

FILASTINIA: WOMEN, FOOTBALL AND BARRIERS

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This article examines the obstacles of Palestinian women football players, the barriers and the challenges that block their ways as football players. It focuses on women's national team players from different cities and villages in Palestine. My basic approach in the analysis was to mix methods that include documentary and interviews with several players. Special attention is given to the various barriers such as gender, culture, economics, and political situation that female Palestinian athletes face. The association between these barriers and the women's experience of football is emphasized.

Questo saggio prende in esame gli ostacoli e le difficoltà che incontrano le calciatrici palestinesi nel loro rapporto con il mondo del calcio. Si concentra sulle giocatrici della nazionale palestinese provenienti da diverse città e villaggi della Palestina. L'impostazione di questa ricerca consiste nell'analisi di documentari e interviste con diverse giocatrici. Un'attenzione speciale viene data a ostacoli come il genere, la cultura, la situazione economica e politica che devono affrontare le atlete palestinesi. Viene discussa l'associazione tra queste barriere e l'esperienza del calcio femminile.

Method and Theory: *Filastinia: Women, Football and Barriers* is an article based upon Palestinian female footballers from different locations and background. With this specific focus and topic in mind, interviews were conducted using the qualitative research design. The reason for qualitative deductive analysis of the data and not other methods is twofold: first, the lack of related studies regarding the approach, and second, the way documented methods were used as a proof of the interviews.

Key words: Resistance to barriers. Gender; Culture; Economic/Political situation Palestine; women's football.

Parole chiave: Resistenza alle barriere. Genere; Cultura; Situazione economica/politica Palestina; calcio femminile.

1. Women's football

Among other aspects is the gradual increase of the social economic power of women reason for expanded opportunities in women's football. This increase took place all around the world, but unfortunately are the opportunities and the chances resolved by it not the same in the entire world. There are countries suffering greatly from their economic conditions, cultures and traditions. Another significant factor in Palestine is the challenge of the current political situation.

Women's football is growing in popularity as a spectator sport, as shown in the example of the final match between the USA and China in the 1999 Women's World Cup. It attracted over 92,000 spectators and an international TV audience that exceeded

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40 million viewers. Nevertheless, women face gender discrimination on a daily basis, whether at work, at home or in any kind of virtual and physical setting.¹

In fact, women from all over the world face almost the same obstacles regarding sports, but there are some differences according to the geographical location, cultures and traditions and religion.²

In this article we consider these experiences by giving attention to several members of the Palestinian women's national football team. We will be looking into the obstacles and barriers they face as football players, as well as discussing the issue of these barriers in the context of women's sport and how individual football players experience this. Concluding by pointing out implications and ways these players use to interact within their country and community in the light of the political situation.

2. Culture and Traditions

Some of the biggest problems that women face are the culture and traditions barriers.

Palestine is considered to be a male dominant community. This means women do not own the freedom of decision making regarding their own lifestyles. In other words, most females in the Palestinian community have male guardians who hold the final decision, and either give permission on certain matters or ban them. The male guardian is usually a family member.³

In a male dominant culture, the opinion about the role of women at the workplace, at home, and in public life is shaped by gender stereotypes.⁴

After interviewing the players, they mentioned «that one of the obstacles they face is the lack of social acceptance for women to play football».

All the players said: «until now football for women is not a very acceptable idea in society. In addition, living in a patriarchal society limits the chances of participation in football for girls and makes it an obstacle for them. Also, according to the society this game is monopolized by men and girls are not physically able to play this game». Saja Ibrahim added that «the society does not accept it because people think that the body of the girl will become to look like a male's physique».

Shadin Abu Zuluf said: «When women started playing football, many people refused the idea and subjected us to vulgar and heavy verbal abuse, just because the older generations were not used to women being taking part in sports or even work. But until now I still hear people criticizing me for playing football». Similarly, Jackline Jazrawi said: «When I found a newly formed team for women football in Bethlehem University and wanted to join it, I heard many negative comments saying that this game is for boys, and that it is shameful for a girl at the university to play football like boys etc.».

