

Muslim women in sport

Muslim women athletes who are engaged in professional and competitive sports often have to face complex situations due to faith, culture, institutional rules, and social expectations. Islam does not forbid women's participation in sport; however, adherence to the principle of modesty (*awrah*) often **clashes** with conventional athletic wear and rules, creating great barriers.

■ The conflict on clothing and uniforms

The central difficulty for female Muslim athletes lies in the requirement to cover parts of their body such as their hair, neck, and limbs, and to wear **loose-fitting** clothing. Historically, many international sports federations have banned religious headwear like the *hijab*, a headscarf commonly worn by Muslim women, because of safety risks, for example **choking** in contact sports. This forced athletes to choose between their faith and their sport. Moreover, some sports, such as swimming, gymnastics and athletics, have clothing and equipment which are often revealing and athletes who chose full-body or loose-fitting clothing, for example a burkini for swimming, faced practical difficulties, such as excess material slowing down their movements or overheating in hot climates.

■ Fighting the ban

In recent years, however, determined athletes have forced some major international federations to change their rules, leading to greater inclusion. For example, FIFA, which had initially banned the hijab in 2007, **lifted** the **ban** in 2014 after extensive campaigning, allowing safe, sport-approved head coverings. FIVB, the federation ruling volleyball, made uniform rules less strict before the London 2012 Olympics, allowing a wider variety of uniforms, including long sleeves and leggings. AIBA, the federation ruling boxing, revised rules to allow the wearing of *hijabs* and full-body uniforms in competitions, provided they are securely fitted and meet safety standards.

■ Muslim women breaking barriers

Several athletes in recent years have demonstrated that it is possible, for Muslim women, to keep their faith while competing in professional sport. These women have become powerful role models, redefining what it means to be a modern Muslim athlete. A couple of them are:


- **Ibtihaj Muhammad**, a **fencing** champion in the USA team, who made history at the Rio 2016 Olympics as the first American Muslim woman to compete in the Games while wearing a *hijab*, winning a bronze medal in the team event. She chose fencing partly because the uniform already provided much of the required coverage;
- **Doaa Elghobashy**, a beach volleyball player from Egypt, who competed at the Rio 2016 Olympics in a long-sleeved shirt, leggings, and a hijab, showing the possibility of high-level competition in modest wear after the FIVB rule change.






ban: *divieto*
to choke: *soffocare*

to clash: *scontrarsi*
fencing: *scherma*

to lift: *sollevare*
loose-fitting: *ad ampia vestibilità*

1  Read the text to find the information required.

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| <p>1. The factors that make competing in sports difficult for Muslim athletes.</p> <p>2. What the principle of modesty is called in Arab.</p> <p>3. The name of the scarf usually worn by Muslim women on their head.</p> <p>4. A risk that wearing <i>hijab</i> during sports practice brings.</p> <p>5. An alternative to swimsuits for Muslim female swimmers.</p> <p>6. The difficulties that full-body and loose-fitting equipment can create.</p> | <p>7. The year when FIFA lifted the ban on <i>hijabs</i>.</p> <p>8. The changes made by FIVB.</p> <p>9. The requirements for <i>hijabs</i> and full-body suits in boxing competitions.</p> <p>10. The sports practised by Ibtihaj Muhammad and Doaa Elghobashy.</p> <p>11. How Muhammad made history at the 2016 Olympics.</p> <p>12. The kind of uniform worn by Doaa Elghobashy at Rio 2016.</p> |
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2    **PAIR WORK** Two Muslim athletes, Zahra Lari and Bilqis Abdul-Qadir, were fundamental to establish the rights to combine faith and competitive sports. Search the Internet to find more on them and share your information with the class.