and women's sports is high and women's professional sports face many difficulties and limitations (Hosseini, 2006; Salam, 2016). This neglect and discrimination against women in sports, particularly Muslim women, is due to social and cultural attitudes of the general population. Cultural and social beliefs refer to traditions, beliefs, types of people-to-people communications and social issues, as well as limitations of family responsibilities such as parenting and child care (Chou et al., 2017; Ehsani & Eghbali, 2008; Suharti & Pramono, 2016; Yildiz, 2016). In many Muslim countries, the presence of male athletes was socially accepted, but women participating in sports competitions are considered controversial by religious leaders (Ayatollah) and governors. Consequently, the number of Muslim women participating in the Olympics and other international events is not promising then the chance of participating in top sports contests greatly depend on cultural and religious foundations. The unfair beliefs and attitudes embodied in the culture and society as well as the instrumental view of the gender to woman among many men are an undeniable truth that has yet shadowed the lives of so many women and girls. Instrumental view to woman is in fact a view that consider a woman to be a mother and to serve the family, and under this pretext she will be away from the rest of the social and professional activities such as sport. These traditions, beliefs, attitudes,

and cultures dominate the personal and social life of Muslim women that affect their self-confidence and this issue is a main reason to affect their sport performance in the international arena (Abdullah et al., 2015; Mozafare, 2009). Over the past decades, women's sports have become increasingly popular, and the number of women athletes participating in sporting events is constantly growing (Emeka et al., 2009). The Rio 2016 Olympics closed when the increased presence of athlete women in the tournament was noticeable over the past few years, in a way that many media, such as the Washington Post and Al Jazeera, was discussed to this issue and even Al Jazeera called it "Hijab Olympic "(IW Sports, 2018). In multi-ethnic societies such as the UK and Australia, most sports organizations such as the AFL, the International Cricket Association and the UK Organizing Committee of the 2012 Olympics sought to involve more Muslim women in this issue in order to cover a range of homogeneous multipliers Nationalities. They refer to the sport of Muslim women as a means of "escaping" the restrictions imposed on women and "triumphing" this limitation in Islamic societies (Shergold, 2012). Of course, the socio-cultural problems are not specific to the Iranian society, and this discrimination affects many societies and although women have taken very strenuous steps in the field of sports, the idea of implementation of justice is wrong.

Considering the mentioned problems, recent studies have shown that the growth of professional sports and the presence of female elite athletes in national and international events, in which female athletes from Muslim countries are no exception to this rule. In the Iran as a Muslim country, the efforts of female athletes to participate in super leagues, national squares,

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international events, Asian games, World cup and Olympic Games and also achieving the medals in these events are dramatically increasing. Therefore, the importance of this issue has been investigated by the researcher to examine barriers to professional sport of women in Iran. An overview of the research background showed that past research has focused on the obstacles to women's sports, and so far little research has been done on women's professional sport. As a result, researchers have investigated this research simply by looking at identifying socio-cultural barriers to professional sport of women in Iran, based on their religious and holy beliefs. The use of sport's experts opinions in this area, which themselves were scientifically and practically active in the main body of sports of Iran, and which had comprehensively understood these problems, were considered. To better identify these obstacles, a semi-structured interview based on Grounded theory was used as a method for collecting information and data.

Then the general purpose of this research was to identify socio-cultural barriers of Muslim women athletes by case study on professional women athletes of Iran.

Literature Review

For many reasons which most of them are often social-cultural, women have not had enough time in history to prove their worthiness and willingness to participate actively in sports activities, as they always have borders drawn up against women, and these boundaries have introduced their social role as a female poorly. On many occasions, due to this social imposition, the woman was in the midst of being a woman or playing sports, and she had to choose one, because in most human societies, sports participation was traditionally exclusive to men. While exercise and physical activities are not assigned to the specific group, but it is a divine blessing, which is the absolute right of every human being (Ahmadi, 2006). In the present society, although the claim of gender equality in social and human rights is universally accepted, there is a big distance between its public acceptance and its performance in practice. Harkness (2012), in his research on the barriers to women's participation in Qatar which was done by case study in the women's basketball team at Georgetown University, concluded that " Families that do not support women's sports activities are a major barrier to participation and believe that women should not engage in heavy physical activity against men. Women's advancement and development in women's sports depend on a high level support from governments and governors. However, women face many cultural barriers, even in countries where there is plenty of resources and will to modernize. As an example, Qatar, a country that has recently begun to invest heavily in the sports sector, can be noted (Pfister, 2010). The Qatari Olympic Committee has started a study on women's participation in sports and physical activity: "That study shows that only 15% of Qatar women at the age of fifteen and more regularly exercise » (Qatar National Development Strategy, 2013). Gruff (2014), has considered the things like harassment of a spouse, gender discrimination, and work-life balance challenges the barriers to the advancement of women's sports in Australia. Results of the Summer Olympics 2012 London and the Winter Olympics 2014 Seoul showed that gender equality improves national performance in the Olympics. According to researchers, their studies provided the first evidence that higher levels of gender equality in a country would dramatically predict the success of the Olympic medal for both male and female athletes. They found gender equality is a win-win strategy that let the members of both genders (men and women) to grasp their true potential (Kamkari, 2018). According to the Southern California Studies Center, published feminist studies titled "Social protection of women's sports in the media and the quality of coverage of news "both online and in mass media in 2015; in that study, the ratio of the media coverage of men's professional sports in the comparison to women in the United States was announced 68 to one in TV and 20 to one at written media (Poorgachi et al., 2017).

