

Docile Bodies or Resistant Bodies?

Tracing Power Dynamics in Elite Iranian Muslim Sportswomen's Experiences

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how power operates through mechanisms of regulation, normalization, moral governance, and resistance in shaping the lived experiences, ethical subjectivities, and professional identities of Iranian elite sportswomen. This research addresses a significant gap in understanding how relations of power are exercised and experienced within the elite sport system of the Islamic Republic of Iran. While Iranian sportswomen have gained increasing international visibility, existing scholarship has often overlooked the institutional, religious and moral conditions through which this visibility is produced and regulated. Drawing on Michel Foucault's conceptualizations of sovereign power, disciplinary power, biopower, pastoral power, and ethics, this dissertation conceptualizes elite sport in Iran not simply as an athletic field, but as gendered site of state governance. This research is based on semi-structured interviews with 26 Iranian elite sportswomen, coaches, and referees and consists of four interconnected articles examining different dimensions of the Iranian elite sport system.

The findings demonstrate that elite sport in the Islamic Republic of Iran operates through overlapping regimes of surveillance, religious regulation, and moral governance that extend beyond athletic performance into athletes' bodies, conduct, visibility, and private lives. Women athletes emerge not only as competitors, but also as symbolic carriers of religious and Islamic Republic values whose legitimacy remains conditional upon conformity to dominant gendered expectations. Surveillance operates through institutional monitoring, digital observation, interpersonal relations, and self-regulation, producing athletes who continuously negotiate the boundaries of visibility, intelligibility, and participation.

The dissertation further shows that women are not merely passive subjects of domination. Rather, they engage in ongoing practices of strategic compliance, concealment, selective visibility, silence, and resistance in order to sustain participation within restrictive conditions. Resistance

emerges not outside power, but within the very relations through which elite sportswomen are governed. Policies such as mandatory hijab and sex segregation, often framed through discourses of protection and morality, function simultaneously as technologies of discipline and control that reorganize vulnerability while obscuring institutional accountability. Within this context, silence frequently becomes a necessary strategy of survival and increases the likelihood of exposure to sexual exploitation during training sessions and competitions. The dissertation also demonstrates how ethical subject formation differs across generations of Iranian elite sportswomen. While the earlier “lost generation” experienced exclusion, erasure, and withdrawal from elite sport, the contemporary “conditional generation” encounters forms of regulated inclusion in which participation depends upon conformity to prescribed moral and ideological norms. Across both generations, compliance often reflects negotiation, survival, and aspiration rather than moral alignment with dominant norms.

Returning to Foucault’s metaphor of theory as a toolbox, this dissertation mobilizes Foucauldian concepts not as a closed explanatory system, but as analytical tools for interrogating how power, surveillance, and moral regulation shape women’s participation in elite sport. The analysis unsettles taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding visibility, participation, protection, and resistance, demonstrating how practices such as silence, strategic compliance, and negotiated visibility emerge as conditions of possibility within structured relations of power, while simultaneously challenging dominant assumptions regarding neutrality, autonomy, and safeguarding within elite sport.

Keywords: Power relations; ethical subjectivity; resistance; surveillance; vulnerability; sex segregation; mandatory hijab; sexual harassment; visibility; Muslim women in sport.

Acknowledgment

First and foremost, I would like to thank the **Iranian elite sportswomen** who participated in this research and trusted me with experiences that were often personal and difficult to put into words. This research has particular meaning for me because Iranian sport has been part of my own life for many years, as an athlete, sport professional, academic, and Iranian woman. In many ways, the questions behind this dissertation were questions I had carried with me long before beginning this PhD. Listening to your stories was therefore much more than collecting data. Some experiences felt deeply familiar, while others made me see aspects of Iranian women's sport that I had not encountered myself. Thank you for speaking so openly and for trusting me with your stories. I hope I have represented them with the care and respect they deserve.

I am especially grateful to my supervisor, **Dr. Christine Dallaire**. I began this PhD with years of lived, professional, and academic experience in Iranian sport and with many questions about power, gender, resistance, and women's place within that system. What I did not yet have was the theoretical language to make sense of many of those questions. Under your supervision, I learned to look at experiences I had known for years through a different analytical lens and to turn questions rooted in lived experience into sociological inquiry. You taught me to engage with Foucauldian thinking, but also to question my assumptions, accept complexity, and become more reflexive in my research. I also learned from you about professionalism and communication in academia, lessons that I know I will carry into the next stages of my academic life. Thank you for your guidance and for everything I learned from working with you.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Alexandra Arellano and Dr. Alexandre Dumas, who accompanied this research from the comprehensive examination and proposal defence through to the final defence. Your questions and feedback repeatedly pushed me

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Preface

This dissertation is presented in an article-based format and consists of four interconnected articles developed during my doctoral studies under the supervision of Dr. Christine Dallaire. Articles Two to Four were conducted under ethics approval obtained from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board (File Number: H-04-25-11346), granted on May 28, 2025. The ethics certificate, consent forms, recruitment materials, and interview guide are included in the appendix of this dissertation. The following section outlines the development of each article and clarifies the respective contributions of the author and supervisor.

The first article, “Unraveling Iran’s Sport Landscape in the Shadow of Political Control,” began prior to the official start of my doctoral studies in Canada, while I was waiting for my study permit and was still working as an Assistant Professor at Tarbiat Modares University in Iran. In consultation with Dr. Dallaire, I began collecting and documenting information related to the structure and sociopolitical organization of sport in Iran. As this work was initiated before my formal enrolment at the University of Ottawa, no University of Ottawa ethics approval was obtained for this article. In addition, as a university professor in Iran, obtaining formal ethics approval from Iranian institutions for research focused on the uncensored experiences of elite sportswomen in Iran was not realistically feasible within the existing institutional and political context. For this reason, this article is not considered one of the primary empirical articles emerging directly from this dissertation but rather serves as a broader historical and sociopolitical background for the doctoral research. Throughout all stages of this article, Dr. Dallaire provided supervision and guidance regarding the development of the research idea, the application of Foucauldian perspectives, data interpretation, the organization of the book chapter, and the publication process.

The second article, “Iranian Elite Sportswomen: Docile yet Defiant Bodies,” was developed based on interviews conducted as part of the doctoral thesis project. All interviews for the dissertation

and related articles were conducted by me, and I was responsible for the data collection, transcription, analysis, and preparation of the manuscript. During the process of applying Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, Dr. Dallaire provided continuous guidance and supervision. She also provided extensive feedback and comments throughout the writing and revision process.

The third article, “Sex Segregation and Mandatory Hijab as Protection? Narratives of Sexual Exploitation in Iranian Elite Sport,” emerged from ideas that developed during the writing and submission process of the first article for a peer-reviewed journal. After several discussions and brainstorming sessions with Dr. Dallaire, we decided to develop a manuscript specifically focused on sexual harassment and exploitation in Iranian elite sport, a topic that had not initially been planned as part of the dissertation. This article critically examines dominant narratives and widely promoted policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding the protection of women in sport. I prepared the initial draft of the manuscript, while Dr. Dallaire played a central role in strengthening the conceptual framing, refining the arguments, and guiding the overall direction of the article.

The fourth article, “From Lost to Conditional Generation: Ethical Subject Formation in Women’s Elite Sport,” emerged through repeated readings of the interview transcripts as well as ongoing discussions with Dr. Dallaire regarding the themes and narratives that appeared across the interviews. During one of these conversations, I mentioned to Dr. Dallaire that the narratives of older generations of women in Iranian sport appeared noticeably different from those of younger women currently participating in elite sport. Dr. Dallaire encouraged me to further develop this observation and to explore these intergenerational differences more systematically. She later shared several readings on ethical subject formation within Foucauldian ethics, which helped shape the theoretical direction of the article. After engaging with this literature, I developed the idea of examining the ethical formation of women athletes within a historical and intergenerational framework. I prepared the initial draft of the manuscript, and Dr. Dallaire subsequently contributed to strengthening the arguments, refining the Foucauldian ethical analysis, and clarifying the overall orientation of the article.

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

AFC — Asian Football Confederation

CEDAW — Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

FDA — Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

FIFA — Fédération Internationale de Football Association

GAMAAN — Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran

ICWSF — Islamic Countries Women's Sports Federation

IFAB — International Football Association Board

IJF — International Judo Federation

MENA — Middle East and North Africa

MWSF — Muslim Women's Sports Federation

NOA — National Olympic Academy

NUSF — National University Sports Federation

NWSA — National Women's Sports Administration

REB — Research Ethics Board

VAR — Video Assistant Referee

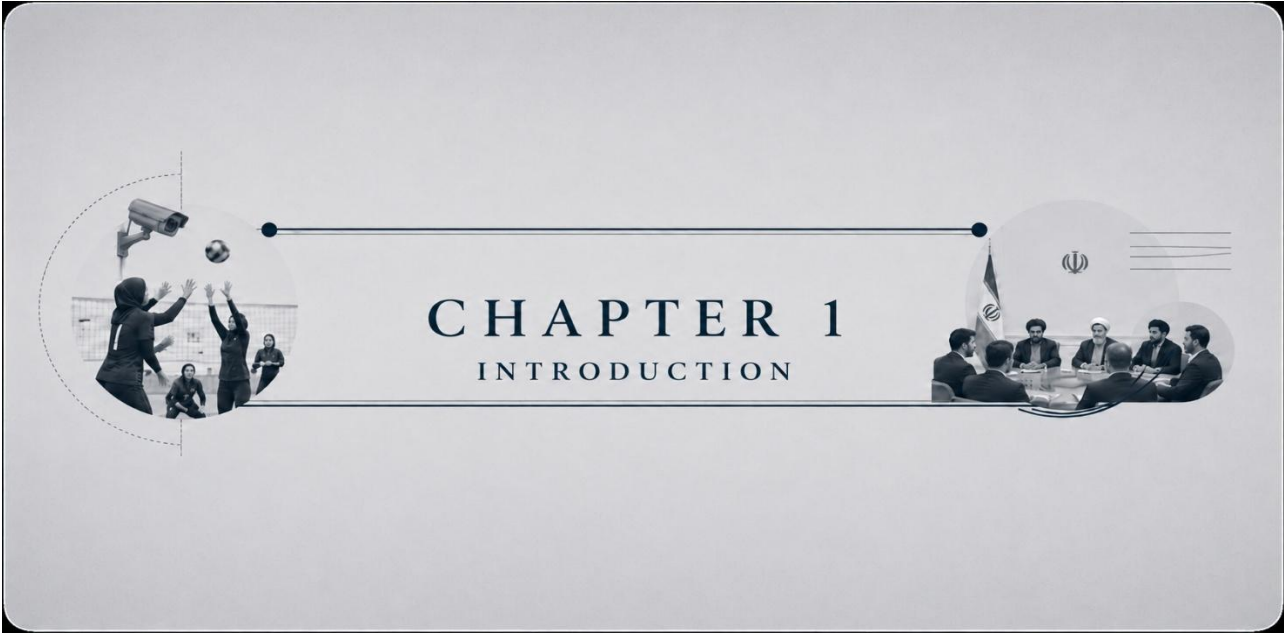
WAPOR — World Association for Public Opinion Research

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1.1. Introduction

“All my books ... are little toolboxes ... if people want to open them, to use this sentence or that idea as a screwdriver or spanner to short circuit, discredit or smash systems of power, including eventually those from which my books have emerged ... so much better!” (Foucault, cited in Patton & Morris, 1979, p. 115).

Foucault’s depiction of his writings as little toolboxes captures the approach taken in this study, which uses his ideas as adaptable conceptual tools rather than as a fixed theoretical system. His notions of discipline, normalization, surveillance, governmentality, and ethical subject formation provide critical means for understanding how systems of power regulate, produce, and organize subjectivities. These concepts are applied here to examine how power relations shape and govern the experiences of elite sportswomen in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and how discourses of control, resistance, morality, and identity are enacted within women’s sport.

Elite sportswomen worldwide encounter persistent challenges, including entrenched gender stereotypes, unequal access to resources, limited media visibility, fewer sponsorship opportunities, restricted managerial roles, and the difficulty of balancing family responsibilities with high-performance sport (Allison, 2018; Archer & Prangue, 2019; Bowes et al., 2022; Carson et al., 2018; Eckstein, 2023; Fink, 2015; Tjørndal, 2019a). In Islamic societies, these challenges are magnified by cultural and political restrictions on women’s participation in sport (Sadeghi et al., 2018), as well as by regulations governing the visibility, movement, and athletic attire of the female body (Hargreaves, 2006; Tjørndal, 2019b). Such constraints are often justified by fears of de-feminization, positioning athletic women as threats to traditional gender norms (Sofian et al., 2010). Yet these dynamics cannot be understood solely as barriers to participation or inequalities within sport. Rather, they must also be understood as effects of broader political, moral, and

ideological relations through which women's bodies, conduct, and visibility become objects of governance.

Understanding the experiences of elite Muslim sportswomen therefore requires examining how gender, religion, power, and governance intersect within broader sociopolitical systems. Elite sportswomen in this study refer to athletes, coaches, and referees who have performed at the highest level (Swann et al., 2015) and represented Iran in at least one international sporting event. These athletes navigate complex networks of institutional, cultural, and religious forces that simultaneously constrain, regulate, and enable participation in elite sport. Drawing on Foucault's theorization of power, resistance, and subject formation, this study explores how women's bodies, identities, and possibilities of action are governed, negotiated, and at times reconfigured within Iran's sport institutions. By focusing on the lived experiences of Iranian elite sportswomen, the dissertation moves beyond interpreting women's sport primarily through frameworks of participation, empowerment, or inequality, and instead examines elite sport as a field in which moral regulation, surveillance, resistance, and ethical self-formation converge. It reveals how discourses of gender, religion, and nation shape athletic subjectivities while also highlighting the strategies through which these women negotiate, contest, and reinterpret dominant relations of power within the Islamic Republic of Iran.

1.2. Statement of the problem

The body, as a sociocultural construct, has been central to understanding disciplinary practices and power dynamics (Kumlu, 2020). Michel Foucault conceptualized the body as a site where power and knowledge intersect, rejecting the notion of a mere biological or natural body (Foucault, 1977). Historically, societal norms have associated women with passiveness and physical attributes, while men are linked to active rationality, perpetuating stereotypes that

undermine women's autonomy (Bordo, 2023). Elite Muslim sportswomen often become positioned within this dualistic framework, where their achievements are often devalued as mere expressions of physical capability or reduced to sources of temptation. Dominant social narratives further marginalize their autonomy, holding them accountable for male behaviour and complicating their navigation of the professional and cultural domains.

Muslim women's experiences in sport are shaped by diverse interpretations of Islam, political contexts, and patriarchal power structures, challenging the notion that they exist within an isolated Islamic vacuum (Hargreaves, 2006). The case of elite Iranian sportswomen exemplifies this complexity. These athletes confront dual challenges: international prejudice, such as hijab phobia within sports federations (Hamzeh, 2017), and domestic barriers rooted in traditional and state-imposed restrictions. Over the past decades, Iranian women athletes have faced significant obstacles to compete at international levels and in navigating Iran's male-dominated sports landscape. The Iranian government suppresses dissent and restricts free expression, putting athletes, coaches, and referees at risk of prosecution for criticizing authorities (Nevett, 2021). Severe state censorship also obscures the realities of gender-based discrimination in elite sports, particularly the professional trajectories of women athletes (Ziabari, 2023).

One consequence of these constraints is the emigration of Iranian sportspeople, particularly women, driven by gendered biopolitics and institutionalized control over their bodies, including compulsory veiling and dress codes (Rahbari, 2022). Additionally, funding for women's sports in Iran remains opaque and inequitable. The Islamic Republic allocates budgets for all sports organizations, yet men's sports consistently receive more resources (Khatibi et al., 2020). Iranian sports officials often attribute challenges in women's sports to external provocations or financial

incentives from Western nations (Bagheri et al., 2019; Hosseini et al., 2020) rather than addressing systemic issues rooted in the nation's sports structure and dominant discourses.

The Iranian state adopts a dual approach to elite women's sports, viewing them alternately as opportunities and threats. For example, international mega-sporting events, such as the Olympics and the Asian Games, have served as platforms to promote the state's gender discourse (Enderle, 2021). Yet elite sportswomen have also used these platforms to resist state control. A notable example is Elnaz Rekabi, an elite climber who competed without a headscarf during the Women, Life, Freedom movement¹. This movement, sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, underscored widespread protests against dress codes and human rights violations in Iran (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Mahsa was detained by the country's moral police and killed because they believed she did not follow the hijab rule². Elnaz's act of defiance highlighted how Iranian sportswomen's bodies have become politicized sites of struggle against patriarchal and state control. According to Turner (2008), the body is at the heart of political struggles. It is

1. On September 13, 2022, a young Kurdish-Iranian woman, Mahsa (Jina) Amini, was arrested by Iran's morality police under the pretext of "re-education" on proper attire. Shortly after her detention, she died in custody, an event that ignited widespread outrage across the country. For many Iranians, already burdened by years of social repression and economic hardship, her death became a catalyst for a new wave of anti-government demonstrations. The ensuing uprising, led prominently by women and girls who appeared in public without the mandatory hijab, evolved into a broader feminist and civil rights movement known as "Women, Life, Freedom." By rejecting compulsory veiling, these women challenged long-standing patriarchal and religious norms, transforming their personal acts of defiance into a national and global call for justice and equality. According to Human Rights Watch (2024), security forces killed more than 500 protesters, including at least 68 children, during the crackdown, primarily by firing live ammunition and metal pellets into crowds. It is further estimated that over 20,000 demonstrators were arrested across Iran. Protests occurred in more than 100 cities and towns, while solidarity rallies spread to 146 cities worldwide, unified under the slogan Woman, Life, Freedom (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023).