¹ S. Ray, *Challenges Faced by Female Athletes in the World of Sports*, <<https://yourstory.com/2016/09/challenges-female-athletes-face/>>

² *Ibidem*.

³ T. Benn - G. Pfister - H. Jawad (2011), *Muslim Women and Sport*, Routledge, USA, Canada, p. 175.

⁴ K. Lyons, *Majority of men in Middle East survey believe a woman's place is in the home*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/may/02/majority-of-men-in-middle-east-north-africa-survey-believe-a-womans-place-is-in-the-home>>.

Deema Yousef said: «I would say that to play football is accepted in our society as it stopped being an abnormal act, but it is still very limited and judged. As female footballers in Palestine usually come from specific social and economic classes, the game has still not been accepted for all females and it varies from a place to the other within the country.

Women in general aspects in the Palestinian society suffer from gender inequality, and football is not an exception. Girls are expected to be future moms and delicate females, and for some, football breaks those social standards.

Also, religious values play a big role in Palestine, both within the Islamic and Christian groups, and some consider it inappropriate for females to practice sports in public. And Palestine is considered to be a male-dominated society, so females usually have limited control over life choices, and them practicing sports stops, therefore, from being a personal choice. This results in males potentially denying them from practicing it, because it is still considered a privilege not a right for females».



Shaden Abu Zuluf

3. Family Restrictions

Another obstacle they mention and that stands in the way of female athletes comes from such societies, is family restrictions or even the parental one.

Men members of the family traditionally own the right to control actions of female members, and therefore they may prevent any actions that in their opinion might dishonor the family and with that stain the family name. For girls who live in such restrictive families, any contact with the other gender is considered shameful and has to be prevented by all means. This is taken very seriously and observed strictly by the male members of a family.⁵

Palestinians live under these religious and cultural rules and standards.⁶ Consequently, most of the communities believe that women will be unobserved and uncontrolled by their families and also, they would be empowered through their participation in sport activities.⁷

⁵ G. Pfister (2010), *Women and sport in Islamic countries*, in «*Forum for Idræt*», 2010, vol.1, n. 1, p. 42.

⁶ T. Benn - G. Pfister - H. Jawad (2011), *Muslim Women...*, cit., p. 170.

⁷ G. Pfister (2010), *Women and sport...*, cit., p. 42.

After interviewing the players and asking them about how accepting their family and friends regarding them playing football were, the responses were that for most of the players, the first supporter for them was their immediate family members.

They motivated them and highly encouraged them, and sometimes went to their matches to cheer for them. However, some players also said: that «their extended family members were not so excited about them being a football player, and subjected them to a lot of negative comments at first but the situation got better with time».

Comparing the situations of Saja and Noor Alian, Saja said: «I had a serious problem with my family and especially with my brothers and uncles. They did not want me to play football because they get judged by their friends and the people around them for letting a female family member play football and that such thing is shameful. Furthermore, they do not want me to come back home late, be it from practice or especially when we have a match in another city.

According to them, that might dishonor the family and stain its name and reputation. They even did not want me to participate with the national team when we have intensive training camps in which requires sleeping outside my home, or international championships. Even sometimes they were hiding my sports cloths just to prevent me from attending the practice. In spite of that, I did not listen to them and I fought a lot just to be able to play football». She also added: «It is not only me who is suffering from this problem, but so many other players who love the game but could not play it because of that as well». As for Nour, she said: «At the beginning my parents were not accepting the idea of me playing football. But by time and with so many attempts trying to convince them to accept it because it is my passion, I was finally successful but it was not easy at all». In terms of their friends, all of them said that «their friends have always been supportive and some of them come to the matches to cheer them on».

