

## **Qatari women's participation in sports and physical activity**

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**Abstract:** The issue of Arab women and sport has already received a great deal of attention from sociologists, feminists, social activists, and Islamic studies scholars in the West. However, little research has been done on women's participation in sports and physical activity in the Arabian Gulf, despite the fact that this part of the world has been undergoing dramatic changes. This article focuses on Qatar, a small but ambitious player in the region. It discusses Qatari females' participation in sports and exercise in the context of recent government-sponsored initiatives. In the national strategy promotion of sports and exercise is important for a combination of reasons that are complex and intertwined: encouragement of physical activity seeks to address the epidemic of obesity while hosting international events brings profit, prestige and national cohesiveness, and support for female athletes brands Qatar as a modern country. Coupled with impressive investment in sport and recreational facilities, this approach creates favorable conditions for female empowerment through sports. Yet, despite visible progress, Qatari women's engagement with sports and exercise falls short of expectations. The author reviews sociocultural factors that impede change and suggests possible directions in future research.

**Keywords** - Qatar, women, sport, physical activity

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Increasing women's participation in sports and physical activity in the Arabian Gulf is important for a variety of reasons. The most obvious one is related to health. Obesity, a growing problem worldwide, has reached epidemic proportions in the region. In Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries the rates of obesity related diseases such as diabetes, hypertension and cancer are alarmingly high. Moreover, the level of female participation in sports and regular exercise has always been low [1]; traditionally, women from the region could not engage in sports and their representation on national teams or attendance at the Olympic games were extremely low or non-existent. Hence, there is also an urgent need for change from the point of view of gender equality. Despite their significance, issues related to women's sporting activities in the Gulf remain understudied. This gap in the literature is especially striking in the case of Qatar, the country aspiring to become a leader in sports on the regional and global scene.

Qatar has made an impressive investment in building an infrastructure for sports culture and educating the population about the benefits of an active lifestyle. The goal of promoting women's participation in sports and physical exercise has been officially incorporated into *Qatar National Vision 2030* [2], a document encapsulating the leadership's plan for the future. It is important to explore the effectiveness of this national strategy in its specific sociocultural context to chart future directions in both research and public policy. This article begins by identifying the main factors impeding Qatari women's physical activity. It then moves to a brief overview of government initiatives that allow women to enter the sports arena at the elite level as well as advocate regular exercise for health benefits. The following section assesses progress and emphasizes the role of cultural beliefs and perceptions. The concluding part of the article emphasizes the role of familial and institutional support; it also proposes that culturally sensitive campaigns increasing the visibility of women engaging in sports and exercise can normalize the idea of these activities being compatible with the local idea of femininity.

### **II. SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT**

Like other countries in the region, Qatar has been undergoing rapid changes. Modernization and industrialization have dramatically affected the lifestyle of the population. Among the negative aspects of this impact one must count unhealthy lifestyle. According to Ministry of Development, Planning and Statistics,

currently approximately 92% of the population lives in the country's capital, Doha [3]. Moving to the city, the previously nomadic Bedouin tribes became sedentary. Local environmental conditions aggravate the problems related to from urbanization. Doha is not a walker friendly city and except for winter, the climate does not favor any outdoor activities. In addition to the environmental challenge, sociocultural factors lead to sedentary lifestyle and overweight. With wealth came the possibility of hiring domestic help to do household chores, which further reduced the amount of everyday physical activity. When food, especially fast food, is plentiful and affordable, it is hard to maintain a healthy diet. This is especially true in countries with the cultural tradition of frequent social gatherings revolving around food [4]. Due to a combination of all these factors, more than 70% of the Qatari population is overweight or obese [5].