2. The Hijab was introduced, following the 1979 Islamic revolution and the removal of the monarchy in Iran. Some Iranian women opposed this idea from the beginning. In March 1979, thousands of Iranian women marched in the street to protest the imposition of the hijab, chanting slogans such as "freedom of choice in clothes". These protests, however, had no effect, and they were in the minority according to the traditional social fabric. The hijab became mandatory for all Iranian women in April 1983. Since then, even non-Muslims and foreigners visiting Iran are required to wear a hijab in public.

undeniable that the bodies of Iranian elite sport women are regulated, politicized, and controlled by the Islamic government and the exercise of patriarchal power. Although they have been marginalized, they have played a significant role in social change through embodied forms of negotiation and resistance.

Furthermore, feminist theorists, such as Beauvoir, have argued that historical narratives often center on male experiences, marginalizing women's perspectives (Shabot & Landry, 2018). This marginalization is evident in Iranian sports, where most discourse revolves around male athletes, leaving the experiences of elite sportswomen largely unexamined. Limited transparency, government restrictions (Shomali & Keshkar, 2022; Shabani et al., 2020), and systemic bias against women have further perpetuated their invisibility (Rahbari, 2019; Rasekh et al., 2019).

This study, grounded in a Foucauldian framework, examines the lived experiences of elite Iranian sportswomen through their own perspectives and those of their coaches and referees. While sportswomen rarely articulate how they navigate gender constructs and intersecting systems of oppression (Allison, 2020), their narratives reveal both struggles and acts of resistance. By investigating how Iranian sportswomen navigate the religious, political and institutional structures of the Islamic Republic, this research examines how athletic subjectivities are constituted through relations of power, surveillance, moral regulation, and negotiation. Rather than approaching elite sportswomen through binary distinctions between docility and resistance, the study explores how women continuously negotiate the conditions through which participation, visibility, and legitimacy become possible within elite sport. In doing so, the research examines how compliance, concealment, resistance, and self-regulation emerge not as fixed opposites, but as interconnected practices shaped within broader relations of governance and constraint. This research contributes to a limited body of scholarship examining how elite Muslim sportswomen navigate highly

regulated and politically governed sport systems. By analyzing their struggles, achievements, and strategies for overcoming barriers, the study offers critical insights into how power dynamics manifest in sports and how these athletes embody resistance within a heavily politicized and gendered framework.

1.3. A Foucauldian Framework for Power, Ethics, and Resistance

Foucault's perspective provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationships between domination, power, resistance, governance, and ethical self-formation, offering a broader view of social dynamics (Heller, 1996). Moving beyond traditional views of power as solely repressive and centralized, Foucault redefines it as distributed, relational, and productive, functioning through social interactions rather than being confined to a single authority (Christensen, 2024). His distinction between juridical and disciplinary models of power clarifies the differences between power and dominance while highlighting the forms and possibilities of resistance (Foucault, 1980; Christensen, 2024). Building on this foundation, Foucault extends the analysis of power to its epistemological dimension through the concepts of truth, regime of truth, and the formation of the subject. He argues that truth is not an objective reality to be discovered but a product of discursive and institutional practices that define what can be accepted as valid knowledge (Foucault, 1978; Lorenzini, 2016). Every society operates within a specific regime of truth, composed of networks of power and knowledge that determine who can speak, what can be said, and how individuals come to know themselves. In the context of Iranian elite sportswomen, these regimes of truth shape generational differences in how women experience and express their subjectivities. At the same time, many elite sportswomen find their voices constrained within Iran's discursive boundaries and systems of surveillance. For some, genuine freedom of expression becomes possible only once they leave the country; beyond its borders, they can finally articulate

experiences and critiques that were previously unspeakable. This spatial shift highlights how regimes of truth operate not only through discourse but also through geography, determining who is permitted to narrate their own story and from where.

Within these regimes, subjects are formed through participation in discourse, internalizing the norms and values that govern social life. This connection between truth, power, and subjectivity situates knowledge as a crucial site through which individuals are governed and govern themselves (Weir, 2008). This theoretical framework enables a deeper analysis of how power operates in daily practices and how individuals navigate, negotiate, and resist its effects. Applying these concepts, this study examines the experiences of Muslim elite sportswomen, uncovering the complex interplay of power, resistance, moral regulation, ethical subject formation, and political and cultural dynamics in their lives.

1.3.1. Power, Governmentality, and Technologies of Regulation

Foucault's conception of power redefines it not as a possession but as a dynamic network of relations permeating all aspects of society. Power operates in an all-pervading manner throughout society, transcending centralized governments or institutions (Smith Maguire, 2002). This challenges traditional notions of power as domination, where one entity exerts control over another. Instead, Foucault emphasizes that power circulates through society, shaping identities, practices, and knowledge (Foucault, 1978; Kallman & Dini, 2017). In Foucault's framework, power is discursive and productive, actively shaping human subjects rather than merely repressing them. A core element of this theory is the inextricable link between power and knowledge. By evaluating, categorizing, and homogenizing, power shapes discourse, and knowledge, in turn, reinforces mechanisms such as surveillance and normalization to govern behaviour. However,

knowledge also creates avenues for resistance, enabling individuals to challenge and subvert dominant power structures (Lawlor & Nale, 2014).

Foucault's concepts of technologies of power and technologies of the self further illustrate these dynamics. Technologies of power encompass the practices, institutions, and knowledge systems that regulate individuals' behaviours within broader social frameworks. In sport, such technologies are evident in training regimens, disciplinary techniques, and performance standards that shape athletes' bodies and conduct in accordance with institutional and cultural expectations (Foucault, 1980; Lawlor & Nale, 2014; Shogan, 1999). Conversely, technologies of the self refer to the practices through which individuals regulate, transform, and manage themselves, often through self-monitoring, self-discipline, and reflection (Foucault, 1988). For elite athletes, these practices involve the continuous management of bodily conduct, identity, and performance in relation to both personal aspirations and socially prescribed norms (Shogan, 1999). These dynamics foster compliance but also create possibilities for negotiation and resistance within structures of power.

Foucault identifies several interconnected forms of power, including sovereign power, disciplinary power, biopower, and pastoral power. Sovereign power is overt and visible, operating through laws, prohibitions, punishment, and displays of authority (Dean, 2009; Foucault, 1990). Disciplinary power, by contrast, functions through subtle and embedded mechanisms that normalize behaviour and produce compliant subjects through surveillance, regulation, and institutional practices (Foucault, 1978; Johnston, 1991). Foucault's metaphor of the panopticon illustrates this dynamic by creating conditions of permanent visibility in which individuals regulate their own conduct because they anticipate the possibility of being observed (Kallman & Dini, 2017). Biopower extends these processes to the level of populations by regulating life through

norms, health standards, and mechanisms concerned with the administration of bodies and social order. It operates through anatomo-politics, which disciplines individual bodies, and biopolitics, which governs population-level concerns such as public health, reproduction, and social regulation (Rail & Harvey, 1995).

Pastoral power further extends these forms of regulation through moral guidance, care, and individualized supervision. Originating in Christian pastoral practices, it functions through the responsibility to guide, protect, and direct individuals' conduct according to moral truths (Carrette, 2013; Follett, 1986). At the same time, it operates according to the logic of *omnes et singulatim*, simultaneously governing populations while attending to individuals in detail. Although historically rooted in religious institutions, pastoral power later becomes incorporated into modern political rationalities and state governance, where discourses of care, morality, protection, and guidance function as techniques for regulating conduct and sustaining social order (Carrette, 2013). In the context of Iranian elite sport, pastoral power is particularly useful for understanding how practices such as mandatory hijab, moral surveillance, and sex segregation are framed as forms of protection for Muslim women while simultaneously functioning as mechanisms of discipline and regulation.

To further examine how these forms of power operate in everyday life, Foucault's concepts of the docile body and governmentality provide additional insight. The concept of the docile body explains how power disciplines and transforms individuals into obedient yet productive subjects through the detailed regulation of movement, behaviour, time, and bodily practices (Foucault, 1975). Rather than operating solely through overt domination, this form of control becomes internalized through continuous monitoring and normalization. In elite sport, such disciplinary

practices are evident in the regulation of athletes' bodies according to institutional, political, and cultural expectations.

Governmentality reflects a broader rationality of governance concerned with directing the conduct of individuals and populations. It involves the indirect regulation of beliefs, actions, and choices through institutions, policies, and knowledge systems that encourage individuals to align themselves with broader social objectives (Smith Maguire, 2002). Extending beyond disciplinary institutions, governmentality regulates populations through political, economic, and security mechanisms that shape norms and acceptable forms of behaviour (Lawlor & Nale, 2014). For elite Muslim sportswomen, governmentality manifests through broader ideological, cultural, and institutional arrangements that shape visibility, morality, bodily conduct, and participation in sport.

1.3.2. Subject Formation and Foucauldian Ethics

Building on his analysis of power and governance, Foucault extends his attention to the processes through which individuals become subjects within relations of power and truth. Subjectivity therefore emerges through participation in discourse and through the internalization of norms, values, and forms of conduct that organize social life (Weir, 2008). For elite Muslim sportswomen, these regimes of truth shape how femininity, morality, athleticism, and religious identity are understood and negotiated within elite sport. Women's subjectivities are constituted through the intersection of religious, cultural, political, and athletic discourses that define appropriate forms of bodily conduct and visibility. These regimes of truth simultaneously constrain and enable action, illustrating how power operates through normalization and self-regulation rather than solely through direct repression. In contexts such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, systems of surveillance and religious governance may also restrict what women can publicly articulate about their experiences.

In his later work, Foucault further develops this analysis through his conception of ethics and ethical subject formation. Rather than defining ethics as obedience to externally imposed moral rules, Foucault conceptualizes ethics as a reflective practice of self-formation through which individuals establish a relationship with themselves in relation to moral codes and normative expectations (Foucault, 1985). Ethics therefore concerns the ways individuals actively shape themselves as moral subjects within broader relations of power.

Central to this framework are four interconnected dimensions of ethical subject formation: ethical substance, mode of subjection, ethical work, and telos (Foucault, 1985). Ethical substance refers to the aspect of the self considered the primary object of moral concern and ethical regulation, such as bodily conduct, desires, identity, or behaviour (Denison & Markula, 2026). Mode of subjection concerns how individuals recognize, justify, and establish their relationship to moral obligations and normative systems within relations of power (Foucault, 1985). Ethical work refers to the practical and reflective activities through which individuals attempt to regulate, transform, and shape themselves as ethical subjects. Finally, telos refers to the broader mode of being or ideal form of existence toward which ethical self-formation is directed, providing orientation and coherence to ethical practice (Foucault, 1985; MacKay & Dallaire, 2013).

This Foucauldian understanding of ethics is particularly useful for examining how elite Muslim sportswomen navigate moral regulation, surveillance, and gendered expectations within the Islamic Republic of Iran. Rather than conceptualizing women as either passive recipients of power or fully autonomous agents acting outside power, this framework enables an analysis of how ethical subjectivities are continuously negotiated, embodied, and reconfigured within broader relations of governance, morality, and resistance.

1.3.3. Domination: A Stagnant Form of Power Relations

Foucault conceptualizes domination as a specific configuration of power relations in which freedom is severely constrained, resulting in stagnation. Unlike the fluid and relational nature of power, domination represents a fixed and oppressive form of control. In a dominating relationship, the dominant party unilaterally dictates the subordinate party's actions, suppressing opportunities for resistance (Munro, 2003). Although this repeated reinforcement of control may create small openings for resistance, the overall structure remains oppressive, limiting meaningful challenges to the status quo. Domination, as Foucault frames it, is not just a descriptive term for certain power dynamics but also an analytical tool for understanding entrenched relationships (Miller, 2019). It signifies a form of power disproportionately concentrated in one group or individual, enabling them to maintain control for their benefit while curtailing others' freedom and agency (Cooper, 1994). Extreme examples, such as the master-slave relationship, illustrate domination's oppressive nature, where resistance is nearly impossible. Such scenarios exemplify "power-over," characterized by subjugation, contrasting with "power-to," which emphasizes capacity and agency (Haugaard, 2022; Pansardi, 2012). Unlike Foucault's broader conception of power which encompasses both constraining and enabling elements, domination is inherently restrictive, lacking productive or transformative potential. Its static nature contrasts sharply with the fluidity of power relations that foster negotiation and resistance. Consequently, domination represents an oppressive form of power, prioritizing control over the dynamic interplay of power that allows for agency and change (Munro, 2003).

1.3.4. Resistance: An Inherent and Inevitable Aspect of Power Relations

Foucault's theory positions resistance as an inherent and inevitable aspect of power relations rather than an external force. Because regimes of truth define what can be said or done,

resistance often takes the form of contesting these very regimes, challenging accepted truths, redefining norms, and exposing the limits of institutional authority (Weir, 2008). Resistance is ever-present, serving as a counterforce to challenge, undermine, or oppose power structures (Smith Maguire, 2002). Over time, Foucault's understanding of resistance evolved as he explored how individuals and groups navigate and contest power (Pickett, 1996). Resistance manifests in various forms, from overt acts of defiance to subtle, everyday practices that indirectly challenge authority. These everyday resistances include hidden or disguised actions such as foot-dragging, sarcasm, or passivity, which Scott (2016) identifies as viable strategies when open defiance is too risky. This is particularly relevant under disciplinary power, where institutional control often limits opportunities for overt resistance. The visibility of power and resistance marks their distinction: power operates systematically and openly through institutions, while resistance often challenges the system from within. Foucault further explores reverse discourse, where the categories and vocabulary of disciplinary power are subverted to critique and reshape its norms. This process rearticulates dominant discourses to challenge their established meanings and undermine their authority (Butler, 2014). Self-transformation and reflection, as techniques of the self, extend resistance by enabling individuals to contest the disciplinarian power shaping their subjectivities. These practices allow individuals to repurpose disciplinary structures, redefining their identities and seeking self-creation (Burkitt, 2002; Lloyd, 2012). By revealing alternative ways to resist power's constraints, such techniques illustrate the dynamic interplay between domination and agency within power relations.

1.4. The Relevance of a Foucauldian Framework to This Study

This doctoral study adopts a Foucauldian framework to examine how power operates within the context of Iranian elite women's sport. Drawing on Foucault's interconnected concepts

of power, discourse, and subjectivity, the research analyzes how women athletes are constituted as subjects within historically specific regimes of truth shaped by institutional practices, moral norms, and political rationalities. While sociological perspectives such as intersectionality focusing on interlocking systems of inequality across identities (Crenshaw, 1991), Bourdieu's theory of practice emphasizing habitus, capital, and social reproduction (Webb et al., 2001), and Butler's gender performativity examining the repetition of embodied gender norms (Butler, 2003) offer important insights into the structuring of experience, they are less equipped to account for the productive and relational processes through which subjects are constituted, governed, and rendered intelligible within regimes of power.

A Foucauldian approach enables a shift from viewing experience as shaped by external constraints toward an analysis of how power operates as a generative force that produces ethical subjectivities, organizes the field of possible action, and configures the conditions under which practices such as self-regulation, silence, strategic compliance, and negotiation emerge. In this sense, it provides a more comprehensive account of Iranian elite sportswomen's experiences by locating them within the dynamic interplay of disciplinary mechanisms, moral regulation, and technologies of the self that simultaneously constrain and enable subject formation. This framework extends beyond discursive structures to the materiality of the body. Power operates directly upon the body through disciplinary techniques that train, regulate, and optimize conduct, rendering individuals both productive and compliant (Villadsen, 2024). The body thus emerges as a site of inscription where political, religious, and institutional relations are materialized through ongoing practices of surveillance and normalization. These processes constitute what Foucault conceptualizes as a political technology of the body, in which individuals come to embody institutional norms while appearing self-governing (Sheridan, 1980). This perspective is essential

for understanding how Iranian Muslim sportswomen are simultaneously shaped as physical, moral, and symbolic subjects within interlocking regimes of sport governance, religious discourse, and national representation. By drawing on Foucauldian ethics, this dissertation moves beyond interpreting athletes' actions as individual choices and instead examines the processes through which subjects come to relate to themselves under conditions of power. Ethical subject formation is analyzed as an ongoing practice shaped by negotiation, constraint, and self-regulation within historically and institutionally structured relations. This approach makes it possible to understand how practices such as compromise, silence, strategic visibility, and at times resistance emerge as forms of ethical engagement within the limits of what is possible.