A lot of Palestinian girls would like to play football, but because of their restriction family or the society they do not have the permission to do so. This can be noticed from the following responses from the members of the Football Palestinian National women's team. Niveen said: «I am trying to convince my friends that women can play football and even the Islamic religion does not forbid us to play». Amira added: «my Muslims friends with headscarves, my classmates, they always say 'I wish that I could play like you!'. I always tell them, go and just play, and they say, 'we cannot [...] you know that is just the culture we live in'»⁸.

⁸ T. Benn - G. Pfister - H. Jawad (2011), *Muslim Women...*, cit., p. 176.



Noor Alian

4. Customs

Another problem that comes from society is customs. The “*Hijab*” an Arabic word means “cover”. Which it covers the whole body except the face and the hands. Women can be forced to wear it, but it can also be a personal, family or social choice for Muslim women. Some women wear it not just for religious purpose but as a habit, fashion mode or as a protection of male gaze. However not wearing it might be seen as an action against Islam.⁹

Most Muslim women play sports in long sleeved garments, while others wear western style outfits. The decisions that taken by Muslim girls and women regarding the choice of their sports clothes can cause conflicts and controversies within families, communities and with religious leaders.¹⁰

All the players responded that, personally, they have the freedom to wear football sportswear (a short and a t-shirt) but it depends on the specific place where the girls want to play football in and on the people’s mentality there. This is because this particular issue is varying between the cities and the villages, where some are stricter than others. Shadin said: «In Palestine you are criticized for wearing shorts; they consider it as inappropriate clothing for a woman. They want us to wear long sleeves and pants, not t-shirts and shorts». Nour said: «Earlier I did not have freedom to wear such clothes, but now it is ok. However, I am still getting so much criticism and bad comments from many people, even on our pictures on social media when they post the news after the matches». Deema said: «Personally I do (wear such clothes). But that is not the general case as some players are prohibited from wearing the right gear due to social and religious values. And I have also been criticized and judged based on the shorts I wear to matches». Jackline added: «Once we had a match in the south of Hebron with the national team. For sure there we cannot wear shorts and play. So, the solution was to wear long sleeves and tight trousers under the formal tricot to respect the traditions at Dourah City (south Hebron), and to play the game without any problems». While Saja reported, «I wear the Hijab and play sports in long sleeved garments, this is my personal choice and I feel comfortable and happy with that».

⁹ G. Pfister (2010), *Women and sport...*, cit., p. 42.

¹⁰ T. Benn - G. Pfister - H. Jawad (2011), *Muslim Women...*, cit., p. 33.



Saja Ibrahim

5. Gender Inequality

Another obstacle they face is gender inequality. My question was: «Is there inequality between male and female players? And do you think that women's football in Palestine receives as much attention as the men's team in terms of training, rehabilitation, sports equipment, training and special expenses? »

Their answers are unanimous that of course there is inequality between men and women in all aspects of life in Palestine. As for sports and football, if we want to compare between female and male football here in Palestine, we can say that there is much more support going towards male football, which is not as much the case for female football.

For example: « [...] in the limited football fields we have in Palestine, the priority of using the fields is for male teams, and they consider women football teams the last priority. Female leagues also do not get as much attention as the male's one». Jackline said: «For example, our first women football league has stopped since 2016, and we have been training with the club team for two years without a motivation to compete.

Also, the expenses that are paid to the men national team for local or international football training camps are much more than those which are paid for the women national team. The women national team members are only gathered for training at the earliest one month before the start of any championship. While the men national teams get to train throughout the whole year». Deema said: «Regarding sports equipment, I think female leagues receive some decent ones, but they are usually previously used by male teams. And funding always goes to male teams, whether it is coming from either the public or the private sector». «Most coaches feel like it is a burden to train us because we are not considered professionals» Shaden said. While Saja said: «there are even no spectators coming to watch female matches, and added when there is a match for a male member in the family, everybody from the family and friends go to watch and support him».



Jackline Jazrawi

6. Political Situation

Palestine, the only occupied country in the world, has suffered from the Israeli occupation in all aspects of life, and the sports sector had its share of violations and restrictions. The occupation limits Palestinian athletes' rights and freedom, and it affects their athletic career on a daily basis.