In terms of cultural barriers, the existence of male-centered culture in sporting societies and the observance of Islamic principles and keeping hijab as the most important obstacles faced by women. Also, regarding social barriers, the lack of attention paid to women's sports by authorities and the lack of support of educational centers such as universities are named as the most important obstacles (Motameni et al., 2014).

Social pressures on women are clearly visible in some of the deprived areas of Iran, especially in areas with traditional texture. A set of attitudes, insights and everything that is perceived to be normative or abnormal made the limits of women in order to know their capabilities and cultural beliefs based on the surrounding social environment and participate in the activities (Poorgachi et al., 2017). The special place for Iran's championship and professional sport is one of the main institutions of sport expansion to the people and the international community and an instrument for achieving strategic goals, consolidating national unity and increasing the spirits and vitality of women. Therefore, focusing solely on elite male sports is not enough, and without the promotion of elite women's sports, a country cannot progress in the international and Olympic championships.

Female have the same right as male to take part in the sports activities but female are facing various problems of inequality throughout the world. The problems of sports participation are more severe especially in Islamic countries of the world and particularly in Iran. There may be different problems behind this situation. The study carried out to identify the influence of social-cultural problems on female athletes with connection to their professional sports participation in Iran.

Methodology

The present study was applied in a qualitative research based on grounded theory. Grounded theory is a kind of qualitative method whose purpose is to understand and perception the experiences of people from events in a particular context, this method is usually used in areas where a lot of researches has not been done before, there is no pattern in this case or the existence of auxiliary pattern does not solve the problem (Parvizy et al., 2003). Regarding the fact that the researchers did not have approached the model or appropriate comprehensive conceptual model in the study of research history in line with the social- cultural barriers of professional women's athletes in Iran, researchers decided to reach the essential barriers of women's athletes by conducting targeted interviews. To collect data, the semi-structured interview was used. The samples were the professors of sports management in universities of Iran, who were somehow active in the main body of the sport, as well as the chairman and vice chairman of the federations that were selected purposefully. Sampling continued until data saturation. In other words, the researchers concluded that the new data would repeat the previous data, so other new conceptual information that needs the new code or extensions of existing codes and classes will not be obtained (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this study, data from interview 8 were saturated, but to ensure that sufficient data were collected, the interviews lasted for up to 11 people. To manage the data, interviews were transcribed and saved as both hard copies and electronic files, then read it while listened and notes simultaneously. Memos were written in the margins. To address the interview responses, a directed content analysis was used. The aim of employing a directed approach to content analysis to extend conceptually or validate a theoretical framework (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The analysis has been made after conducting interviews in three stages in accordance with the guideline of data grounded theory: a) open coding, b) axial coding and c) selective coding. MAXQD Apro 12.3 software was used for each of the three types of coding and the exact analysis of

the statistical data. In fact, in open coding, the purpose is to uncover concepts. In the next step of open coding, considering the common nature of their conceptual propositions, they were included under a more abstract concept. In fact, similar conceptual statements were classified as "main concepts". The next step is the axial coding that converts the concepts derived from the first stage into categories. The third stage was the selective coding that the researcher developed the concepts of the relationship between the categories obtained in the axial coding pattern (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Table I
Participant demographic

Demographic	Data
Gender	5 Female, 6 Male
Age	28 – 69 years
Graduate degree	9 Phd, 1 Phd candidate, 1 Bachelore
Sport's field	1 Basketball, 3 Football, 1 Handball, 1 Squash, 1 Track and field, 1 Wrestling, 3 physical fitness & public sports
Athletic administrative background	2- 35 years