1.4.1. Power as Productive and Relational

A central reason for adopting a Foucauldian framework lies in its reconceptualization of power as productive and relational. Rather than being possessed or imposed, power circulates through social relations, producing subjects, knowledge, and forms of order (Haugaard, 2022). This perspective shifts the analytical focus from domination alone to the processes through which individuals participate in their own governance. Power operates through what Foucault describes as the micro-physics of power, a dispersed network of mechanisms embedded in institutions and everyday practices (Sheridan, 1980). These mechanisms function through normalization, observation, and repetition, shaping conduct while enhancing capacities and rendering individuals governable. Within this study, such an understanding is particularly valuable for analyzing how elite Muslim sportswomen's identities are formed within normative and institutional frameworks, while remaining sites of negotiation, transformation, and limited forms of resistance.

1.4.2. Disciplinary Power and the Regulation of Bodies

Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power, normalization, and surveillance illuminate how Muslim women's bodies and conduct are regulated within sport institutions as well as broader socio-religious contexts. These processes intersect with governmentality, through which governance operates indirectly by fostering self-regulation aligned with moral and cultural norms (Pedram, 2023). Disciplinary power functions as a political anatomy that treats the body as an object to be trained, classified, and optimized within systems of control (Sheridan, 1980). Within Iranian elite sport, this is evident in the continuous monitoring of athletes' bodies through dress codes, training regimes, and performance expectations that reflect both religious modesty and national ideals.

These processes contribute to a form of moral governance in which external regulation is internalized. Athletes monitor their appearance, movement, and conduct in relation to prescribed ideals of femininity and Islamic propriety. This reflects Foucault's notion of the docile body, while also revealing how self-regulation coexists with subtle forms of resistance. Such an analysis aligns with broader feminist sociological efforts to connect lived experience with structural relations of power and inequality (Jackson, 2024).

1.4.3. Power/Knowledge and the Construction of Subjectivity

Foucault's concept of power/knowledge provides a critical lens for analyzing how institutional authority defines what counts as legitimate knowledge, identity, and conduct (Lawlor & Nale, 2014). Within Iranian sport, categories such as elite Muslim sportswoman, national athlete, and moral representative are not neutral descriptors but discursive constructs shaped by institutional, political, and cultural forces. Through these discourses, power does not merely constrain but produces subjects by defining the conditions under which individuals become

intelligible. As Foucault suggests, the internalization of these norms renders the subject both governed and self-governing, with moral regulation operating as a form of self-surveillance (Sheridan, 1980).

In Iranian elite sport, this results in the production of subjectivities aligned with religious modesty and national representation, while simultaneously opening spaces for strategic negotiation and redefinition. Subject positions are therefore not fixed but are continuously produced through engagement with regimes of truth that regulate both conduct and possibilities of action.

1.5. Rationale and significance

The rationale and significance of this study can be summarized in three ways.

Gendered barriers in Iranian sport: Since the establishment of the Islamic regime in Iran, political Islamists have redefined gender roles by enforcing the hijab in sport and imposing strict dress codes that restrict women's participation in international events such as gymnastics and swimming (Mohammadi, 2021). Sports such as cycling are also constructed as masculine, further discouraging women's involvement, while misogynistic policies continue to limit women's access to stadiums (Enderle, 2021). Women's participation in elite sport is additionally organized through regimes of conditional visibility, in which inclusion and international representation remain dependent upon conformity to dominant moral, religious, and political expectations. Despite these constraints, Iranian women have achieved remarkable success in elite sport, symbolizing forms of resilience and agency that extend beyond athletic achievement alone (Ziaee et al., 2023). Beyond examining barriers and resistance, this study explores how Iranian elite sportswomen constitute themselves as ethical subjects within relations of surveillance, moral regulation, and ideological governance. In doing so, the research moves beyond interpreting athletes' actions as isolated

individual responses to oppression and instead examines the ethical negotiations, compromises, and forms of self-regulation through which continued participation in elite sport becomes possible. The findings may also contribute to support programs and policy discussions concerning female athletes, coaches, and referees, while encouraging more context-sensitive approaches to gender equity in sport.

Voices of elite Muslim sportswomen: Beyond these structural barriers and constraints, few studies have explored the voices of elite sportswomen in Muslim societies and the ways they negotiate power relations within their professional environments. This study amplifies these narratives while examining the broader institutional, cultural, and moral conditions through which certain experiences become difficult to disclose, contest, or even articulate within elite sport settings. In doing so, the research sheds light on how silence, visibility, and self-expression are shaped through relations of gendered power, religious norms, and institutional expectations. The study therefore contributes to a sociological understanding of gender, culture, governance, and power in elite sport, while emphasizing the importance of approaches that take broader cultural, gendered, and structural conditions into account.

Disciplinary practices and resistance: Understanding these experiences also requires attention to the forms of power through which Muslim women's bodies are regulated within highly structured institutional environments. While existing scholarship has documented the political, religious, and cultural regulation of Muslim women's bodies (Ahmed, 1992; Hargreaves, 2006; Babakhani, 2024; Beidollahkhani, 2026), considerably less attention has been given to how these processes operate within elite sport, where organizational, disciplinary, and performance-related demands intersect with broader gendered and religious expectations. As Ramírez (2017) argues, the regulation of Muslim women's bodies extends beyond formal policies and is embedded within

wider projects of governing visibility, morality, and social order. Yet little is known about how these forms of regulation are experienced and negotiated within elite sport, a setting characterized by heightened surveillance, public visibility, institutional accountability, and performance pressures. This study therefore examines how Muslim women's bodies become sites through which multiple forms of power are exercised, negotiated, and contested simultaneously. Rather than conceptualizing resistance as external opposition alone, the research explores how athletes navigate and respond to these overlapping demands through everyday practices of adjustment, negotiation, and selective compliance. In doing so, the study contributes to broader sociological debates concerning embodiment, governance, and power by advancing understanding of how bodily regulation operates within highly regulated sport systems.

1.6. Reflections on the Researcher's Context and Standpoint

I position myself as an immigrant social researcher whose engagement with sport is shaped both by lived experience and by analytical frameworks developed through academic training. Throughout my career, I had held a variety of roles, from elite basketball and badminton player to sports director to academic in sport management. Growing up in post-revolutionary Iran, I experienced the harsh realities of a sex-segregated and discriminatory society. Despite these challenges, sport became a crucial companion throughout my formative years, offering a sense of belonging and self-expression that often contrasted with the restrictive cultural environment around me. My early immersion in the world of sport culminated in academic pursuits beginning with undergraduate studies in physical education and sport science, followed by a Ph.D. in sport management.

My understanding of gender, power, and inequality emerges not only from theoretical engagement but from lived experience within regimes that actively regulate feminine appearance,

bodily conduct, and spatial mobility. As a teenager, I faced social isolation and stigma at the intersection of gender, appearance, and identity. My short hair and clothes that were perceived as boyish were frequently questioned, and my enthusiasm for playing soccer, a sport dominated by boys and symbolically reserved for masculinity, made me appear even more deviant within that context. I resisted the obligation to wear the hijab until I was seventeen³, often cycling freely through the streets or playing badminton with neighborhood boys. These acts, though small, reflected early expressions of resistance to the state's regulation of Muslim women's bodies. At the time, I lacked the language to articulate this resistance as feminist, but I was constantly questioning the inequities I saw around me: Why were there no national teams for women? Why did televised sports feature only men? Why was soccer inaccessible to girls like me? Why were jeans and a T-shirt considered improper for a girl who simply wanted to play?

Throughout my academic career in Iran, I frequently faced scrutiny and warnings regarding my dress and lack of adherence to the state-mandated hijab regulations. My clothing represented the maximum level of compliance I was personally willing to accept within the boundaries of those state-imposed norms. I was repeatedly questioned for not attending congregational prayers at the university mosque and for wearing jeans. As a faculty member at Tarbiat Modares University, one of Iran's most prestigious institutions of higher education, I was expected, like many other women faculty members, to wear a black chador⁴ and serve as a model of Islamic behaviour and morality. Although wearing the black chador was not formally mandatory for all female faculty members, it was a dominant cultural expectation within the university. I never wore a chador and sometimes attended the university in light-colored coats and scarves, with a few strands of my hair visible.

3 . According to Iran's Islamic dress code, girls are legally required to begin wearing the hijab (headscarf and modest clothing) after the age of nine years.

4 . A long, loose piece of fabric traditionally worn by many Muslim women in Iran, serving as a full-body covering that functions as a headscarf, veil, and outer garment all at once.

These choices, which were considered minor acts of nonconformity, had significant professional consequences. My application for promotion to the rank of associate professor remained in limbo until the day I left Iran; it was neither approved nor rejected. Although I met all academic and research criteria and received excellent evaluations in both teaching and scholarly performance, my promotion was withheld solely because I did not conform to the institution's prescribed Islamic standards of dress and behaviour.

These experiences were not isolated incidents but reflections of broader structures of power and social control, issues that this study sought to interrogate through a Foucauldian lens. Growing up as a woman from a minority group in Iran further shaped my sensitivity to exclusion, silencing, and the politics of visibility. My perspective as both an insider to the Iranian sport system and an outsider to its dominant religious state discourses enabled me to engage critically with the data and to question the normalized hierarchies within which female athletes operated.

1.6.1. Insider–Outsider Position

Beyond my personal journey, I contributed extensively to Iranian sport organizations, serving as a director in national bodies such as the National University Sports Federation (NUSF) and the National Olympic Academy (NOA). Within these male-dominated institutions, I used my expertise in sport management to advocate for female athletes and promote greater inclusion in decision-making processes. My involvement in numerous research and policy initiatives provided a comprehensive understanding of Iran's sport landscape and of the challenges and opportunities confronting women athletes. These professional encounters, combined with my lived experiences, positioned me uniquely to interpret the subtle mechanisms of power, control, resistance, and ethical subject formation shaping women's sport in Iran. While my professional experiences provided valuable insight, this study went beyond personal observation. It engaged with the lived

experiences of Iranian elite sportswomen as co-constructors of meaning, particularly in relation to how they constituted themselves as ethical subjects within conditions of surveillance, moral regulation, and ideological governance. Guided by a constructivist and reflexive epistemology, I recognized that my interpretations were shaped by my history, values, and positionality.

1.6.2. Reflexive Practice

To maintain awareness of these influences, I engaged in continuous reflexive memo writing throughout the research process. This practice helped me identify moments when my advocacy for gender justice or my prior experiences could bias interpretation. Through deliberate reflexivity, I aimed to maintain analytical clarity while ensuring that participants' voices remained central to meaning-making. Reflexivity also served as a tool for transparency, reminding me that knowledge was co-constructed through interaction and interpretation rather than discovered as a fixed truth.

1.6.3. Ethical Commitment and Purpose

My previous professional affiliations and insider knowledge required discretion and ethical sensitivity. I took care to anonymize all contextual details that could reveal individuals, institutions, or specific events. The inclusion of reflective observations served not as personal testimony but as a methodological bridge between lived experience and analytic interpretation. In conducting this research, I also drew upon my professional experiences in sport management to inform my understanding of context and interpretation. These experiences were not used to express personal opinion but rather to illuminate patterns and dynamics that are often absent from formal documentation. I recorded these reflections as analytic notes, carefully omitting any details that could identify individuals or organizations. These notes, drawn from past professional encounters, were used solely to support interpretation where they helped clarify institutional practices or gendered power relations within Iranian sport. By integrating my professional insights in this

reflexive and ethical manner, I aimed to enrich the analysis while maintaining confidentiality and respect for those involved.

This research represented a deeply personal yet scholarly endeavor to amplify the silenced voices of Iranian elite sportswomen. Having lived in a system that constrained freedom of expression, I could not freely publish or share these reflections while in Iran. Conducting this research in an environment that valued academic freedom allowed me to transform those constraints into critical insight. My ultimate goal was not to speak for others but to create a platform through which Iranian women athletes could articulate their experiences, reclaim their narratives, and challenge the disciplinary structures that had long defined their visibility and participation in sport.

1.7. Objectives and Research Questions

Guided by Michel Foucault's theorization of power, discipline, and subjectivity, this doctoral research investigates how elite Muslim sportswomen's bodies are governed, normalized, and contested within the sociopolitical structures of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Drawing on Foucault's view of the body as a cultural construct imbued with power, perception, and discourse, the study explores how women athletes, coaches, and referees experience, negotiate, and sometimes resist institutional and cultural control, while constituting themselves as ethical subjects within broader relations of surveillance, moral regulation, and political governance in Iran's elite sport system.

The main objective of this research is to examine how power operates through mechanisms of regulation, normalization, moral governance, and resistance in shaping the lived experiences, ethical subjectivities, and professional identities of elite Iranian sportswomen. Through this lens, the study seeks to reveal how institutional and state religious governance influence both

compliance and agency in elite women's sport participation. To achieve this overarching aim, the study pursues three specific objectives:

- (A) To analyze the mechanisms of power, surveillance, and control exercised by Iranian sport institutions and state authorities in regulating the bodies and performances of elite sportswomen.
- (B) To explore the strategies of negotiation, resistance, and agency through which elite Muslim sportswomen challenge or subvert institutional and cultural constraints.
- (C) To examine how elite sportswomen navigate the intersection of state religious doctrine and international sport expectations in shaping their professional identities.

Aligned with these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

- (A) What power dynamics and control mechanisms are employed by the Islamic government to regulate the bodies and performances of elite Iranian sportswomen?
- (B) What forms of resistance do elite Muslim sportswomen employ to challenge institutional and cultural control over their bodies and careers?
- (C) How do these women navigate the intersection of state religious doctrine and international athletic demands in their professional lives?

Together, these objectives and questions aim to uncover the complex interplay between power, discourse, moral regulation, and resistance in shaping women's experiences in elite Iranian sport, contributing to a deeper understanding of how gendered bodies and ethical subjectivities are disciplined, negotiated, and rendered intelligible within regimes of religious governance.



CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW



2.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the lived experiences of Muslim elite sportswomen and situate these experiences within a Foucauldian theoretical framework. Although existing scholarship has increasingly documented the experiences of Muslim women athletes, the experiences of coaches and referees remain comparatively underexplored. Addressing these groups alongside athletes broadens the analytical lens of the review and provides a more comprehensive understanding of how power relations, governance, and gendered regulation operate across elite sport. To guide this literature review, four key concepts are central: the Muslim woman's body, elite sport, the Iranian context, and Foucauldian perspectives on power, discourse, and ethical subject formation. The review is organized into four interconnected sections that together establish the conceptual and contextual foundation of this study. The first section explores the status of women in Islam, highlighting how religious and cultural interpretations have historically shaped women's roles, bodily practices, and social positions. The second section focuses on the Iranian context, tracing the sociopolitical status of women after the Islamic Revolution and examining how gender norms and the Islamic state's control over female bodies have evolved. The third section analyzes the relationship between Muslim women, the body, and sport, emphasizing how gender, religion, and power intersect to shape both opportunities and constraints within sporting contexts. The fourth and final section provides a comprehensive overview of women's participation in Iranian sport, from its historical roots to contemporary developments, focusing on the lived experiences of Iranian women in elite sport. Together, these perspectives demonstrate the complex interplay of power, surveillance, resistance, negotiation, and ethical subjectivity that continues to shape the experiences of Iranian Muslim elite sportswomen.

2.2. The Status of Women in the Qur'an and Islamic Tradition

Rahman (2021) explains that the Qur'an, as Islam's most important religious text, was intended to reform and elevate the social status of women rather than institutionalize their inferiority. Women's subordination in many Muslim societies, he argues, stems not from the Qur'an itself but from historical, political, and cultural practices that emerged later. The Qur'an aimed to protect the most vulnerable members of pre-Islamic Arabian society, including women, slaves, and the poor, by condemning injustices such as female infanticide and the exploitation of women, while promoting justice, dignity, and moral equality. Although the Qur'an acknowledged socioeconomic differences between men and women in early Arabian society, it did not assert men's inherent or spiritual superiority. Both sexes are regarded as equal in moral worth and capable of piety and virtue. Rahman (2021) emphasizes that the Qur'an's legal pronouncements should be understood as historically conditioned reforms intended to promote justice and social balance, while their ethical essence of fairness, compassion, and equality remains universally relevant.

The Qur'an neither prescribes veiling nor mandates the segregation of the sexes. Instead, it promotes mutual modesty, respect, and moral conduct for both men and women. Historical evidence suggests that in the Prophet's time, gender interaction occurred within a context of dignity and restraint, without the later institutionalized practices of seclusion or veiling (Rahman, 2021). However, later Shi'i interpretations of Islam, particularly those codified through hadith compilations by clerics such as Allameh Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, contributed to a patriarchal reinterpretation of gender roles. These teachings positioned women as subordinate and dependent on men by grounding gender hierarchy in religious authority. Shi'i fiqh (jurisprudence) and hadith traditions often portray women as emotionally fragile and morally weaker than men, defining their primary purpose as wives, mothers, and sexual beings devoted to reproduction and family service

(Ferdows & Ferdows, 2021). Such interpretations, later reinforced by Ayatollah Khomeini and the clerical establishment of the Islamic Republic, embedded women's obedience, seclusion, and moral restraint within a religious framework, presenting subordination as divinely ordained. Ferdows and Ferdows (2021) argue that these clerical readings, rather than the Qur'an itself, have most strongly shaped Iranian gender norms, legitimizing women's dependence as a religious duty.