Athletes from both genders suffer from mobility restrictions, whether it is in the form of illegal checkpoints on Palestinian land that delay and harass athletes on their way to practice or competitions, denying traveling permits for some athletes, or denying entry permits for foreign athletes and sports teams.¹¹ Not to mention the situation in Gaza where athletes, alongside other civilians, live in a huge prison where no one can exit or enter. This blockade started 13 years ago and is still ongoing.

All the players in the interviews said that «obstacles concerning the right of movement between cities in Palestine and limitations on traveling is the biggest problem they are facing. This violation of basic human rights denies athletes from gaining experience that comes from practicing that sport against other teams. This weakens as a result the overall level of football in Palestine, not to mention the siege on Gaza that denies Gazan athletes from participating in any sports event held in the West Bank or outside the country». Taleen Halteh and Shadin said: «It limits our ability as a team to gather around to practice due to the checkpoints and the Israeli abuses. Because in the team we are from different cities and some need to cross the Israeli checkpoints in order to practice and play football».

Saja from Alarraba Palestinian occupied village said: «When we have a match outside of Palestine, I cannot travel with the other national team players through the same border point or airport; I have to travel from the Israeli airport of Tel Aviv. Due to that, the last time when I returned back from Turkmenistan, they detained me three hours at the checkpoint just because I have a Palestinian scarf and the Palestinian national team uniform».

¹¹ "الانتهاكات الاسرائيلية بحق الرياضة الفلسطينية" <http://info.wafa.ps/atemplate.aspx?id=9017>

«Because I live in Jerusalem, each time I have practice I have to pass through the Israeli checkpoint. Sometimes they make me wait a lot to conduct body checks, and that causes me to arrive late to practice. So, in order to avoid that, I have to leave my house several hours before the practice to be able to arrive on time, » Nour said.

«When I used to play football with the national team, and when we had some training in Ramallah, going from Bethlehem to Ramallah used to take us sometimes from 3 to 4 hours instead of 1.5 hours, because of the check points and especially the “*Container Checkpoint*”. The Israeli soldiers used to close the checkpoint for no reason and make Palestinian commuters wait for hours as an obstruction of movement! We had to allocate hours of our valuable time only for transportation, and were always arriving exhausted to the trainings in Ramallah. This situation is still also the case when we have games in Ramallah with our club teams, » Jackline said.

Deema added: «I would say, on top of all of that, Palestinian athletes and clubs have faced and still do face outrageous acts by the Israeli army. Some athletes have been shot dead, some imprisoned and others injured in ways that destroyed their athletic career, which is a complete violation of human rights. Furthermore, many sports facilities have been destroyed. This sense of insecurity creates fear within Palestinian families who might prevent their daughters from playing sports; as the political situation cannot be separated from sports. Banning sports equipment shipment is also a problem. And permission to build sports facilities is almost impossible to get. Also, the Israeli government has refused to grant foreign athletes, coaches and official staff members permits, and denied them entry to Palestine».

«The Israeli occupation is one of the main reasons that holds back sports in Palestine and kills any kind of luxury lifestyle» Dr Khalil says¹².



Taleen Halteh

¹² M. Hasan, *Women's Sports Major Challenges and Two Key Solutions*, <<http://thisweekinpalestine.com/womens-sports/>>.

My question was: «Do you face any obstacles regarding the lack of sports infrastructure?»

All of them responded that «of course we do and that affected on us to improve as players. As players who were the first players to play football, we faced the same difficulties related to the lack of infrastructure, we were used to train at outdoor concrete fields, because there were no indoor fields available for us to train in. Moreover, at winter time, we had to cancel our training for hundreds of times to ensure our safety so as to not getting injured while playing at a concrete slippery playground». They also mentioned that they do not have even one natural field to practice on, and as a national team as all of the championships outside of their country must be played on a grass natural field, due to that they face difficulties while playing and effect on their results negatively, because they are not used to play on that type of field, as everyone knows how much different this kind of field would be comparing to the artificial one. As well as the lack of gyms and other many sport infrastructure that help them to improve.