In addition to socioeconomic and environmental factors leading to sedentary behavior, one must point to sociocultural norms as barriers to active lifestyle. Interest in active participation in sports and regular exercise has always been low in the region [1] for reasons that are complex and intertwined. Especially in the case of Muslim women, strict interpretation of the Quran combined with a conservative code of manners and notions about femininity can have a deleterious effect. Contrary to stereotypical beliefs, Islam encourages taking care of one's body and does not restrict the right of women to engage in physical activity. In fact, according to many, it is supportive of physical exercise for women [6-9]. At the same time, strict interpretations of the Quran impose restrictions on clothing and female spatial practices that make it difficult for them to engage in sporting activities. Modesty requires that in the presence of males who are not immediate family members, a Muslim woman's body must be covered and her hair must be hidden under a *hijab* (a scarf called *shayla* in Qatar). While veiling and an *abaya* (a traditional long and loose dress) restrict movement, the exhortation to avoid the male gaze limits female mobility. In countries that adhere to a conservative interpretation of the Quran space is gendered and the genders do not interact freely. This determines the choice of space in which women feel free to exercise. To a large extent, the absence of women in the sports arena can be attributed to such spatial practices. Clearly, the fact that until 2012 Qatar was one of the 3 countries that never sent female athletes to the Olympic Games ran counter to the narrative of modernization and political prominence the leadership aimed to gain.

Another restricting factor is related to the traditional roles of Arab women as wives, mothers and daughters. Family and societal obligations are given priority over personal goals. This is true for Muslims living both in Arab countries and in diaspora. Since physical exercise is not considered socializing or fulfilling familial duties, Arab women hesitate to dedicate a lot of time to an activity that could be judged selfish [10, 4]. In a recent study [11] Qatari women cited lack of time and family obligations as an obstacle to regular exercise. Then there is also the fear of engaging in activities that are not feminine. It is assumed that a well-mannered young girl will discipline her body language and maintain decorum in public places. Behaviors involving free flowing bodily motion in front of males is considered sexual in nature and thus inappropriate [12]. Likewise, becoming muscular is associated with de-feminization [10]. For these reasons, too few girls and women join organized sports teams or engage in physical activities such as going to the gym, taking fitness classes, walking, jogging or swimming.

### **III. OVERVIEW OF GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES**

The leadership of Qatar understood the need to take urgent action for the sake of the well being of the citizens as well as national prestige. The seriousness of the push for change is evidenced by the fact that the goal of sports development has been directly linked to human, social, economic, and environmental development, the four pillars identified in *Qatar National Vision 2030* as the foundation for the country's future. Hence, Qatar Olympic Committee's (QOC's) Strategic Plan 2008-2012 listed six priority areas for sports: building sports and leisure facilities, promotion and publicity, sports education, awareness and cultural change; athlete pathways development; sports management and hosting international events [13] (QOC, 2007: p.13).

On the international scene, Qatar can already boast of several significant achievements that put it in the limelight. In 2006 the country hosted a multi-sports event called the Asian Games. For example, in 2010 it won the bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup; in 2011 it bought Paris Saint-Germain FC; in 2013 it became the first commercial sponsor of Barcelona FC's shirt. The greatest achievement came in 2016, when Qatar secured the bid to host the 2023 World Championships. Domestically, visible progress has been made in recruiting new talent and team building, especially when it comes to male athletes. Women's sport seems to advance more slowly, although progress becomes evident if one considers that it started from an extremely low baseline. Several milestones in female elite sport participation deserve recognition in this context.

A breakthrough in the women's sports movement in Qatar occurred in 2000, when Sheikha Moza bint Nasser al-Missnad, the president of the Family Affairs Council and second wife of the former emir, established Qatar Women's Sport Committee (QWSC). From the beginning QWSC aimed at improving women's performance in sports and promoting their participation in various sporting events, sessions and conferences at home and abroad. Several landmarks reflect progress made under QWSC' guidance. In 2003 Qatar hosted the

second Asian Conference on Women and Sport, where all participants pledged support for women athletes. Then, in the 2006, Al-Sowaidi became the first woman to represent her country in Doha Asian Games. Two years later, Yasmian al-Sharshani joined the QGA, becoming the only member of the women's national team. Later, she represented Qatar in the 2011 Arab Games in Doha. The QGA continued to enroll and train new female golfers and in 2015, it introduced girls under the age of ten to the game as members of its expanding youth academy. Most importantly, in 2012, for the first time Qatar sent female athletes to the Olympic Games. Four women participated: Bahiya al-Hamad competed in air rifle shooting, Nada Arkaji in swimming, Aya Magdy in table tennis, and Noor al-Malki in. Though the performance of the Qatari athletes was not spectacular, the significance of their presence at the events can hardly be overestimated.