2.2.1. The Muslim Female Body: Faith, Gender, and Power

Across Islamic thought, the human body has served as a symbolic and moral boundary between the sacred and the profane. Islam associates nudity with moral vulnerability for both men and women, while covering the body expresses discipline, self-respect, and reverence for God. Within this moral framework, the female body has often been viewed as a powerful site of faith, sexuality, and social order, where religion, morality, and gender intersect (Al-Absi, 2018). Islamic teachings link religion, gender, and the body to define norms of conduct and appearance. The female body is regarded as a source of dignity and spiritual integrity, and its exposure is perceived as a breach of both moral and divine order. These beliefs have shaped broader notions of modesty, chastity, and social boundaries within Muslim communities. While both men and women are called to modesty, women's bodies have historically been more strictly regulated through cultural customs and religious interpretation. Such interpretations, however, vary widely across time and place, revealing that Islam is not monolithic but deeply shaped by context, politics, and culture (Al-Absi, 2018; Charrad, 2011).

Scholars have long debated how Muslim women's bodies function as sites of religious identity and political meaning. Some view modesty and veiling as mechanisms for disciplining women's sexuality and reinforcing gender hierarchy (Eltahawy, 2010; Mernissi, 1991; Mule & Barthel, 1992), while others interpret veiling as a complex act of resistance, identity formation, or

critique of Western colonial narratives (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Bjoernaas, 2015; Mancini, 2012). Babakhani (2024) argues that Muslim women's bodies have frequently been central to Orientalist depictions of Islam, where the veil operates as a political symbol of otherness. Yet, for many women, bodily practices of modesty and veiling represent negotiated expressions of agency, faith, and belonging within intersecting structures of power.

2.2.2. Modesty and Awra: The Moral and Social Boundaries of the Body

Modesty (*haya*) occupies a central role in Islamic ethics as both an internal virtue and an external code of conduct. Scholars conceptualize modesty as an internalized self-view (Sedikides et al., 2003), a form of social self-presentation (Cialdini & De Nicholas, 1989), or a combination of both (Exline & Lobel, 1999). While modesty exists in many cultural traditions (Andrews, 2006; Vu et al., 2016), in Islam it is considered an essential component of Iman (faith) and moral behaviour. Prophet Muhammad emphasized that every religion has a distinct character, and the character of Islam is modesty, underscoring its centrality in Muslim moral life (Padela et al., 2019). In Islamic practice, modesty extends beyond attire to encompass behaviour, speech, and interpersonal relations. It fosters humility, discourages arrogance, and guides social interaction between genders. The Qur'an's injunctions regarding modesty and the Prophet's teachings highlight its function in preserving dignity, preventing moral corruption, and sustaining social harmony (Boulanouar, 2006; Padela & Del Pozo, 2011).

Integral to modesty is the concept of *awra*, which refers to parts of the body that should be covered to protect personal dignity and uphold divine and social order. The term derives from the Arabic root *awra*, meaning deficiency or vulnerability, suggesting both physical and moral dimensions of modesty (Karyono et al., 2017). According to El Guindi (1999) and Al-Qaradawi (1960), the *awra* for men generally extends from the navel to the knee, while for women it

encompasses the entire body except the face and hands when in the presence of unrelated men. Mentioned four times in the Qur'an, awra establishes moral and physical boundaries that define modesty and regulate gender interaction.

The concealment of the awra serves multiple purposes: it reflects spiritual humility, guards against moral temptation, and sustains community ethics. Through these embodied practices, Islam expresses a holistic moral vision that connects inner faith with external discipline. The veil (hijab) and other modest dress forms thus emerge as outward symbols of devotion, decency, and respect, though their meanings and expressions vary widely across societies and historical contexts (Moaddel, 2020; Teimouri, 2026). The intertwined concepts of modesty and awra demonstrate how Islam links bodily comportment with moral and social order. The female body, situated at the intersection of faith, gender, and power, becomes a site where spiritual ideals, cultural identity, and personal agency are negotiated and continually redefined.

2.3. The Status of Iranian Women under the Islamic Republic

To develop a comprehensive understanding of the status of Iranian women, it is essential to examine the foundations of the Islamic Republic and the ways in which these principles have been embedded within the social structure. This analysis must also consider the legal and social consequences of implementing these principles, particularly as they shape women's everyday lives, rights, and opportunities. Finally, the section provides an overview of contemporary Iranian society, drawing on recent statistical data to explore public attitudes toward religion and women's issues, thereby illustrating the broader sociocultural landscape in which Iranian elite sportswomen's experiences are situated.

2.3.1. *The Foundations of the Islamic Republic of Iran*

Following the 1978-79 Islamic Revolution, Iran established a theocratic state grounded in Shi'i Islam and the doctrine of *Velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the Islamic jurist). As Koo (2024) explains, this doctrine placed religion at the center of political authority, national identity, and moral order. The new regime sought to legitimize its power by promoting Islamic values such as martyrdom, self-sacrifice, and anti-imperialism, while framing opposition as a threat to the revolution. Beyond its borders, Iran aimed to export this revolutionary doctrine by supporting Shi'i movements across the Middle East to extend its influence and reinforce its position as the leader of the Islamic world.

The doctrinal project of the Islamic Republic extended deeply into the social fabric through a broad process of politico-ideological Islamization. Haghayeghi (1993) argues that the clerical regime consolidated its authority by reshaping state institutions, education, culture, and media according to Shi'i Islamic principles. Within this framework, women occupied a central position in the construction of the new moral and national order. Their bodies, behaviours, and social roles were transformed into key instruments through which the regime expressed its religious and normative identity. In this regard, Afary and Anderson (2023) interpret such control as a form of biopolitical governance, in which women's bodies are utilized to maintain the state's norms of religious virtue, moral order, and national purity. In Iran, girls' gender and religious identities are shaped through dominant discourses of gender, religion, and culture that they encounter within the family, educational settings, and social interactions with peers (Babakhani, 2024). These early socializing institutions play a crucial role in reproducing state dogma, embedding patriarchal and religious norms into the daily experiences of women from a young age.

This Islamization campaign permeated everyday life through the regulation of gender relations, social norms, and public morality. The state promoted a vision of femininity centered on piety, modesty, and family devotion, framing these traits as essential to the preservation of the Islamic community. Women's participation in public life was limited and closely monitored, while their primary identity was tied to the domestic sphere as mothers, educators, and moral guardians of the family. Education and mass communication were also used to institutionalize these gendered ideals. Educational reforms redefined women's roles around motherhood and religious instruction, while systematically eliminating Western influences. State-controlled media, supervised by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, portrayed women primarily as symbols of chastity, self-sacrifice, and family commitment, ensuring that female representation aligned with the normative vision of the Islamic Republic (Haghighi, 1993).

Building on Nashat's (2021) interpretation, the doctrinal foundations of the Islamic Republic promoted a return to traditional, domestically centered gender roles presented as divinely ordained and crucial to maintaining the moral order of Islamic society. Leaders such as Ayatollah Khomeini portrayed women's postrevolutionary duty as caring for the family, raising children, and preserving moral purity, rejecting gender equality as a Western and corrupt concept incompatible with Islamic values. In official discourse, ideal womanhood was modeled after Fatimah, the Prophet's daughter, representing obedience and devotion, and Zaynab, whose courage was celebrated only when exercised in defense of Islam. Through this discursive framework, women were cast as the moral foundation of the Islamic nation, responsible for sustaining faith, family, and national virtue. Their social role was defined not as an individual right but as a religious obligation, serving the broader project of the Islamic Republic to shape an idealized, disciplined, and spiritually unified society (Nashat, 2021). Recent feminist analyses have emphasized that

understanding Iranian women's experiences requires attention not only to state dogma but also to how women themselves navigate and reinterpret these structures in their daily lives. Babakhani (2024) argues that many scholars and feminist theories fail to capture the lived realities of Iranian Muslim women. In seeking to challenge stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed, they often overlook how Iranian women actively construct their religious identities and make choices within complex networks of power. Understanding Iranian women's bodily and moral practices therefore requires attention to the dynamic interplay of religion, gender, class, culture, and politics that shapes both their agency and constraint.

2.3.2. Legal and Social Consequences of Implementing the Islamic Republic's Doctrine

The implementation of the Islamic Republic's postrevolutionary doctrine produced sweeping legal and social transformations that redefined women's position in Iranian society. Following the 1978-79 Revolution, the regime dismantled all legislation considered inconsistent with Islamic law, most notably repealing the Family Protection Law of the Pahlavi era (1925-1979), which had offered limited safeguards for women in marriage, divorce, and custody. As Moghadam (2024) explains, the replacement of this legal framework with a Sharia-based system institutionalized patriarchal authority, subordinating women to male guardianship and reasserting the dominance of clerical interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence. Under this new legal order, men were granted unilateral rights to divorce, polygamy, and child custody, while women lost significant legal autonomy. The minimum marriage age for girls was reduced to nine and later raised to thirteen, and marriage required the consent of a male guardian, typically a father or grandfather. Women were prohibited from serving as judges and faced restrictions in employment and mobility, often needing a husband's permission to work or travel. The penal code (Qanoon-e Qessas) established unequal treatment by valuing a woman's life and legal testimony at half that

of a man's. Marriage laws also institutionalized obedience (*tamkin*) and maintenance (*nafaqa*), linking a wife's right to financial support to her sexual compliance. Rape within marriage was not recognized as a crime, and while women retained control over personal property, their broader economic and legal independence remained severely constrained (Moghadam, 2024).

These legal reforms reinforced a gender hierarchy that permeated both the private and public spheres. The constitution explicitly tied women's rights to Islamic principles, guaranteeing equality only in accordance with the laws of Islam. This formulation entrenched the subordination of women within the legal system, ensuring that gender inequality was presented as both moral and divinely sanctioned. Iran's refusal to sign the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) further reflects the regime's commitment to maintaining a patriarchal order grounded in religious authority (Moghadam, 2024).

The Islamization of law in postrevolutionary Iran was closely connected to broad social changes that reshaped gender relations and women's everyday lives. State policies sought to confine women to domestic and reproductive roles, framing motherhood, modesty, and obedience as central elements of female virtue. Measures such as early retirement, the closure of daycare centers, and gender segregation in education and workplaces reinforced women's dependency on men and their confinement to the private sphere. Educational curricula were redesigned to emphasize homemaking, religious devotion, and submission, while public discourse idealized women as moral guardians of the family and nation (Nashat, 2021). Beyond the legal codification of gender inequality, political power has also been exercised through everyday mechanisms that enforce moral conformity and regulate women's appearance. In Iran, political influence has been used to promote a specific interpretation of Islam, often targeting women's appearance and behaviour. Women have at times been encouraged or pressured through male relatives to wear the

veil as a visible sign of proper Muslim conduct, reflecting the state's broader effort to control women's public roles and reinforce religious conformity (El-Solh & Mabro, 2020). This gendered social order was further strengthened by the state's control over women's behaviour and appearance. Veiling was redefined as a civic and moral obligation, serving as a visible marker of political loyalty and religious propriety. The state portrayed the veil as essential to protecting chastity, family honor, and social order, while labeling unveiled women as un-Islamic or morally corrupt. Over time, veiling shifted from a personal act of faith to a compulsory public duty subject to surveillance and moral policing (Friedl, 2021).

In practice, women were expected to wear dark, modest clothing and limit their presence in public spaces. Even in girls' schools, veiling was enforced as part of moral discipline, and women who appeared unveiled risked accusations of immorality or defiance. The veil functioned as both a religious symbol and a political instrument of control, reinforcing gender hierarchy and male authority (Friedl, 2021). According to Mohammadi and Hazeri (2021), contemporary expressions of hijab vary across regions and generations. The black chador, a full-body cloak leaving only the face visible, is typically worn by older or more conservative women, while the scarf or shayla, covering the hair and neck, allows greater flexibility in color and style. In areas such as Qeshm Island and Sistan and Baluchestan Province, local customs have produced distinctive forms such as the burqa and niqab, reflecting Iran's ethnic and cultural diversity. Teimouri (2026) argues that the Islamic Republic has used the hijab not merely as a religious requirement but as a political institution central to sustaining patriarchal authority. After 1988, the regime responded to women's growing resistance through pro-hijab rallies, morality campaigns, and coercive enforcement, revealing how control over women's bodies became integral to the state's political legitimacy.

2.3.3. *A Portrait of Contemporary Iranian Society*

While the previous sections examined the religious, legal, and social mechanisms through which the Islamic Republic sought to define and control women's roles, contemporary Iran reveals a population increasingly resistant to such constraints. The country is marked by a dynamic tension between the persistence of theocratic authority and the rise of secular, democratic, and egalitarian values. Shifting public attitudes toward religion, governance, and gender illustrate deep structural transformations within Iranian society. Recent surveys point to profound changes in political culture, religiosity, and social outlook. The 2025 GAMAAN⁵ report *Iranians' Political Preferences in 2024* demonstrates a decisive departure from religious governance toward democracy and individual freedom. Based on responses from over 77,000 Iranians, 47.9 percent of whom were women and 52.1 percent men, approximately 70 percent oppose the continuation of the Islamic Republic, with only 11 to 19 percent expressing support. Opposition is strongest among younger, urban, and highly educated groups but remains significant across society. Nearly 89 percent favor democratic governance, while only small minorities support religious or military rule. When asked about core values, Iranians prioritized human rights (37 percent), social justice (33 percent), and national pride (26 percent), whereas support for traditional or religious values was minimal at five percent (Maleki, 2025).

⁵ GAMAAN (the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran) is an independent, non-profit research organization based in the Netherlands that investigates the social and political opinions of Iranians. Due to the limitations on free expression and survey research inside Iran, GAMAAN uses innovative online methods, distributing its questionnaires through a wide range of digital channels and VPN networks to gather representative data. To ensure the accuracy and credibility of its findings, the organization applies statistical matching and weighting procedures and cross-validates results with external sources. GAMAAN's independence and methodological rigor have earned it international recognition. In 2022, it received the Market Research Society's President's Medal for making an extraordinary contribution to research, and its director, Dr. Ammar Maleki, assistant professor of comparative politics at Tilburg University, currently serves as Iran's national representative for the World Association of Public Opinion Research (WAPOR) for 2025–2026.

Religious diversity and declining religiosity further illustrate societal change. According to GAMAAN's *Iranians' Attitudes Toward Religion: A 2020 Survey Report*, only 32 percent of respondents identified as Shi'ite Muslims, while growing numbers described themselves as atheists (9 percent), Zoroastrians (8 percent), spiritual but not religious (7 percent), agnostic (6 percent), or Sunni Muslims (5 percent). Another 22 percent reported no religious affiliation, and nearly half indicated having lost their religion over their lifetime. Public support for separating religion from state power was strong: 68 percent believed religious prescriptions should not influence legislation, and 71 percent argued that religious institutions should fund themselves independently of the government. Public attitudes toward women's rights and bodily autonomy underscore these shifts. The GAMAAN survey revealed that 72 percent of Iranians oppose the legal obligation to wear the hijab, and 58 percent reject it as a religious practice altogether; only 15 percent believe veiling should be legally enforced (Maleki & Tamimi Arab, 2020). Once a symbol of piety and national identity, the hijab has increasingly come to represent state control, a notion now widely rejected, particularly by women. The ongoing struggle for women's autonomy is exemplified by decades of social and political engagement. Rising literacy and university participation among women, delayed marriage, and declining fertility rates have collectively altered the gender order and challenged state-sanctioned ideals of femininity. These demographic and cultural shifts have facilitated new forms of subjectivity and resistance (Afary & Anderson, 2023). Women's empowerment has expanded through education, employment, and public participation, strengthening social agency and reducing compliance with state-imposed norms (Kahalzadeh, 2024).

The death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini in 2022 epitomized these tensions and catalyzed the nationwide "Women, Life, Freedom" movement. The movement spread rapidly across Iran, uniting

individuals from diverse social, ethnic, and class backgrounds. Its slogan encapsulates an emancipatory discourse linking bodily autonomy, human dignity, and collective liberation. Unlike earlier movements, men actively supported women's resistance, signaling a fundamental disruption of patriarchal power relations and cultural norms. The uprising articulated a counter-discourse that contested the biopolitical regulation of women's bodies, demanded recognition of women's social and political agency, and represented an epistemic rupture in Iran's collective consciousness (Afary & Anderson, 2023). Women now stand at the center of Iran's discursive and political struggle. As Koo (2024) emphasizes, they are both subjects of patriarchal repression and key agents of social change, driving the redefinition of national identity and religious authority. Their ongoing defiance, expressed through public visibility, digital activism, and participation in protests, symbolizes broader societal efforts to renegotiate the boundaries of freedom, equality, and justice. These acts reveal a shifting landscape in which the pursuit of individual and collective rights increasingly transcends dominant discourses of religion and gender.

2.4. Muslim sportswomen experiences

Women in elite sports have been the subject of numerous studies offering diverse insights into their experiences. However, research focusing on the participation of Muslim women in sport remains limited, and their presence in elite-level contexts is especially underexplored (Toffoletti & Palmer, 2017). This research gap can be attributed to several factors, including limited access to elite athletes, their apprehension about openly discussing their conditions and status (Hargreaves, 2006), and restrictive legal frameworks and policies in many Muslim-majority countries. Existing literature identifies a range of socio-cultural barriers that constrain Muslim women's participation in sports. Based on a scoping review, Hussain and Cunningham (2024) note that the predominant focus in the field has been on obstacles such as Sharia law, cultural norms,

religious identity, social taboos, clothing requirements, limited social support, family constraints, Islamophobia, the Western sporting paradigm, and patriarchal structures. These factors collectively shape the ways in which Muslim women navigate sporting environments, influencing decisions about participation, training, and competition. Integrating these findings highlights the pervasive influence of socio-cultural and religious norms, providing a foundational context for understanding the nuanced experiences of Muslim sportswomen across diverse national and cultural settings.