Shaden said: «according to that also the priority to men and boys to train in the field, sometimes we fight to get two hours to practice in the field in the middle of the week». Jackline mentioned also «the lack of safe infrastructure is also a barrier that affects spreading the game in rural areas: for example, girls at villages and marginalized areas can't play football in-front of boys or men because of traditional thoughts, and there are no available indoor sport halls or closed pitches where they can feel safe. That's why they don't play football or even sports when they became over 13 or 14 years old».

Deema said: «as Palestine is an occupied state, athletes suffer from lack of training fields, and mostly $\frac{3}{4}$ teams share a field together, also the occupation applies many boundaries regarding equipment's shipping. Moreover, for building stadiums, training fields, sport centers or clubs they will need for an approval form the occupation government».

One of the most important reasons that cause the lack of the sport's infrastructure is the Israeli occupation, as more than half of the Palestinian lands are controlled by Israel, in which reduce the possibility for building sport facilities and fields to empower sport in Palestine. The Palestinian National Authority (PNA) controls only 17.9% of the West Bank.¹³ They are even not able to organize a half marathon in their land as they organized yearly a marathon in Bethlehem, in which participants have to run the same track twice rather than running a one-way track because of the wall that was built by the Israeli in order to limit Palestinians freedom and movement.¹⁴ That is a proof of what Deema reported.

¹³ "الانتهاكات الاسرائيلية بحق الرياضة الفلسطينية." <http://info.wafa.ps/atemplate.aspx?id=9017>

¹⁴ UN: *Palestine Marathon Draws Attention to the Right to Freedom of Movement*, <<https://www.palestinemarathon.org/news/473.html>>.



Deema Yousef

7. Female Football in Gaza

Interviewing the sports journalist Mohammad Alakhras from Gaza I noticed that the situation in Gaza when it comes to Women in Sport is as diverse as it could be compared to the West Bank of Palestine.

M. Alakhras was involved and covered a major part of football activities in Palestine for both genders.

He informed me that in Gaza they do not have any female football teams because females are strictly forbidden to partake in this sport.

«There is no female football in Gaza because of the traditions, culture and the restrictions set by the families. These limitations do not allow the girls in Gaza to play football at all. The girls themselves are aware of these borders so they don't attempt even thinking about participating in these kinds of sports. They know that they would face countless obstacles and criticism which would eventually get them into serious troubles. Although, the passion to play football does well exist among girls. They would love to be a football player as would be possible anywhere else in the world». Mohammad said.

«Two years ago, the Center for Development Action "Together" in cooperation with UNICEF, supported by the Government of Japan and under the supervision of the Palestinian Football Association (PFA), had organized a small tournament for the U14 girls. The Association received numerous responses from girls who had participated, but unfortunately various interventions had been made on different parts, for the game not to spread». Mohammad reported.

Mohammad said: «The city suffers from its poor political and economic situation, this makes it more difficult for girls to play football. Nevertheless, it does not completely prevent them from playing football. The main reason for girls not to play football is the restriction of culture and some Islamic organizations and parties. Latter of

them believe that girls who participate in this game might affect the ethics and traditions of the community and according to them girls do not have the right to play this kind of sport».

He added: «Maybe there are some girls who play football just for fun inside their female schools and others might even play football in secret indoor places, but they are not allowed to play in public. Islamic organizations and parties in Gaza prevent them from doing so. There are ideas of the Palestinian Football Association (PFA) in Gaza to organize football tournaments for girls in Gaza and to have football teams for females too. Nevertheless, this could only happen under one condition, the Islamic organizations and parties would have to approve such activities, but they refuse».