Results and Discussion

The results of the 11 semi-structured interviews showed that after three stages of open, axial and selective coding, 85 codes or badges were obtained that 20 main concepts were identified for them. Then, they were classified in 5 categories, namely personal problems, social beliefs, governmental thought, cultural attitudes, legal- law and customary barriers, all of which included a central issue called social- cultural barriers. In the meantime, governmental thoughts with abundance of 8, incorrect beliefs Institutionalized in the society with a frequency of 7, and the weakness of cultural management with abundance of 5 were among the factors that have the most importance in the ratio of the other equivalents codes in the field of primary concepts which shows that experts consider eliminating these barriers as a guarantee of promoting the sport of Muslim women.
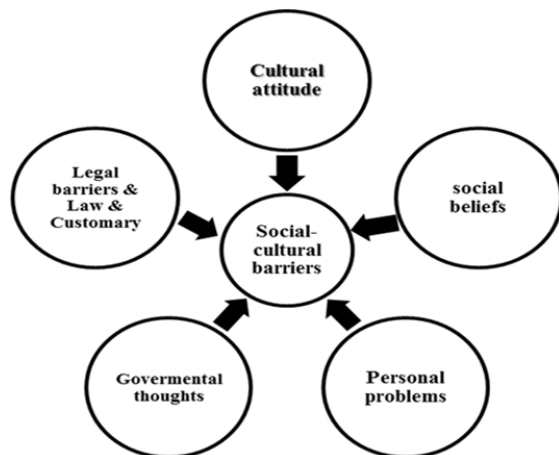

Fig. 1. The modeling of social-cultural barriers for Iranian woman's athletes

Cultural attitudes

Due to the views of sport experts, cultural attitude is category as one of the barriers to professional female athletes and it consists of; Lack of education in recognition of the importance of women's sport to students and family, not using images of athletes in school and universities textbooks,

disregard for promoting the culture of sports women in television films, elitism subversion in sport as a cultural dilemma. For solving this barriers they suggest some solution that it would be efficient in women sport, such as; Cultural management and cultural change to remove cultural barriers, education and culture of attendance to clubs since childhood, use images of elite sports women in textbooks, the correct training modeling to the athletes, promote women's sports, especially sports culture in movies and television. This finding is similar to studies which done by (Motameni et al., 2014; Jamil, 2009; Zia-ul Islam et al., 2014). Regarding cultural barriers, the existence of a man-centered culture in the sports community and the observance of Islamic principles in protecting hijab are the most important obstacles faced by women (Motameni et al., 2014). According to Zia-ul Islam et al. (2014), "a cultural and folkloric, spiritual and physical challenges, creates hindrance in the way of sport participation particular among the female folk.

Social beliefs

Some barriers that mention by participants such as; The false beliefs and attitudes institutionalized in the society towards women's sports, disregard for public sport as the main pillar of women's sports in society, not having the program for the sport of families in organs and public and private institutions, the lack of support and cultural and social constraints on women's sports. They also introduce some ideas for removing these barriers that are included; Expansion of common sport between women and men, institutionalize exercise among families, increase the interest of community through development of women's sport. This category is similar to finding which done by (Mehdipoor, 2007; Motameni et al., 2014). Concerning social barriers, the lack of attention the authorities to women's sports and the lack of support for educational centers such as universities is one of the most important barriers to women's sport (Motameni et al., 2014).

Individual problems

Gender Problem, the personal ideas, creation the exterior motivation are some barriers that participants in this research announced it and researchers category it as individual problems. The results of this research are consistent with the findings of study which done by (Hashemi, 2006; Ohta et al., 2007). In the area of personal barriers, lack of sufficient time, lack of motivation, self-confidence and self-esteem of women mentioned as the most important barriers (Ohta et al., 2007). Some solutions that are suggested by experts in this study such as; encourage and promote self-esteem and self-confidence in girls from childhood, appreciation and encouragement of sports elites and non-discrimination with male athletes, increasing the attractiveness of women to social activities, especially with the continued presence of clubs should be considering clearly.

Governmental though

Governmental though are the new finding in this study, which didn't mention in previous researches, this category describe the attitude, belief, notions and concept of religious leaders that covered and influence female professional athletes in Iran and shadowed on this area vastly.

Fatwa, Protest and opposition of radical clerics and some imitative authorities to prohibit sending female athletes abroad, forbidden the television shows of some events, including wrestling and football for women, by some religious authorities (Ayatollah) and the lack of consistent it with Islamic values, an instrumental view to women as a custodial person whose duty is specific to homework and parenting.