The influence of religion on sports experiences varies significantly across Muslim contexts. While some Muslim countries integrate religion into nearly every aspect of life, others adopt a more marginal approach. Additionally, the sporting experiences of Muslim women differ considerably depending on whether they reside in non-Muslim countries or in nations where Islam serves as the official religion. For example, Cheng (2019) found that Muslim female athletes in Australia were socially integrated through participation in Australian rules football, and although religion influenced their morals and behaviour, it had minimal impact on their decision to participate in the sport. Similarly, Hussain and Cunningham (2023) demonstrate that in diverse contexts, individual religious identity can actually motivate physical activity when aligned with health and fitness goals. Their analysis showed that religious identity significantly predicted both physical activity intentions and behaviours, particularly among women with high health consciousness. These findings indicate that the determinants of Muslim women's participation differ sharply between contexts: in non-Muslim countries, individual religiosity and personal health awareness may be more decisive than societal or community-level factors, whereas in Muslim-majority countries, broader socio-cultural and institutional constraints often exert a stronger influence.

Indeed, in Muslim-majority countries, religion typically exerts a far-reaching influence, shaping leisure preferences and determining participation or non-participation in sports (Mroz, 2022; Senarath & Liyanage, 2020; Sofian et al., 2010). This suggests that Muslim women's sports experiences are deeply embedded in the national and sociocultural contexts in which they live. As such, no singular or uniform pattern emerges; instead, these experiences reflect the complexities of intersecting cultural, religious, and political influences. To establish a comprehensive understanding, this section reviews five key themes related to the experiences of Muslim women in sport: Governing Muslim Women's Bodies, Fear of Defeminization, Sex Segregation in Sport, Redefining Norms, and Modesty and Modernity.

2.4.1. GOVERNING MUSLIM WOMEN'S BODIES IN SPORT

A growing body of scholarship contests the traditional notion that religious practices are confined to sacred spaces like mosques and churches, revealing instead how religion permeates ostensibly secular contexts such as workplaces, schools, public transportation, healthcare settings, and sports arenas (Cadge et al., 2009; Hjelm, 2014; McCue & Krayem, 2023). Within this framework, Muslim sportswomen face distinct challenges that are shaped by their religious identities, setting their experiences apart from those of other female athletes (Tjønndal & Hovden, 2021). Many Muslim sportswomen are raised in environments where Islamic laws and cultural norms are deeply embedded, and their commitment to Islamic values profoundly influences their navigation of the sporting world (McCue & Krayem, 2023). In many Muslim-majority countries, the regulation of women's bodies exists at the intersection of religion and gender, where control over physical practices (Foucault, 1978) is often a mechanism for negotiating power and status. Beyond legal rights and obligations, Islamic influence shapes moral guidelines for everyday behaviour, including prayer, fasting, and adherence to dress codes, particularly for women

(Kamali, 2008). In some contexts, adherence to these principles is voluntary, while in others, state-enforced Islamic mandates impose severe consequences for noncompliance (Kebede, 2016).

A significant barrier to Muslim women's participation in sports stems from the perspectives of Islamic jurists and scholars, who frequently view modern sports as threats to traditional Islamic values (Shavit & Winter, 2011). Such scholars critique modern sports as secular and culturally foreign, arguing that they undermine moral and religious principles (Terrenoire, 1980). Historical factors, such as the introduction of sports like football and basketball through British and American imperial interventions in the early 20th century, have further solidified these perceptions, with religious authorities often framing these activities as Western intrusions incompatible with Islamic tradition (Ibrahim, 1982; Shavit & Winter, 2011). Muslim women encounter unique challenges in sports, shaped by intersecting factors across the religious, cultural, legal, and sociopolitical domains. These challenges demonstrate the complexity of their experiences and the negotiation required to participate in sports while maintaining adherence to their religious and cultural values.

2.4.2. Fear of Defeminization and the Disruption of Ideal Muslim Femininity

Sports are used in Islamic societies to exercise disciplinary power, shaping behaviour and thought to conform to social norms (Hargreaves, 2006; Foucault, 1978), such as those regarding the hijab, modesty, and gender roles. Physical exercise for women is traditionally considered a selfish act in Persian Gulf countries, where women are distracted from their primary responsibilities like taking care of their children and husbands. In addition, there is serious concern that rigorous athletic pursuits will lead to the defeminization of the ideal Muslim woman (Dun, 2016; Golkowska, 2021). These norms control women's participation in sports by delineating acceptable boundaries, such as adherence to modest dress codes, level of involvement, and the

segregation of spaces for men and women (Yousra et al., 2021). These regulations serve as subtle yet effective mechanisms through which disciplinary power maintains social order (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014) and reinforce traditional gender roles and concepts of hijab and modesty.

Furthermore, Islamic countries may institute gendered structures that restrict Muslim women's access to sports and sports facilities through discriminatory laws and regulations. In Pakistan, for example, gender-segregated sports facilities, completely male-dominated spaces, and strict clothing codes severely limit women's participation, highlighting how systematic control is enforced within specific socio-cultural contexts (Qureshi & Ghouri, 2011). Despite these legal constraints, Muslim sportswomen frequently resist these dominant structures. Their persistent efforts to engage in sports, even when faced with significant societal and religious barriers, represent acts of resistance. For instance, Pakistani women continue to fight for their basic social rights through playing cricket despite prevailing gender norms (Aslam, 2021). Also, certain sports are legally forbidden for women because these activities are deemed too masculine, often associated with muscularity and a large physique, which are perceived as imitating masculinity (Moore, 1997; Rahbari, 2019). The argument is that such sports contribute to the defeminization of Muslim women (Golkowska, 2021). However, this restriction also opens up new avenues for resistance. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, for example, women secretly participate in banned sports like bodybuilding and boxing in private clubs (Bockman, 2023; Mowat, 2017). In a country where public spaces are strictly regulated to maintain an Islamic atmosphere and censorship is employed to protect Islami-Iranian culture from Western influence, female boxers, bodybuilders, and other female athletes defy norms by sharing photos of their training and competitions on social media without adhering to the Islamic dress code and hijab. These overt acts of defiance challenge not only gender norms but also the broader Islamic doctrine, directly confronting the technologies

of power that seeks to regulate behaviour in line with societal expectations (Kallman & Dini, 2017). Despite the Islamic state's disciplinary authority to limit sportswomen, these forms of resistance show that power is never absolute. Decentralized and pervasive disciplinary power, which operates through societal norms and expectations, makes resistance less visible and more diffuse, complicating efforts to challenge these power relations (Allen et al., 2007).

2.4.3. Configuration of the Islamic lifestyle through sex segregation in sports

Foucault's concept of biopower helps to explain how sex segregation in sports functions not just as overt control but as a tool for encouraging, reinforcing, monitoring, optimizing, and organizing, especially in Islamic contexts. Biopower is a technology of power that organizes human subjects into communities and modulates their lifestyles (Foucault, 1978). In Islamic countries, the regulation of Muslim women's participation in sports, restricted by both legal and societal expectations, exemplifies this dynamic (Hargreaves, 2006). Sharia law, which prohibits the mixing of unrelated men and women due to concerns about social and physical interactions, serves as the foundation for these regulations (Van Geel, 2012). Consequently, in recreational and elite sports, facilities enforce strict sex divisions, separating men and women and restricting their simultaneous presence. This segregation is a clear example of how power operates through shaping the Muslim lifestyle, as described by Foucault. Sports venues often schedule services based on gender, giving men access during peak hours like after work and on weekends while women are relegated to less convenient times such as mornings and afternoons. This practice reflects and reinforces societal norms, which dictate that women's primary roles are in the private sphere, caring for their children and husbands. Through this scheduling, power is applied to shape and normalize behaviours, marginalizing women's involvement in public life and making them

conform to societal expectations (Foucault, 1978; Zarezadeh & Rastegar, 2023). In Islamic countries, sex segregation through sports illustrates how subjects are gradually constituted.

However, if sex segregation is applied in a more socially equitable context in which gendered norms impact Muslim sports women's experiences, it can lead to productive outcomes for Muslim sportswomen. Kay (2016) highlights that sex segregation is significant for Muslim women in the UK, as their families must ensure religious and cultural norms are respected. Similarly, Lenneis et al. (2022) reveal, Danish Muslim women in women-only swimming spaces navigate complex power dynamics shaped by gender, ethnicity, and religion. This shows that even in seemingly restrictive settings, Muslim women can exercise agency and engage in self-formation. For these female swimmers, resistance may not involve openly defying religious or cultural norms but reinterpreting them to enable self-care and self-expression in a safe environment (Foucault, 1987; Heyes, 2006). While these spaces are still governed by disciplinary power, through surveillance, hygiene rules, and modesty standards, they provide an opportunity to resist the broader societal panoptic gaze, allowing women to temporarily escape external judgments and focus on self-care (Foucault, 1987).

In some Islamic countries, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, sex segregation in sports goes even further: women are barred from entering sports stadiums as spectators. This is a clear example of domination in sports, where women's autonomy is severely restricted by the state, which enforces gender norms through segregation, limiting women's freedom and exerting strict control over their bodies and appearances. Foucault's (1990) concept of domination describes how such power relations limit freedom, with one group consistently imposing its will on another. In this context, women, seen as guardians of Islamic morality, face more intense scrutiny than men (Shahrokni, 2019). Munro (2003) suggests that this creates stagnant relationships, making

resistance difficult but not impossible. Despite these rigid frameworks, women may find subtle ways to navigate or challenge these imposed norms. One form of resistance is demonstrated by some young Muslim girls who disguise themselves as men to enter stadiums. This act, though risky, highlights their determination to defy oppressive policies. Such acts of resistance, often both creative and dangerous, are significant in challenging the state's control over Iranian Muslim women. In this context, dominance is exercised not by an individual, but by a government driven by an Islamic discourse that continues to significantly impact the agency of Muslim sportswomen.

2.4.4. Redefining norms: balancing religious values and modern sports

Muslim sportswomen encounter significant challenges regarding the decision to wear the hijab in sports, a dilemma shaped by Islamic cultural values and exacerbated by hijab phobia within international sports federations (Hamzeh, 2017; McLaughlin & Torres, 2014). Through the lens of Foucault's (1978) concept of disciplinary power this situation exemplifies how power permeates institutions, regulating behaviour and embedding control within individuals' daily practices. Muslim sportswomen are subjected to heightened scrutiny and regulation by both sports institutions and societal norms concerning their religious dress. In response to this control, Muslim sportswomen engage in various forms of resistance, aligning with Foucault's assertion that where there is power, there is also the potential for resistance (Smith Maguire, 2002). These women challenge restrictive dress codes by asserting their right to participate in sports while adhering to their religious dress, thereby disrupting normative power structures. This ongoing negotiation of power reflects Foucault's idea that power is not merely repressive but also productive, generating new forms of agency and knowledge (Foucault, 1978).

The resistance enacted by Muslim sportswomen often takes the form of everyday resistance, as described by Scott (2016), including subtle acts that challenge power without taking

direct action. For instance, the creation and popularization of the Burkini, a full-body swimsuit that allows Muslim women to engage in sports while adhering to their religious beliefs, exemplifies such resistance (McCue & Krayem, 2023). Foucault posits that power is exerted through discourses, systems of knowledge and language that shape our understanding. In some Western countries, such as the UK and France, the discourse surrounding the Burkini reflects broader power relations that marginalize Muslim women's identities and practices, casting their use of Burkinis as a threat to societal norms. However, these discourses also serve as sites of resistance, where meanings are contested and redefined (Weedon & Hallak, 2021). A strong sense of resistance can also be observed in how Muslim women navigate and negotiate societal expectations in sports. In Qatar, for example, the introduction of a new abaya (*a long, loose garment worn by many Muslim women in Arab countries to cover the body and preserve modesty*) that allows for greater movement while maintaining modesty standards and the hijab expresses everyday resistance without direct confrontation (Scott, 2016). This subtle challenge to traditional norms introduces stylistic modifications that enable Muslim women to engage in physical activities while preserving their cultural and religious identities (Knez, 2014). Similarly, in Saudi Arabia and Oman, a gradual shift in attitudes toward women's participation in physical activities and the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, while still respecting Islamic requirements, illustrates everyday resistance. This shift, which varies between generations and regions, demonstrates how power is contested within the framework of cultural and religious norms (Alghamdi & Aldossari, 2024; Yousra et al., 2021). Muslim women also often employ techniques of self-reflection and transformation to reconcile their religious beliefs with their desire to participate in sports and redefine their identities (Burkitt, 2002; Lloyd, 2012). This process allows them to navigate the complex interplay of societal expectations, religious norms, and personal aspirations, asserting their autonomy in a context that

seeks to regulate their bodies and behaviours. As Sehlíkoglu (2021) highlights, Turkish women engaged in sports are not merely exercising their bodies; they are participating in a process of self-transformation that challenges traditional gender roles, redefines their relationship with the body image, and reimagines their societal roles. This form of resistance, according to Foucault, is not necessarily about grand, overt acts of defiance but rather about subverting norms imposed by disciplinary power through everyday actions (Scott, 2016). By asserting their agency and autonomy, these women are challenging dominant power structures and creating new definitions and expressions of femininity and body that are not constrained by Islamic norms.

2.4.5. Between Modesty and Modernity: The Contradictions of Islamic Norms and Secular Governance in Elite Sport

Elite sports practices often normalize and institutionalize standards that shape athletes' identities and prepare them for success (Tjønndal, 2019). These practices are guided by both explicit and implicit rules, which athletes do not choose but must adhere to (Smith Maguire, 2002). These rules shape not only the learning environment but also influence an athlete's personal identity (Tjønndal, 2019). For elite women, this immersion into the culture of elite sports molds their identities around performance-oriented values, such as a strong commitment to the sport and the pursuit of victory (Douglas & Carless, 2009). However, these values often clash with Islamic norms, particularly regarding modesty, privacy, and public visibility (Benn & Dagkas, 2017). The lifestyle of elite Muslim sportswomen is heavily influenced by their behaviour, attire, training routines, and dietary practices (Pfister, 2000; Tjønndal, 2019). Professional attire, for example, institutionalizes an ideal of how elite women should compete (Tjønndal, 2019). For Muslim women, modesty, often expressed through covering the body, symbolizes submission to God and aligns them with Islamic traditions (Pfister, 2003, 2010). However, attire rules in Olympic sports,

such as those set by the International Volleyball Association for beach volleyball, which mandate significant body exposure, pose a challenge for Muslim women who seek to adhere to their religious modesty requirements (Benn & Dagkas, 2017).

Another particularly contentious issue is the safety concerns surrounding Muslim women wearing head coverings in international competitions, such as basketball (Bahrainwala & O'Connor, 2022), despite the lack of documented evidence showing that head coverings pose a health threat to female athletes (Prouse, 2015). This tension reflects a deeper struggle between Islam and secularism, exposing the problematic binary between Islam and Western culture (GhaneaBassiri, 2010). In this binary, the West is often seen as embodying values associated with democracy, equality, and individual liberty, while elite sports culture, which is implicitly viewed as Western, serves to reinforce and perpetuate these distinctions (Robb & Dugan, 2022). Foucault's distinction between power and domination is crucial for understanding the experiences of elite Muslim sportswomen related to international sports governance. The International Sports Federations enshrine and govern dominance over their national members through power over sport bodies, in fundamentally constricting ways, focusing only on subjugation and control (Munro, 2003). The disqualification of the Iranian women's soccer team from the 2012 Olympics due to FIFA's hijab ban exemplifies domination in action (Ryan, 2012). While power is fluid and embedded in everyday practices, domination is a more rigid and oppressive form of power that entrenches control, limiting freedom and resistance (Munro, 2003). The International Football Association Board (IFAB) and FIFA justified their hijab ban on the basis of player safety, citing unsubstantiated strangulation risks without any concrete evidence. This enforcement of specific dress codes not only regulates how Muslim women can appear on the soccer field but also reinforces dominant cultural and political norms that privilege Western ideals of secularism and

neutrality (Prouse, 2015). FIFA's safety rationale can be viewed as the imposition of a normative standard that marginalizes those who do not conform, effectively excluding Muslim women from the global sports arena. This exclusion reflects a broader disciplinary mechanism aimed at homogenizing athletes' appearance and behaviour in line with dominant cultural norms (Prouse, 2015).

Muslim elite sportswomen's resistance to these norms can be understood through Foucault's concept of reverse discourse, where the very categories imposed by power are reappropriated and rearticulated to challenge the norms they enforce. Elite Muslim Sportswomen often face narratives that frame the hijab as incompatible with modern sports. These women, however, reverse this discourse by participating in competitive sports at international levels while wearing a hijab, demonstrating that it is possible to take part in world events while wearing a hijab as well and achieve success. In fact, by insisting on their right to wear the hijab or other religious attire in sports, Muslim women resist exclusion and challenge the underlying assumptions about gender, religion, and modernity that inform such policies. This resistance has led to significant changes in sports policies, including the eventual relaxation of dress codes by international sporting federations (Benn et al., 2010; McLaughlin & Torres, 2014).