A proof of Mr. Mohammad's reports are the documents of the Palestinian Football Federation. The Palestinian Football Federation has formed a women football team in the beginning of the third millennium to represent Palestine in the championships. The female players were from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. After their participation in 2006, female players from the Gaza strip did not continue due to the circumstances they were in. As a next step, women's football was limited to the West Bank only. This apparently happened due to the easier movement and travel prospects players from the West Bank have compared to Gaza.¹⁵

A Palestinian football player from Gaza, Hala, said: «2006, women's participation in football was even more difficult in Gaza because of the destruction of the football field by an Israeli rocket». ¹⁶ She also added that: «2007, after the Islamic Hamas party came to power in Gaza, it has become even more difficult than before for women to play football. Women's football was officially disbanded and vanished in the sports club». ¹⁷

During the period of the Egyptian administration rule in Gaza, the female sport in was popular and encouraged by the parents and the community. The masculine view of girls not being allowed to do sports did simply not exist. Muammar Bseiso reported: «During 1959-1967, no obstacles from the society concerning female participation in sport existed, except the political situation that make it more difficult». Najwa Terzi has confirmed, «the society was encouraging girls in all aspects and we did not have any problem with that»¹⁸.

¹⁵ المصري. "الرياضة النسوية في قطاع غزة." ¹⁵

¹⁶ T. Benn - G. Pfister - H. Jawad (2011), *Muslim Women...*, cit., p. 173.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 176.

¹⁸ المصري. "الرياضة النسوية في قطاع غزة." ¹⁸



Mohammad Alakhras

Concluding Remarks

This article has highlighted just a few of the many challenges that Palestinian female footballers must deal with and face on daily basis. It has also provided reasons why it is difficult to find girls who are playing football in Palestine.

Sports is very important and useful for women in many different aspects, such as physiological and psychological. Sports empowers women, lets them grow in their personalities, mentalities and abilities and enables them to see and understand the world in a different and better way. Therefore, to have minimal opportunities and options when it comes to participation in sports is unfair and unjust. It is difficult for anyone else to understand what it is really like to endure all these barriers, without being in their football shoes.

Still, many issues could not be addressed in the declaration above. The acceptance for female's athletes to wear the “*Hijab*” is not yet granted by everyone, such as different sports federations and others. For these athletes to participate in official championships the allowance to wear the “*Hijab*” is a necessity. The sports factories do not even produce special authorized sports gear for them. They might find suitable sports outfits in some sport shops but not fashioned with the same fabric and quality as the authorized athlete's outfits. As we know, professional athletic clothing is of high importance as it affects the athlete's results and achievement for better performance. For high results, every second counts and nonprofessional outfits slow down the athlete's performance.

Despite all these challenges, these players are shining, raising their heads up high and standing up on their feet, believing that the power of sports is significant and that it can change almost everything. Sports can transcend all the obstacles mentioned before. It holds the power to gather uncountable athletes from different spots of the world and

backgrounds and teaches them to accept and respect each other despite the differences such as religion, cultures, colors, and choice of outfit. Each one has the right to do sports in whatever way she chooses to do it, if it does not interfere with the freedom and right of others. So, accepting and respecting is their symbol and way of life.

Athletes are used to extraordinary situations and that is exactly what female footballers face in Palestine, so they have to fight and give lots of effort to overcome and break these obstacles through patience and sacrifices. The footballers confirmed that they are ready for hard work and sacrifice. They believe that in order to reach great results great sacrifices have to be made. They hold on to the hope that they can do little changes and achieve their dreams and ambitions. Last but not least, they won't give up for the love and the passion of the game itself.

They reported, «to live in a place where football is a challenge you develop a stronger connection between you and the ball, where all you want to do is pushing yourself beyond the limits and be the best version of yourself as a player.» They would like to send a message to all female footballers around the world who face similar or any kinds of difficulties: Keep fighting for your passion and never give up even if faced with numerous obstacles around you. One day these obstacles will pass, and you will succeed and be proud that you never gave up.



Palestinian Women's National Team 2017



Palestinian Women's National Team 2018

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