Following the Olympic debut in 2012, the QWSC developed a four-year strategy for improving female athletics in the country. It is clear that this effort is geared not only towards achieving gender equality in sports but also empowering women. Praising the effort and progress made by the QWSC in the last few years, the committee's president, Ahlam al-Mana, stated explicitly that this type of work "has enabled Qatari women to play a much bigger role in society and widen their opportunities" [14].

Change at the elite level of sports does not necessarily translate into improving the rates of regular exercise across the society. The latter is much more difficult to achieve. The benefits of a healthy lifestyle may be made clear, but it takes time to change perceptions and develop new habits. As part of this effort, Qatar has seen an impressive investment in infrastructure and nationwide campaigns showcasing the importance of exercise for building a healthy community at both physical and psychological levels.

First of all, in a pioneer initiative, on 6 December 2011, HH Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani (at that time Deputy Emir and Heir Apparent) issued the Emiri Decree No. 80 proclaiming Tuesday in the second week of February each year a National Sports Day. To celebrate this holiday, all ministries, governmental bodies and institutions prepare a series of public events and encourage their employees to engage in sporting activities. Likewise, companies and businesses organize activities and sports competitions to spotlight the message of healthy, active lifestyles. Thus, every year the local community is offered a growing list of educational and participatory events that emphasize individual achievement in fitness and family fun. These events are well attended and well publicized in the local media. It is important to point out that they include both residents and nationals of all age groups, and accommodate different levels of fitness and ability. Special effort is made to attract women. For example, in 2015, National Sport Day activities organized by Qatar Foundation included a walkathon through the campus of Education City under the inspirational slogan *Unlocking Your Inner Athlete*. Each stage of the route featured stations touting the benefits of a healthy lifestyle and, at the end of the walkathon, female participants could try out different types of exercise in 'Ladies Only' places.

Secondly, Qatar proved its commitment to promoting sports and physical activity by the scale of its investment in building sports and recreational facilities. The best example is Aspire Zone, the 250-hectare development founded in 2003. Originally called Sports City, the precinct includes a large public park called Aspire Park, two hotels, the Aspire Academy training center, Aspetar, a sports medicine and orthopedic hospital, as well as the Hamad Aquatic Center and Khalifa International Stadium. Aspire Zone also has a venue designed exclusively for teenage girls and females over the age of 18 years. There, Aspire Active Women's Programs offer 'Ladies Only' classes in a state-of-the-art facility tailored to the needs of the local population.

Central in the celebration of National Sports Day, Aspire Zone remains a vibrant hub of activities throughout the year. Arguably, however, it is the Aspire Park that best embodies the leadership's vision for the nation's wellness and helps incorporate it into everyday reality. As Doha's biggest park, it encompasses 88 hectares beautifully designed to provide walking, jogging, cycling, and horse riding trails in addition to areas for picnicking and relaxation. Exercise equipment for use by passers by is placed strategically in multiple locations and the visual landscape encompasses motivational slogans such as *Step into Health*, *Inspired to Aspire*, *Walk Towards a Healthy Lifestyle* or *Every Step Counts*. Moreover, billboards with pictures of a traditional Qatari family walking together are prominently displayed at the entrance to the park. Thus, although this space is multifunctional - and is indeed used for many different purposes - it unmistakably emphasizes the importance of sporting activities. While there is no statistics on the use of the park available yet, no one can fail to notice a steadily increasing number of women that engage in walking as a form of exercise. Some Qatari female walkers come to Aspire Park accompanied by a male family member, others come with female friends or even walk alone. They walk dressed in *abayas* and wear *hijabs*; a few are fully veiled and even wear gloves. Yet, there can be no mistake as to the purpose of their presence in the park - they are there to exercise. A few women signal it even more clearly by wearing a sports cap on top of a *hijab*.

Although the creation of walking paths in Aspire and support for walking in other popular public spaces (for example, the Corniche) may seem unremarkable, it sends an important message. Walking is the easiest and most culturally acceptable physical activity. It does not require equipment or sports uniforms and can be practiced at different difficulty levels. Women's football met with opposition in Doha due to its clothing

requirements, but walking does not cause such concerns. Not surprisingly, it is the type of physical activity most popular among Qatari women. For example, the 2009 statistics showed that among females 15 years of age and above who exercised regularly, 58% engaged in walking, 12% in running, 14% in aerobic exercise, and 6% in swimming [15]. Thus, promoting walking seemed an obvious choice and a step forward in building a healthy lifestyle.