2.5. Women's Sport in Iran: Past, Present, and Lived Experiences

After reviewing the broader status of women in Islam and within the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as examining the experiences of Muslim women in sport, this section builds the foundation for analyzing Iranian elite sportswomen. It begins with a historical and cultural overview of women's sport in Iran, followed by a discussion of Iranian women's participation in various forms of sport in the contemporary era, and concludes with a review of Iranian sportswomen's lived experiences within political, cultural, and institutional contexts.

2.5.1. A Historical and Cultural Overview of Women's Sport in Iran

The evolution of women's sport in Iran reflects a complex relationship between religion, state discourses, and cultural norms. Iran has a longer history of women's sports than most other Islamic nations (Pfister, 2005). Iranian women's bodies have long served as symbolic battlegrounds, alternately embodying aspirations of Western modernity (Hargreaves, 2000) and tenets of Islamic governance (Hargreaves, 2006). Their sporting experiences have unfolded within a landscape shaped by colonial legacies, geopolitical tensions, economic sanctions, and war (Bina, 2017), rendering progress uneven and politicized (Jahromi et al., 2011). This historical overview highlights milestones and enduring challenges that continue to shape elite women's sport in Iran.

Early Beginnings :19th Century

Modern sport and physical education entered Iran in the 1850s, facilitated by travel, international labor migration, and cross-cultural exchange (Jahromi et al., 2011). Christian missionaries played a central role in introducing physical education to girls' schools, initially benefiting non-Muslim communities. As upper-class Muslim girls began attending these institutions, they became early advocates for expanding sport opportunities for all women (Chehabi, 2002). The primary obstacle was the widespread perception, shared both socially and personally, that sport was unnecessary for women. Many, already burdened by household responsibilities, questioned its value and considered everyday chores or walking sufficient physical activity. Given low literacy rates and the concentration of educated women in major cities, the Iranian popular press, particularly newspapers and magazines, served as the main vehicle for promoting women's sport, although its reach and influence were limited (Khosrozade & Azizi, 2021). Yet, even among the minority of educated urban women with access to this popular press, sport was often not taken seriously or regarded as a meaningful pursuit.

Pre-Islamic Revolution :1900-1978

The year 1935 marked a turning point in institutional support for women's sport with the establishment of the Iranian Women's Center, the introduction of preparatory programs for girls, and the unveiling decree (Khosrozade & Azizi, 2021). Modernization policies led to physical education in girls' schools and the creation of the Ladies' Center (*Kānun-e Banovān*), which promoted women's physical fitness. In 1939, Iran held its first national women's championships in athletics and swimming. Despite conservative opposition rooted in morality and gender norms (Chehabi, 2002), upper- and middle-class women pushed boundaries. Under the Pahlavi regime (1925-1979), sport symbolized progress and empowerment, with the Women's Sport Organization, supported by the imperial family, actively promoting female participation. Iranian women debuted internationally at the 1958 Tokyo Asian Games in athletics and table tennis (NOC Iran, 2023). Educational reforms during the 1960s increased women's university enrollment to roughly one-third of the student population, and women gained the right to vote in 1963 (Pfister, 2005) and expanded sport opportunities (Jahromi et al., 2011). In 1964, four Iranian women competed in track and field and gymnastics at the Tokyo Olympics (Brown & Connolly, 2010). Hosting the 1974 Asian Games in Tehran further elevated women's visibility in international sport (Hareuveny & Blanga, 2023).

Post-Islamic Revolution:1978-1990

The 1978-79 Islamic Revolution abruptly reversed the trajectory of women's sport. The new regime enforced strict gender norms that halted competitive sport for women (Mohammadi, 2021). Bodily autonomy and public participation were curtailed through control over clothing, movement, and behaviour (Kohan, 2022). Muslim feminists argue that neither veiling nor excluding women from public life is mandated by Islamic law; rather, such practices stem from

patriarchal traditions embedded in religious interpretation (De Knop et al., 1996). While Islam grants certain protections to women, these are coupled with expectations of obedience, fostering dependency (Sattar, 1987).

Elite women's sport, still in its infancy, was stalled by policies emphasizing modesty, traditional gender roles, and social control (Paidar, 1997). The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) further diverted resources from sport. Physical activity for women was limited to gender-segregated, supervised settings (Chehabi, 2002). Nonetheless, institutional structures emerged: the Women's Sport Organization (1981), the Directorate of Women's Sports Affairs (1985), and the Women's Division of the Physical Education Organization (1989). These bodies sought to regulate sport participation within doctrine boundaries (Brown & Connolly, 2010) and reflected structures and missions distinctly different from those of women's sport organizations prior to the Islamic Revolution. Public competition remained contentious. Some religious authorities endorsed private, non-competitive activity for women but rejected public or international competition (Yousefi et al., 2024). International participation was restricted to sports compatible with Islamic dress codes, such as shooting and chess (Jahromi et al., 2011).

Contemporary period :1990 to the present

Since the 1990s, Iran has established women's sport organizations within a gender-segregated framework, including the Muslim Women's Sports Federation (MWSF), the Islamic Countries Women's Sports Federation (ICWSF), and the National Women's Sports Administration (NWSA), all under the Deputy President for Women's Sport (Steel & Richter-Devroe, 2003). In a patriarchal, religiously conservative society, women-only structures were seen as the only viable means to sustain participation. The Muslim Women's Games, held in Tehran from 1993 to 2005, became a flagship initiative, with women serving in all leadership roles. The final edition in 2005

hosted 1,587 athletes from 39 countries (Brown & Connolly, 2010). The 1990s also marked the reestablishment of national women's teams and renewed competition under hijab-compliant uniforms (Jahromi et al., 2011). A pivotal moment came in 1996 when Lida Fariman ended a 32-year Olympic absence by competing in shooting and carrying Iran's flag at the opening ceremony (Malanski, 2024). Efforts to gain international recognition for Islamic dress codes expanded opportunities for Iranian women across more disciplines.

In the 21st century, Iranian women achieved historic successes, winning medals at the Asian, Olympic, and Paralympic Games (Hosseini Khah, 2018). The arrival of foreign coaches and the rising certification levels among Iranian coaches and referees improved the quality and conditions of women's training in line with international standards. In 2016, taekwondo athlete Kimia Alizadeh became Iran's first female Olympic medalist, earning bronze in Rio. Her achievement challenged gender norms and inspired a generation, earning her a place on the BBC's list of 100 most inspiring women (BBC, 2019). Iranian women also secured a historic team gold medal in Kabaddi at the 2018 Asian Games in Kabaddi and contributed 31% of Iran's medals at the 2022 Hangzhou Asian Games. Despite these achievements, women's sport remains constrained by state doctrine, limited decision-making power, financial challenges, and male-dominated governance (Saffari, 2025). Structural barriers include compulsory hijab laws (Shirazi, 2017; Teimouri, 2026), gender segregation policies (Shahrokni, 2019), and dress codes that exclude women from gymnastics, swimming, and beach volleyball (Enderle, 2021). Certain sports, such as bodybuilding, boxing, wrestling, and fitness activities like Zumba, remain banned for women (Rahbari, 2019). Persistent stereotypes in sports such as soccer and cycling, along with inequitable resource allocation (Talebpour et al., 2019), further marginalize elite sportswomen.

2.5.2. Forms of Iranian Women's Sports Participation

Participation of Iranian women in sports, whether at recreational or elite levels, has followed a long and challenging trajectory. Women's access to sports is closely regulated and controlled under the laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran: some activities are entirely prohibited, meaning that even under full Islamic dress and in women-only spaces, participation is not permitted, while others are allowed only under highly restricted conditions. Despite these legal and cultural constraints, Iranian women continue to engage in sports, demonstrating resilience and resistance as they navigate these structural, social, and doctrinal barriers. Their engagement across diverse contexts exemplifies resistance as a multidimensional, dynamic, and complex social phenomenon, manifesting in varied forms and pursuing multiple objectives (Baaz et al., 2017). Iranian women's sports participation can be broadly categorized into four types:

Approved sports: These activities are officially permitted for women and include volleyball, basketball, football (soccer), futsal, handball, badminton, tennis, table tennis, athletics, archery, shooting, skiing, canoeing, kayaking, horseback riding, ice hockey, chess, mountain climbing, taekwondo, karate, judo, wushu, and weightlifting. Participation is conditional upon adherence to Islamic attire regulations set by Iranian federations. Women may also compete internationally, as governing bodies permit Muslim women to wear the hijab. Although these sports are rarely live-streamed, participants are able to share photos and videos provided they comply with dress codes.

Limited international sports: Sports such as gymnastics, swimming, beach volleyball, and other water-based disciplines are available at the national level (Worden, 2016; Berkeley, 2023). However, due to conflicts between international attire regulations and hijab requirements, Iranian women are generally unable to compete in these sports internationally. Sharing photos or videos

of participation is highly restricted for modesty reasons. Consequently, women who wish to pursue professional careers in these disciplines often relocate abroad to continue their athletic development (Fathi, 2023).

Prohibited men's sports: Certain sports, including boxing (McRae, 2020), bodybuilding (Rahbari, 2019), wrestling (Youshanlou, 2025), and fitness programs such as Zumba are formally restricted to men. Women receive no institutional support in these areas, and public documentation of their participation, such as posting photos or videos, can result in legal prosecution. Despite these prohibitions, some women engage in these activities clandestinely, representing acts of defiance against state and social norms (Rahbari, 2019). For instance, the arrest of a female bodybuilder for posting hijab-less training photos illustrates the legal and social risks involved (Mowat, 2017).

Culturally taboo sports: Certain sports, though legally permitted, remain controversial due to traditional gender norms. Football and futsal are often viewed as masculine and are subject to strict regulations and invasive gender verification tests (Bailey, 2014). Cycling and horseback riding are discouraged based on cultural beliefs that they compromise women's modesty and virginity, while adventurous sports such as mountain and rock climbing are considered socially inappropriate due to perceived risks (Rahbari, 2017). Despite these restrictions, Iranian women actively participate across all categories, including officially prohibited activities. Their engagement challenges entrenched societal norms and state-imposed barriers, demonstrating significant resistance. The classification of sports into "approved," "limited international," "men's," and "taboo" reflects deeply ingrained gender norms and illustrates the state's role in regulating women's autonomy and mobility. Nonetheless, Iranian women continue to assert agency through sports, redefining cultural spaces, reshaping traditional meanings of femininity

and physicality, and creating new avenues for expression. Through their participation, women negotiate structural and religious constraints, generate subtle acts of resistance, and transform the sociocultural landscape of Iranian sport.

2.5.3. Iranian sportswomen's experiences

There is a clear discrepancy between the Persian and English scientific literature on Iranian women's sports. Persian-language articles often address general barriers like cultural, financial, structural, and managerial limitations in a cautious, less confrontational tone (Arian & Ghaderi, 2021; Eyvazi Kolsh et al., 2022; Maleki & Mallaei, 2021). They only confirm that there are many factors affecting sportswomen's experiences in Iran, without investigating the origins of these limitations and barriers. In contrast, English-language publications, especially in international journals, take a more critical stance, focusing on power dynamics, bodily autonomy, systemic injustice, and state intervention (Mohammadi, 2020, 2021; Rahbari, 2017, 2019). Persian academics working on social issues, particularly in gender and women's studies, often fail to fully capture the complexities of women's experiences. This limitation arises from constraints such as fear of repercussions for publishing content critical of government policies, entrenched biases, and the pervasive influence of male-dominated perspectives. Also, Persian studies tend to adopt managerial approaches, largely overlooking sociological analyses of gendered issues and power relations. This managerial focus limits engagement with the broader socio-political dynamics shaping Iranian women's participation and exclusion in sports, neglecting critical discussions of social inequalities and the lived experiences of these women. Thus, it seems that the English scientific literature on Iranian women's sports is closer to the actual experience of sportswomen described briefly in the following paragraphs.

The scholarly exploration of Iranian sportswomen's experiences highlights significant barriers and diverse forms of resistance. Mohammadi (2021) critically examines state control over elite female athletes in post-revolutionary Iran, emphasizing the tension between governmental regulations and public resistance. The Islamic regime enforces its power through both coercion and dominant discourses, employing discriminatory practices such as barring female athletes and detaining female fans. Additionally, the state manipulates public consent through media control and surveillance. Despite these constraints, Iranian sportswomen actively resist patriarchal norms, advocating for gender equity and reform while striving for athletic success. Yet, reducing these practices to acts of resistance alone risks overlooking their ethical dimension, as women's practices are also forms of self-constitution through which they creatively act within existing power structures rather than simply opposing them (Fathzadeh, 2021). This perspective aligns with Foucauldian feminist approaches that reject liberal notions of agency as autonomy or resistance alone, instead understanding agency as embedded within power relations and enacted through ethical self-practices that shape subjectivity (Vintges, 2012). Beyond overt resistance and negotiation, elite sport also functions as a disciplinary environment through which athletes are shaped into particular kinds of ethical subjects. Foucauldian scholarship on elite sport suggests that high-performance sporting cultures normalize self-surveillance, discipline, sacrifice, and performance-oriented identities, encouraging athletes to internalize dominant expectations as part of their own self-understanding (Gerdin, 2026). From this perspective, Iranian elite sportswomen are not only constrained by external regulations and gendered moral expectations, but are also continuously engaged in forms of ethical self-formation through which they come to understand, discipline, and position themselves within broader institutional and political structures.

These broader disciplinary and gendered expectations are reflected across multiple sporting contexts in Iran. Rahbari (2017) highlights the restrictive gender norms and societal expectations confronting Iranian women in equestrian sports in Tehran. Traditional gender roles often confine women to domestic responsibilities, relegating sport to a lower priority unless pursued professionally. Rahbari (2019) extends this analysis by examining Iranian women bodybuilders on Instagram, demonstrating how social media provides a platform for self-expression and challenges to gender boundaries. Female athletes use these platforms to redefine femininity, posting images of themselves engaging in sports forbidden in Iran without adherence to compulsory dress codes. In addition, narrative research on Iranian female football fans shows that, despite exclusion from stadiums, women actively construct alternative spaces of participation such as cafés, streets, and digital platforms through which they express identity, cultivate belonging, and challenge gendered restrictions (Aqababae et al., 2026). Fozooni (2008) further illustrates how Iranian women football fans resist Islamic norms through acts such as cross-dressing, intoxication, and overt expressions of defiance during football gatherings, directly challenging clerical control over morality and social hierarchies. Similarly, Rahbari and Mahmudabadi (2022) critically explore essentialist gender beliefs, which associate femininity with traits such as softness and elegance, positioning muscular female bodies as unattractive and incompatible with idealized womanhood. Sports such as boxing and wrestling are therefore stigmatized as masculine and threatening to these norms. Nevertheless, Iranian women continue to engage in such banned sports in private clubs, often in concealed or informal settings (Bockman, 2023; Mowat, 2017).

Beyond athletic participation, gender segregation extends to sports spectatorship in Iran. Women are generally barred from entering stadiums and arenas as fans (Mohammadi, 2020). Despite this restriction, many women persist in resistance by disguising themselves as men to gain

entry, risking severe consequences. The tragic case of Sahar Khodayari, the Blue Girl, epitomizes this resistance. Facing imprisonment for attempting to attend a football match disguised as a man, she set herself on fire and later succumbed to her injuries (Abtahi et al., 2022; Azad, 2023).

Internationally, like their Muslim women peers, Iranian sportswomen face additional challenges, particularly through discriminatory policies influenced by hijab phobia. The disqualification of Iranian athletes from the 2012 Olympics under FIFA's Law 4, which banned head and neck coverings, exemplifies such barriers. Hamzeh (2017) critiques these regulations as a manifestation of a colonialist-Islamist alliance that racializes and marginalizes Muslim women athletes. Domestically, sportswomen must navigate a dual standard: adhering to both sports regulations and Islamic dress codes. A state committee must approve sports attire, ensuring its compliance with Islamic norms, such as the appropriate looseness or coverage.