According to Bibi et al. (2016)," Islam promotes good health and fitness

and encourages both men and women to engage in physical activity to maintain healthy lifestyles". In this connection, Henderson & Winn (2006) also argued that "Islam does allow female to participate in sports activities, but there are certain restrictions where female are caged inside the four walls. Participation in sports activities for maintain health and prosperity of mankind is agreed by Muslims and the Holy Quran declares that do not forbid good things which Allah made lawful, and do not transgress that Allah has not transgressed."

Using the opportunity to solve the hijab problem for the presence of women in international squads, solving the problem of women entering the stadiums, paying attention to the guidelines and recommendations of the Islamic religion on the importance of sport and health in human life, as well as encouraging both sexes of men and women to participate in physical activities are some suggestions that experts suggest to solve these problems.

Legal, law and customary barriers

Restrictions on outbound dispatch, politicizing the sport of this stratum, discrimination in the provision of facilities & budget allocation, the lack of real meaning of professional sports of women, legal, customary and legal rules governing on women's sports, inequalities in the fees of athletes, coaches and referees between men and women are put in this categorize, some of finding in this study mentioned by previous researchers that named it structural barriers or lake of facility but in this research, because the ideas about this barriers are more complete than previous finding then, researchers decided to create a new category which named it, legal, law and customary barriers. This category is similar to the finding of (Ghodrati, 2008; Bibi et al., 2016). The barriers to the lack of investment in the development of women's sports facilities and the lack of access to suitable sports spaces and gyms are the most important obstacles to women's sport activities in Iran (Ghodrati, 2008).

Creating a women's sports fan campaign such as the campaign for charity supporters for women, supporting the female athlete's legionnaire, modeling of other countries and using them in accordance with the conditions governing the exercise environment of Iran, eliminating and unifying the parks and public places for public sports regardless of genders, design of veil and suits to cultural values, use of international trainers for coaching and training, identify resources and talent are suggested by sport's experts to remove these barriers from the body of professional female athletes.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study is limited because while selecting the interviewees only academia managers, acting in the main body of the sport, sports federations and sports organizations, were chosen; thus the finding are not generalizable. Due to limited to connect to other Muslim country, the solutions and recommendations maybe not to be suit and match to all Muslim women athletes. Additional, alternative qualitative methods for example; surveys and focus groups, can provide a more thorough examination of identification barriers to Muslim female athletes.

Future study is needed to focus on other Muslim countries where women athletes have strongly demand to participate in Olympic Games and other international events to compare women athletes situations and social- cultural barriers which they struggling with it, in order to remove this problem from the life of Muslim professional female athletes. Another recommendation; interview with the female athlete's elite and identify their views on this issue and compare it with the findings of this research, moreover analyses their opinions and compare with result of this study as well.

Finally, interview with religious leaders with an emphasis on the issue

that the Prophet Mohammed ordered his followers to do physical activity and sports such as swimming, shooting and horse riding and also he directed parents to teach these sports to their children.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the media, social misconceptions, old cultural attitudes, absurd beliefs of religious leaders, law and custom play a role in discriminating women athletes. Another issue lies in Iran's education and training as only a small percentage covers women's sports and its importance. There is a need for social-cultural change beginning from school and from the beginning of childhood. The strategies that respondents put forward to address these barriers include: respect and practice of the Olympic Charter Act on gender equality and meritocracy in sports federations, counseling to solve the problem of women entering stadiums, television broadcasting of women's sports events through media National with regard to the removal of the Hijab ban law, the promotion of the culture of women's sports in cinema and television films, cultural education to institutionalize sports in families, the lack of gender segregation in public sports and public places, the use of images Elite athlete women in school textbooks, culture education, attending clubs with the family from childhood and through educational books, trying to inform religious leaders and outlining the benefits of professional women's sports for the community, all of which are rooted in the thrust of removing cultural and social barriers for women's sports which requires the design of a professional sports system for Muslim women and, for its successful implementation, it requires a strong leadership to change cultural and social attitudes along with the self-confidence and efforts of women of Muslim athletes and the companionship of social, political, and religious authorities. It is not the duty of the authorities to see women only as a means of reproduction, but their duty is to defend women's rights. One of these rights is to have the necessary facilities to promote professional sport. Muslim women are only able to have an equal share to build a future for their families and their country, which these restrictions on women's rights have to take into consideration. Muslim women are increasingly achieving athletic honors. It is time to look at women's sports and take supportive plans quickly, especially when the proportion of women interested in exercising and sport in Muslim countries is significantly increasing and their demands should be taken into consideration seriously. Women's sports issues cannot be resolved through a specific organization; it should be solved through interactions between the religious and juridical divisions, academia and the parliament and the government in order not to see such discriminatory and stereotypical barriers to sports activity of Muslim women.

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