#### **IV. DISCUSSION**

How successful has been the push for improving women's physical activity levels so far? To the author's best knowledge there is as yet no comprehensive answer to this question. The findings in a few recently published articles are not very reassuring. For example, the 2011 Global School-Based Student Health Survey (GSHS) showed that only 15% of students in grades 7 - 9 reported being physically active for 60 minutes or more on 5 or more days per week [16]. Furthermore, the National STEPS Survey (NSS) that recently examined the health and behavior of 2,496 adults in Qatar showed that 43.2% of the female respondents were obese; while 63.3% of the population between the ages of 18-64 years did not engage in recreational physical activity, 86.2% of the women between 45-65 years old reported no participation in any vigorous physical activity [17]. Last but not least, a year-long pedometer study established that daily steps for the overall population ranged from 3,505 steps/d to 10,010 steps/d, with a median of 6,008 steps/d. A total of 44.1% females were found to be sedentary, 32.4% were low active, and only 23.5% were physically active [18]. Overall, the data reveals that although females showed an increase in their physical activity, they still remain less active than males and do not meet the global recommendations of physical activity [16].

It is hard not to agree that the main impediments Qatari women face are cultural in nature. Thus, the key to success lies in a combination of education, outreach and community engagement activities. QOC's recommendations for the advancement of women in sports and physical activities include 'reader-friendly publications and media initiative to raise awareness about the value of sport and physical activity, the need for special community-based sports facilities for women, and the need to organize sports programs and physical activities for girls and women of all ages' [13]. Publicity campaigns and high profile events such as National Sports Day play an important role in raising awareness of the benefits of sports and exercise. However, as with other behavioral modifications, changing a lifestyle requires time and support. With the media serving as an important source of information, daily exposure to programs educating about the health benefits of exercise and attractive advertisements in shopping malls could contribute to swaying public opinion. Even more important is the support from social groups such as family and friends [10, 11]. Since families are more willing to allow their daughters' participation in school sponsored sports and exercise [4, 11, 12], the role of these institutions can hardly be exaggerated. In addition, advice from physicians [19-20], programs and culturally appropriate materials from health centers would inform the public and sway opinions.

Last but not least, it seems that Qatar needs change at the level of discourse. Overall, the importance of sports celebrities as influencers has been overestimated. According to a recent study, famous Qatari female athletes have less impact as role models than was originally hoped for [10]. In other words, Qatari women do not seek to identify with them and their achievement. There seems to be a gap between acceptance of the government sponsored vision and norms observed in the private sphere: in other words, what is now considered acceptable in principle may still be inapplicable in the lived reality of a Qatari woman's life. This can also signal that Qatari women have not interiorized the discourse of sports and exercise as a source of empowerment. More open discussion about this issue and cultural ideas of femininity would help to link exercise and physical activity to modern lifestyle.

#### **V. CONCLUSION**

Qatari women's participation in sports and physical activity is restricted not by laws or lack of resources but by socio-cultural norms. As it has been observed by Harkness, "sports function as a site of contestation, conformity and negotiation of larger social issues that impact Qatar and the Middle East" [12]. Changing opinions and forming new habits takes time and commitment and needs to be done gradually and in a culturally sensitive way. The currently used strategy: a two prong approach of cultivating female athletes and simultaneously extolling the health benefits of regular exercise at any level is bound to prepare ground for future growth. Likewise, creation of sex-segregated venues is important if it is the only space where women feel comfortable when they exercise. At the same time, promoting the use of public space as a culturally appropriate place where women can engage in at least some forms of physical activity alongside men can also be crucial in normalizing female participation in sporting events.

Last but not least, policy making should be informed and accompanied by research. A 2009 literature search on adults and physical activity in the Gulf identified no more than 8 studies that reported on surveys of national populations in GCC countries and only one of them was conducted in Qatar [20]. Considering the investment Qatar has made in building sporting culture the scarcity of quantitative and qualitative studies comes

as a surprise. Especially the cultural factors impeding women's participation in sports and exercise deserve scrutiny within a larger framework of gender relations and agency. Moreover, this inquiry should be led by Qatari researchers. The limitation of this and other discussions cited here is their reliance on sources in the English language. A more comprehensive picture can come only from listening to voices of the local community asking and answering questions that they consider important.

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