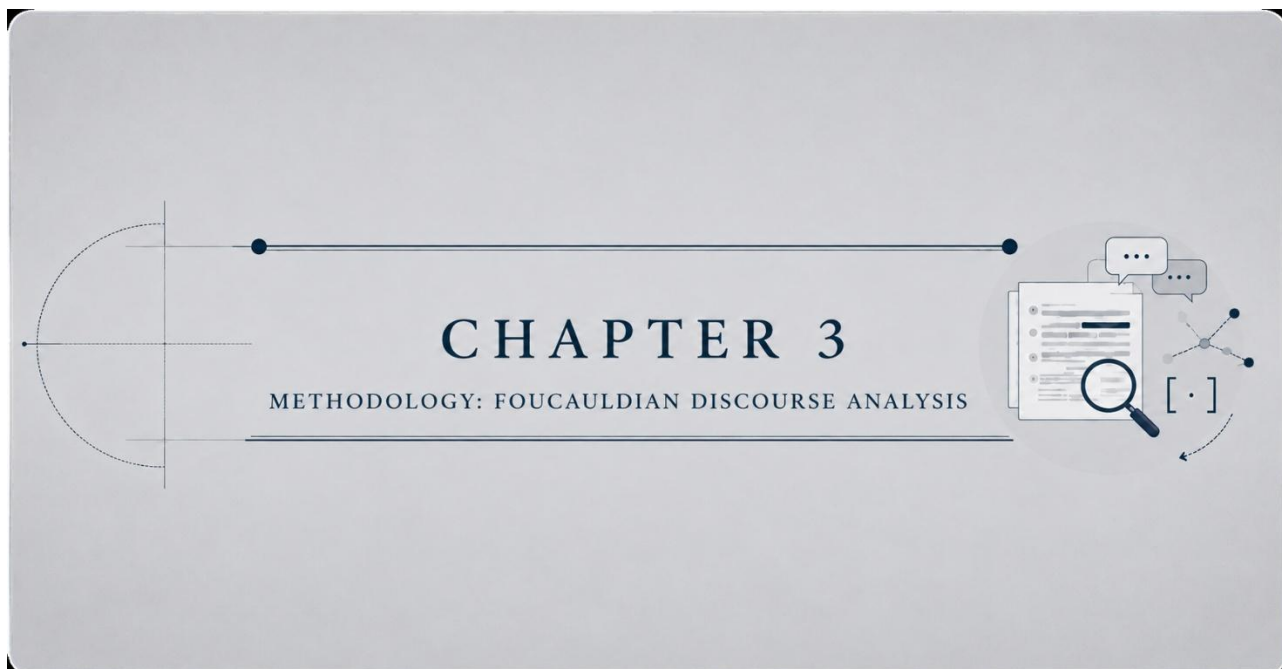
Despite these obstacles, there are signs of progress in Iranian women's sports. Ziaee et al. (2023) highlight the historical and societal impact of Iranian Muslim women's achievements in international sports, noting their contributions to national pride and gender empowerment. Javani (2022) suggests that while morality, tradition, and religious authority heavily influence women's sports, younger generations are driving incremental changes in participation. Although this movement faces repression, it represents a subtle yet significant shift in societal attitudes. Yousefi et al. (2024) trace the evolution of women's competitive sports in Iran from 1979 to 2020, illustrating how religious, cultural, and political factors have shaped women's athletic participation. Initially marginalized, women's competitive sports have gradually re-emerged, supported by initiatives such as the Islamic Women's Games, which align athletic participation with religious norms. Despite ongoing challenges, Iranian female athletes have increased their global presence, highlighting broader debates on inclusion, equality, and the negotiation of Islamic

femininity in sports. This progress underscores the agency of Iranian sportswomen and civil society in pushing the boundaries of cultural and political constraints.

The experiences of Muslim women in the Middle East often reflect common themes, such as the tension between religious norms and participation in modern sports. Existing scholarship underscores how cultural, political, and religious influences intersect to shape their engagement with sports, revealing both barriers and resistance strategies. However, each context presents unique sociopolitical dynamics, making broad generalizations problematic. Research on Muslim women in sports remains limited, particularly with respect to elite Muslim sportswomen and Iranian sportswomen. In the Iranian context, much of the existing literature is dominated by a sport management perspective, which often overlooks critical analyses of systemic inequalities and power dynamics. While existing scholarship has documented barriers to participation, identity negotiation, and various forms of resistance, much of this literature remains fragmented, focusing on specific sports, body politics, or managerial concerns. As a result, limited attention has been given to understanding how elite sport itself operates as a broader site of governance through which conduct, visibility, morality, and participation are regulated. Similarly, relatively little research has examined how power relations shape subjectivity, ethical self-formation, and everyday practices across different positions within elite sport, including athletes, coaches, and referees. Existing scholarship has also paid limited attention to how surveillance, silence, sexual vulnerability, and gendered regulation become embedded within institutional arrangements and broader systems of governance. For Iranian elite sportswomen, the challenges are particularly pronounced, as they must navigate multiple expectations: adherence to international sport regulations while complying with religious norms and the moral and institutional logics of political Islam, including state-

mandated approval of their attire. This duality highlights the intricate and multifaceted nature of their struggles within both national and global frameworks.

Given the constraints of conducting research within Iran, scholars based outside the country are often better positioned to provide rigorous and critical analyses free of censorship. Therefore, this study seeks to address these research gaps by analyzing power relationships in Iranian society, incorporating international perspectives, and conducting interviews with Iranian elite sportswomen, coaches, and referees. By doing so, it aims to provide a nuanced and in-depth exploration of how power, governance, and moral regulation shape the experiences, subjectivities, and everyday negotiations of women within Iranian elite sport.



3.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework employed to explore how Iranian elite sportswomen construct, negotiate, and interpret their ethical subjectivities and sport subject positions within the sociopolitical context of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) as both a theoretical orientation and analytical tool, the study examines how mechanisms of power regulate women's bodies, conduct, visibility, and ethical self-relations, while also exploring the forms of negotiation, strategic compliance, ambiguity, and resistance through which elite sportswomen navigate institutional, cultural, and religious constraints. Situated within a poststructuralist epistemology, FDA provides a means to interrogate the interplay between religious ideologies, state doctrines, institutional practices, and women's lived experiences within regimes of surveillance, moral regulation, and ideological governance in elite sport. It enables an analysis of how discourses of discipline and moral regulation operate alongside practices of self-formation and negotiation that shape the ethical subjectivities of elite female athletes, coaches, and referees. The chapter first introduces the philosophical and theoretical foundations of FDA and its relevance for studying the production of knowledge, ethical subjectivity, and lived experience in sport. It then outlines the research design, including participant recruitment, data collection procedures, and ethical considerations, followed by a description of the eight-step analytical process through which FDA was implemented to interpret and analyze the data.

3.2. Theoretical Foundations of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

Rooted in Foucault's (1976) ideas and poststructuralist theory, FDA challenges conventional understandings of power as fixed, centralized, or solely repressive. Instead, it conceptualizes meaning, truth, and subjectivity as historically contingent, relational, and

continuously produced within discourse (Coyle, 2007). Poststructuralism emphasizes how individuals are constituted through historically situated discourses that shape what can be thought, said, experienced, and enacted within particular social and institutional contexts (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017; Ussher & Perz, 2019). While FDA draws from structuralism's attention to the systems and rules through which meaning is organized (Han, 2013; Norris, 2002), it moves beyond structuralism by foregrounding the dynamic and productive relationship between discourse, power, and ethical subject formation. Foucault's concept of discourse refers not merely to language or communication, but to historically specific systems of knowledge that regulate the production of truth and define the conditions under which particular statements, subject positions, and forms of conduct become intelligible within institutional and social contexts. From this perspective, discourse does not emerge from individual expression alone, but from broader historical and institutional procedures that shape the formation of knowledge, morality, and subjectivity (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017).

Building on this foundation, Foucault's archaeological approach provides a framework for examining the historical rules, regularities, and epistemic conditions that make certain forms of knowledge and experience possible within specific periods (Sheridan, 1980; Krarup, 2021). Complementing this orientation, a genealogical sensibility enables an examination of how relations of power, moral regulation, and institutional practices become historically normalized and embodied within everyday life. Together, these orientations align with FDA's goal of interrogating the conditions of possibility through which particular truths, subject positions, and ethical relations to the self are produced and sustained.

FDA therefore serves as a robust analytical approach for examining how power-knowledge relations shape social practices, regulate conduct, and constitute ethical subjectivities within

specific historical and institutional settings. Although Foucault's work provides the theoretical foundation for this approach, he did not prescribe a fixed methodological procedure. Rather, his writings offer a flexible set of conceptual tools through which researchers can critically interrogate how relations of power, discourse, and subject formation operate across social life (Cheek & Cheek, 2008).

3.3. Methodological approach to FDA and its application to Iranian sport

A qualitative methodological approach was adopted to enable an in-depth exploration of how meaning, subjectivity, and lived experience are produced, negotiated, and regulated among elite Muslim women in sport, rather than focusing on variables or cause–effect relationships (Willig, 2013). As discussed in Chapters One and Two, while extensive research exists on elite women's sport and sport management, there remains limited knowledge concerning Muslim women's lived experiences within regimes of surveillance, moral regulation, and state doctrines in elite sport. FDA was therefore selected as the most suitable framework for addressing the research questions. It aligns with a social constructionist understanding of knowledge that emphasizes how power, truth, and discourse are socially and historically produced, offering a critical lens through which to examine how elite Muslim athletes, coaches, and referees are constituted as ethical subjects within the sociopolitical structures of Iran.

As a methodological approach, FDA is particularly valuable for examining how relations of power operate through discourse, institutional practices, and everyday social interactions. This orientation shifts analytical attention from universal explanations toward localized, historically situated, and context-specific processes, enabling closer examination of silences, ambiguities, tensions, and subtle forms of regulation within social life (Kaufmann, 2011). FDA further enables critical interrogation of legitimacy, morality, and institutional authority by questioning the

discursive conditions through which particular norms, truths, and forms of conduct become normalized and sustained (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Through this approach, discourse is understood not only as shaping social identities and practices, but also as governing intelligibility, visibility, and ethical relations to the self.

In this study, FDA provides both a theoretical and methodological framework for analyzing the narratives of elite Iranian female athletes, coaches, and referees. The study also draws methodological inspiration from Foucault's genealogical orientation, which extends beyond the structural organization of discourse to examine how relations of power emerge historically through struggles, ruptures, contingencies, and institutional practices (Foucault, 1975; White, 2009). Genealogy complements FDA by tracing how truth, subjectivity, morality, and resistance are historically constituted within broader relations of power and governance (Prado, 2018). The analysis therefore attends not only to participants' narratives, but also to the wider sociopolitical and historical conditions through which particular forms of women's participation in elite sport become regulated, negotiated, and made intelligible (Cheek & Cheek, 2008).

This research employs an exploratory qualitative design to examine how Iranian elite sportswomen negotiate their ethical subjectivities within a highly regulated, patriarchal, and politicized sport system. Foucault's understanding of discourse as a system of statements that constitutes objects, truths, and subject positions (Parker, 2012) is particularly relevant to this analysis, as it foregrounds how relations of power shape the conditions under which individuals become recognizable, legitimate, and governable within elite sport (Hollway, 1983). This approach contributes to a deeper understanding of how ethical subjectivities are negotiated within the specific context of Iranian elite sport, where state regulation, sex segregation, mandatory hijab policies, and moral surveillance shape the conditions of women's participation.

3.4. Participants

Qualitative research emphasizes an in-depth understanding of how individuals interpret and give meaning to their social, cultural and professional experiences rather than seeking statistical generalization (Hesse-Biber, 2014). In alignment with this epistemological orientation, this study employed a maximum variation sampling strategy to capture a broad range of perspectives among Iranian elite sportswomen who shared the experience of international representation but differed in demographic, professional, and contextual characteristics (Langdridge, 2008). This approach, combined with purposive and criterion sampling, ensured that participants were selected based on their direct relevance to the research objectives (Somekh & Lewin, 2005). The inclusion criteria were designed to ensure that participants had direct experience with the institutional, cultural, and political dynamics shaping women's elite sport in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Elite Status: Given the absence of a universally accepted definition of “elite” in sport, this study adopted Swann et al.'s (2015) characterization of elite athletes as “top performers in a given sport at the national or international level within their country.” Based on this definition, participants eligible for inclusion in the study were Iranian female athletes, coaches, and referees who had represented the Islamic Republic of Iran at least once in international competitions, including events such as the Olympic Games, World Championships, FISU Games, and Asian Games. This criterion ensured that all participants possessed firsthand experience with the political, institutional, and cultural structures shaping women's elite sport in Iran.

Muslim Women in the Context of Iranian Elite Sport: In this study, the term “Muslim women” is used primarily within the institutional and discursive framework governing women's sport in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although the term Muslim traditionally refers to individuals

who identify as followers of Islam and live according to Islamic principles (Souaiaia, 2016), it is not necessarily known whether all participants personally identified as religious or practicing Muslims, or whether they fully aligned with the religious values promoted by the state.

Nevertheless, within the Iranian sport system, both domestically and in international competitions, the dominant institutional assumption of the Islamic Republic is that all Iranian women are Muslim. As a result, sportswomen are expected to comply with official regulations concerning dress, compulsory hijab, and sex conduct associated with the state's representation of Muslim women. From this perspective, the term "Muslim women" in this dissertation does not refer solely to individual religious belief or personal faith, but also to a broader sociopolitical and discursive position through which Iranian elite sportswomen are represented, regulated, and governed within the structures of elite sport.

Additional Selection Considerations: Additional selection considerations included diversity in sport discipline, age, geographic location, and professional status. The sample included both retired and active participants who were involved in elite sport as athletes, coaches, or referees at the time of the interviews. Interviews with elite women residing outside Iran were particularly valuable, as these participants often felt more comfortable expressing their experiences and opinions openly without concern about potential repercussions from Iranian authorities. Several participants held multiple sport or professional roles, such as transitioning from athlete to coach or combining coaching and refereeing responsibilities. However, only the roles through which participants had represented Iran internationally were included in the analysis, while experiences unrelated to international representation were excluded.

Recruitment Process: Ethical approval for this doctoral research was obtained from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board (REB), which operates in accordance with the Tri-

Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2, 2014) and all applicable institutional and legal regulations. The REB reviewed and approved the ethics application under File Number H-04-25-11346 (see Appendix A). All procedures related to participant recruitment, informed consent, data collection, and data management were conducted in full compliance with these ethical standards.

Following research ethics approval, I conducted recruitment within a broad inclusion framework designed to capture the diversity of Iranian women's experiences both within and beyond the country. This approach enabled me to examine the complex trajectories of professional development, self-governance, and identity negotiation across different sport contexts in greater depth. Recruitment was facilitated through my professional networks, developed during my previous work in Iran in senior sport management roles, using both English and Persian recruitment forms (see Appendix B & C), as well as through snowball referral forms available in both languages (see Appendix D & E) and social media platforms such as Instagram and Telegram, which are widely used among Iranian athletes. Recruitment took approximately three months and occurred primarily through my professional social media accounts. Following disruptions to communication with Iran during the regional conflict in the summer of 2025, I contacted approximately 90 elite athletes, coaches, and referees who appeared to meet the eligibility criteria, introduced myself and the study, and invited them to participate. These individuals were drawn from a broader professional network developed through my previous involvement in Iranian sport. Some did not respond, while others requested further information, in which case the interview guide and consent form were shared before an interview was scheduled. My professional background facilitated access and helped establish trust within this sensitive research context.

The recruitment request did not explicitly seek women who had resisted or opposed the state regime. The recruitment message stated: “Through this research, I want to explore the challenges, barriers, and accomplishments that shape the journeys of Iranian elite sportswomen like you. My goal is to highlight your experiences, struggles, and successes so that your voice can contribute to a better understanding of women’s participation in elite sports.” However, this emphasis on challenges, barriers, and struggles may have encouraged self-selection among women who were willing to discuss difficulties in their sport experiences. In the Iranian context, references to challenges and barriers may also have been understood as including state-imposed constraints on women’s sport.

This is particularly relevant given the tension between an elite sport lifestyle and the state-promoted ideal of Muslim womanhood. Elite sport requires women to wear athletic attire, travel frequently within Iran and internationally, spend extended periods away from home for training camps and competitions, and often have considerable public and media visibility. For some women, the demands of an elite sport career may also mean delaying marriage or having children. These aspects of elite sport do not always fit easily with expectations that an ideal Muslim woman should dress and behave modestly, marry and have children, fulfil domestic and caregiving responsibilities, and devote much of her time and attention to home and family. Pursuing an elite sport career can therefore place women in tension with these expectations. This does not mean that participants necessarily understood their sport participation as political resistance or opposition to the regime.

Confidentiality: Given the sensitivity of discussing women’s participation in sport within a restrictive sociopolitical environment, strict confidentiality procedures were implemented to safeguard participants’ privacy and autonomy. Participants were asked at both the beginning and

the end of the interview to indicate their preferred level of anonymity in any publications, choosing whether to remain completely anonymous, permit limited disclosure of contextual information, or be directly identified by name. Although many elite sportswomen in Iran are public figures, the combination of a large population and comprehensive anonymity measures significantly reduced any risk of identification. Iran's population exceeds 92 million, and women's sport operates across more than 40 national federations.

Over the past two decades, thousands of elite sportswomen have represented Iran internationally across youth, junior, senior, and university national teams in both individual and team-based disciplines, including the Olympic and Paralympic Games, FISU Games, Asian Games, World Cups, and World Championships. This large pool, estimated between 3,000 and 4,000 international-level participants, makes the identification of any single participant highly improbable. A total of 26 Iranian elite sportswomen participated in the study, comprising athletes, coaches, and referees from various disciplines. The sample size followed the qualitative principle that the richness and depth of understanding are prioritized over numerical representation (Patton, 2002). The inclusion of participants residing both within and outside Iran provided valuable comparative insights, as those in the diaspora often spoke more openly about their experiences than those living under direct institutional oversight. This sampling strategy produced a diverse and information-rich group of participants, offering nuanced insights into how Iranian elite sportswomen negotiated institutional power, cultural norms, and gendered expectations while constructing their professional identities.

Anonymous Participants: Twenty-one participants chose to remain anonymous. At the time of the interviews, all but three resided in Iran. One participant was living in Turkey but traveled frequently to Iran and also requested anonymity. To protect participants' identities, all identifiable

and potentially revealing contextual information was removed or modified. Pseudonyms were assigned, and details such as sport discipline, competition names, years of participation, and other identifying references were excluded from the transcripts and analyses to maintain confidentiality and anonymity (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1. Anonymous participants Information

#	PSEUDONYM	AGE	TOP-TIER SPORT EVENT	ROLE	CURRENT PLACE OF RESIDENCE	EDUCATION	DURATION OF INTERVIEW
1	Nazi	44	Asian games	Athlete & coach	Turkey	MA	95 min
2	Roya	30	Asian games	Referee	Iran	MA	112 min
3	Mitra	39	Asian games	Coach	Iran	PhD	127 min
4	Nasim	28	World Cup	Athlete	Iran	BA	52 min
5	Noshin	40	Asian games	Referee	Iran	MA	70 min
6	Toba	37	Word Cup	Athlete & coach	Iran	PhD	117 min
7	Sahar	31	World championship	Athlete	Iran	MA	54 min
8	Mona	22	Universiade Asian games	Athlete	Iran	BA	98 min
9	Bitā	23	World championships	Athlete	Iran	BA	65 min
10	Fereshteh	43	Olympic	Athlete	Iran	BA	57 min
11	Saghar	28	World Cup	Athlete	Iran	MA	107 min
12	Tina	47	Asian Cup	Coach	Iran	PhD	51 min
13	Mahshid	54	Summer Olympic	Coach	Iran	PhD	67 min
14	Atosa	43	World championship	Coach	Iran	PhD	87 min
15	Maryam	37	Asian games	Athlete	Iran	PhD	88 min
16	Nika	27	Asian games	Referee	Iran	MA	135 min
17	Sima	58	Asian cup	Coach	Iran	BA	70 min

18	Kiana	23	Asian cup	Athlete	Iran	High school diploma	53 min
19	Naghmeh	47	Asian cup	Athlete	Iran	PhD	99 min
20	Fatemeh	24	Olympic	Athlete	Germany	High school diploma	104 min
21	Shahnaz	38	World championship	Athlete & coach	Canada	MA	78 min

Identified Participants: Five participants consented to being directly identified. These individuals had either previously shared their stories publicly or agreed to have specific aspects of their identities disclosed. Four participants were living outside Iran at the time of the interviews, while one resided in Iran but chose to be identified. The consent form clearly specified the types of information that could be shared, including name, sport discipline, awards, and opinions. All participants were informed of the potential risks associated with disclosure and were given the opportunity to decide the extent to which their identities would be revealed (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2. Identified Participants Demographic Information

#	NAME	AGE	DISCIPLINE	TOP-TIER SPORT EVENT	ROLE	CURRENT PLACE OF RESIDENCE	EDUCATION	DURATION OF INTERVIEW
1	Leila	54	Mountain climbing	Climbing Mount Everest	Athlete	Toronto, Canada	PhD	179 min
2	Aso	38	Soccer	CAFA U-18 Women's Championship	Referee	Vancouver, Canada	MA	151 min
3	Farnaz	37	Speed climbing	IFSC Climbing World Cup	Athlete	Vancouver, Canada	BA	51 min
4	Tannaz	52	Track & Field	Women's Islamic Solidarity Games	Athlete	Tehran, Iran	MA	93 min
5	Soheila	54	Volleyball	World championship	Referee	California, US	BA	148 min

3.5. Data Collection Strategy

This study used semi-structured online audio-recorded interviews as the primary method of data collection. The interview data provided rich insights into the institutional, cultural, and discursive dynamics shaping elite Iranian sportswomen's experiences and identities.

3.5.1. Interview Design, Setting, and Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary method of data collection, offering a balance between structured guidance and flexibility to explore emerging themes (Jones et al., 2013). This approach ensured consistency across interviews while allowing adaptation to the unique contexts of participants' experiences. It was particularly suitable for examining sensitive topics related to power, control, and identity, as it encouraged open dialogue, reflexive engagement, and in-depth reflection. All interviews were conducted online using secure digital platforms-Zoom or Microsoft Teams-through a University of Ottawa official account. I was based in Canada, while participants resided in Iran or other countries. These platforms were selected following consultation with the university's Information Technology (IT) staff to ensure compliance with institutional digital security standards. Participants were free to select their preferred platform based on accessibility and comfort, and each session was scheduled at a mutually convenient time that accommodated different time zones and professional commitments.

To ensure participants' safety, comfort, and privacy, several ethical safeguards were implemented. Before scheduling the interview, participants were advised to choose a private and secure location where they felt comfortable speaking freely. At the beginning of each session, I confirmed that the participant was in a safe and private environment by asking, "*Are you currently in a safe and private place to proceed with this interview?*" This step, included in the interview

guide, was critical for protecting participants' confidentiality, particularly given the political sensitivities surrounding women's participation in elite sport in Iran.

Interviews lasted approximately 51 to 179 minutes, depending on participants' availability, the depth of discussion, and the sensitivity of the topics explored. The interviews followed a gradual progression from general to specific and reflective questions. The interview guide served as a flexible framework for discussion, covering predetermined topics while allowing probing questions to delve deeper based on participants' responses (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Participants received the consent form (see Appendices F and G) and the interview guide (see Appendices H and I) in advance, enabling them to reflect on the topics and consider their experiences prior to the interview, which led to more thoughtful and comprehensive discussions.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. Recording was mandatory for inclusion in the study, ensuring accuracy in capturing participants' narratives and expressions. Due to the sociopolitical sensitivities surrounding women's participation in elite sport in Iran, verbal consent was obtained. All electronic data were stored in accordance with the University of Ottawa's data protection and storage policies. Audio recordings and transcripts were kept in encrypted, password-protected folders on OneDrive, with access restricted to my academic supervisor and I (principal investigator), thereby ensuring confidentiality and data security.

3.6. Doing Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

This study employed Foucauldian-informed discourse analysis to examine how Iranian elite sportswomen are constituted within systems of power, surveillance, and discipline, and how processes of negotiation and resistance emerge within these conditions. There is no fixed or standardized procedure for conducting FDA; rather, it is a theoretically informed analytic orientation that provides conceptual tools for examining the relationship between discourse,

power, and subjectivity. FDA was selected for its capacity to examine how discourse functions as a mechanism of power by shaping what can be said, who can speak, and how subjects are constituted within specific socio-political and institutional contexts (Foucault, 1972; Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017; Riley et al., 2021). Within this framework, power is not viewed as an external or purely repressive force, but as a productive and relational network that organizes conduct, produces knowledge, and shapes subjectivities (Foucault, 1980).

Applying FDA in this study enabled an examination of the discursive practices, institutional norms, and relations of power through which women's elite sport in Iran is governed, regulated, and negotiated. The analysis focused on identifying dominant discourses, forms of regulation and surveillance, processes of subject formation, and forms of negotiation and resistance present across participants' narratives. Following the analytical principles outlined by Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2017), Riley et al. (2021), and Cheek and Cheek (2008), the analysis proceeded through eight interconnected steps, described below. These steps were not treated as a linear sequence; rather, the analysis was iterative, involving repeated movement between the interview transcripts, emerging discursive patterns, Foucauldian concepts, and developing interpretations across the analytical process.

Step 1. Analytical Orientation and Problematization

The analysis began by identifying problematizations, the points at which Iranian women's participation in sport was constructed as an issue requiring regulation, justification, or moral defense. In the context of post-revolutionary Iran, women's athletic participation is framed not primarily as a right or achievement, but as a moral, political, and religious concern. Particular attention was given to discourses surrounding sex segregation, compulsory hijab, surveillance of women's bodies, and state regulation of visibility, as well as discourses of protection and Islamic

morality through which women's participation in elite sport became constructed as morally risky, sexually vulnerable, and conditionally acceptable within institutional sport settings. Drawing on Foucault's (1985) concept of problematization, this step examined how these discourses produced a field of power/knowledge that shaped the conditions under which women's participation in elite sport became intelligible, regulated, visible, and vulnerable.

Step 2. Corpus Selection and Familiarization

The corpus of statements consisted of 26 semi-structured interviews with elite female athletes, coaches, and referees who had represented Iran in international competitions. All interviews were conducted in Persian, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently translated into English for analysis. The analytical process began with repeated and immersive readings of the interview transcripts to identify recurring expressions, silences, contradictions, and discursive patterns surrounding women's participation in elite sport. Terms such as modesty, moral duty, nation's honor, representative of the Islamic Republic, discipline, and obedience appeared frequently across participants' narratives, helping to trace the linguistic and symbolic boundaries of what was considered acceptable, thinkable, and sayable within Iranian sport institutions. These recurring patterns were not treated as fixed codes established in advance. Rather, repeated readings involved moving back and forth between elite sportswomen's narratives and Foucauldian concepts, allowing analytical categories to be refined as contradictions, tensions, silences, and previously unanticipated patterns became visible across the corpus.

As familiarity with the transcripts deepened, additional analytical patterns emerged inductively from participants' narratives, including spontaneous disclosures and observations related to sexual harassment, exploitation, silence, surveillance, and institutional vulnerability within elite sport. Repeated engagement with the transcripts also revealed generationally

differentiated patterns in participants' experiences and interpretations, leading to an intergenerational analytical organization based on age, historical context, and professional trajectories within elite sport. Particular attention was given to moments of ambivalence, ethical tension, contradiction, hesitation, and emotional strain, as these instances revealed ongoing negotiations between participants' personal moral orientations and institutional expectations. Interview accounts were treated as both reflections on lived experience and situated discursive constructions, with attention to how experiences were recalled and made meaningful within available discourses and the interview context. Contradictions, silences, hesitations, and tensions were not automatically interpreted as evidence of ethical reflection or subject formation. Ambiguity, memory, interviewer effects, and ordinary narrative inconsistencies were also considered, and broader analytical significance was assigned only when such instances formed patterns within or across narratives and could be situated in relation to wider discourses, institutional expectations, and relations of power.

Step 3. Identifying and Constructing Discourses

In this stage, recurring patterns of language, meaning, and representation were organized into discursive formations understood as systems of statements that define, regulate, and normalize women's participation in elite sport. The analysis examined how institutional actors, including sport federations, coaches, the Ministry of Sport and Youth, the National Olympic Committee, and media organizations, constructed dominant understandings of femininity, morality, discipline, visibility, and legitimate athletic conduct within Iranian elite sport. Particular attention was given to discourses surrounding compulsory hijab, gender segregation, protection, Islamic morality, moral legitimacy, disciplined visibility, and acceptable forms of feminine participation through which women's athletic involvement became regulated and justified.

The analysis also explored how these discourses produced different subject positions across historical and generational contexts, including distinctions between exclusion, conditional participation, disciplined inclusion, and morally acceptable visibility. This stage involved tracing how recurring vocabularies, rhetorical patterns, and justificatory logics shaped broader understandings of gender, athletic identity, ethical conduct, and national representation across the corpus.

Step 4. Mapping Power, Knowledge, and Normalization

This stage examined how relations of power operate through discourse, institutional practices, and systems of knowledge to regulate women's conduct and shape acceptable forms of participation within elite sport. Drawing on Foucault's concepts of discipline, normalization, and pastoral power, institutional policies, regulations, and moral expectations were analyzed as technologies of power that govern women's visibility, bodily presentation, behaviour, and interpersonal interactions. Particular attention was given to mechanisms of surveillance, moral guidance, reputational control, and conditional inclusion through which elite sportswomen became subject to both external regulation and internalized self-discipline. Operationally, these Foucauldian concepts functioned as analytical lenses rather than predetermined coding categories. For example, surveillance was examined through Iranian elite sportswomen's narratives of being observed, monitored, reported on, or anticipating the possibility of observation; normalization was traced through narratives and practices that established particular forms of dress, bodily presentation, femininity, morality, and conduct as acceptable or deviant; and pastoral power was examined through accounts of moral guidance, correction, and individualized regulation exercised in the name of protection, moral conduct, or institutional belonging. The analysis then considered how these external forms of regulation were taken up by Iranian elite female athletes, coaches, and

referees through practices of self-monitoring, concealment, silence, anticipatory compliance, and self-regulation.

The analysis also explored how technologies of the self-operated alongside institutional forms of control, shaping practices of self-monitoring, concealment, silence, anticipatory compliance, and risk management. This step aimed to demonstrate how normalization functions not simply through repression, but through productive forms of governance that encourage individuals to regulate themselves in accordance with dominant moral and institutional expectations within Iranian elite sport.

Step 5. Subject Positions and Subjectification

This stage examined how discourses produced and organized the subject positions available to elite sportswomen within Iranian elite sport, and how participants negotiated, accepted, resisted, or reworked these positions in relation to institutional norms and cultural expectations. Particular attention was given to competing forms of subjectivity through which women were constituted as morally responsible Muslim women, professionally ambitious athletes, vulnerable sporting bodies, and institutionally regulated subjects.

Drawing on Foucauldian ethics, the analysis explored ethical substance, modes of subjection, ethical work, and telos as interconnected dimensions through which elite sportswomen negotiated moral conduct, self-relations, and participation across different historical and institutional contexts. Attention was also given to practices such as negotiated compromise, strategic compliance, silence, withdrawal, and self-regulation through which participants managed institutional constraints and constituted themselves as ethical subjects. This stage ultimately examined how power operates through the production of gendered subjectivities, shaping women's

sense of self, agency, moral responsibility, and possibilities for participation within the discursive field of elite sport.

Step 6. Historical Contextualization

Following Foucault's genealogical approach, discourses were situated within their broader historical and socio-political contexts. The analysis traced how gender, religion, and state doctrines intersected across different historical periods to define acceptable forms of women's participation in sport. Attention was given to identifying continuities and discontinuities in the evolution of these discourses, revealing how shifts in political and ideological structures influenced the formation and transformation of dominant narratives. This stage ensured that the analysis remained sensitive to the contingent and historically situated nature of power and knowledge. Historical contextualization also enabled an examination of continuities and discontinuities in ethical subject formation across different post-revolutionary generations of elite sportswomen.

Step 7. Counter-Discourses and Resistance

This stage focused on identifying counter-discourses that challenged dominant representations of women's roles, morality, and participation within Iranian elite sport. The analysis examined how alternative meanings, critiques, and forms of resistance emerged within and against existing relations of power, as well as how participants negotiated restrictive institutional expectations through discursive and everyday practices. Resistance was analyzed not only through overt opposition, but also through more subtle and constrained practices such as strategic silence, concealment, selective disclosure, negotiated compromise, withdrawal, selective compliance, and the strategic management of visibility across public and private spheres. Attention was also given to practices related to the selective presentation of the self, concealment of aspects

of personal life, modification of bodily presentation, and navigating dress regulations in ways that maintained the appearance of compliance while not fully adhering to institutional expectations.

The analysis further examined how resistance operated through the re-articulation of dominant meanings, the refusal to fully identify with imposed subject positions, and the differentiation between national belonging and Islamic regime representation. In some cases, participants appropriated dominant categories and representations to challenge existing power relations, reflecting forms of reverse discourse and resignification. Additional forms of resistance included constrained forms of speaking, contesting rumors and institutional narratives, engaging in prohibited practices under conditions of surveillance and risk, resignation from institutional roles, withdrawal from participation, and, in some cases, leaving Iran to reconstitute the self outside dominant regulatory frameworks.

Step 8. Reflexivity and Transparency

Analytical rigor in this study was established through transparency, reflexivity, and theoretical coherence rather than replicability. Throughout the research process, I remained attentive to how my background, experiences, and prior involvement in Iranian sport shaped my access to participants, interpretation of the data, and understanding of the broader research context. This positionality also influenced participants' willingness to discuss sensitive experiences related to sexual exploitation, institutional vulnerability, and moral regulation within Iranian elite sport.

Before beginning my academic career, I was personally involved in sport as a varsity athlete in badminton and basketball, which contributed to my familiarity with the culture and everyday dynamics of women's sport in Iran. In addition, my previous professional experience as Vice President of the National University Sports Federation for five years and Sports Director at the National Olympic Academy of Iran for two and a half years provided deeper insight into the

institutional, cultural, and political structures shaping women's elite sport in Iran. At the same time, this proximity to the field required ongoing reflexive attention to how my experiences and assumptions could influence the research process and interpretation of the data.

To support analytical credibility, analytic decisions were documented through reflective memos, theoretically grounded interpretations, and continuous supervisory and peer feedback. I also maintained factual and reflexive notes throughout the research process to record contextual observations and analytical reflections that emerged during data collection and analysis. These notes excluded identifying information about individuals or organizations and were used solely to support contextual interpretation and deepen understanding of the broader sociopolitical conditions surrounding women's participation in elite sport.

Reflexivity was central to recognizing that my interpretation also constitutes a discourse that both examines and constructs meanings about the systems of power under investigation. Maintaining this reflective awareness supported methodological coherence and ethical responsibility throughout the analytic process.

3.7. Methodological Alignment Across the Dissertation Articles

This dissertation adopts an article-based format in which the four articles are grounded in a shared qualitative and Foucauldian-inspired methodological framework. At the same time, each article incorporates specific methodological adaptations aligned with its particular research questions and objectives. This section explains how the articles are methodologically connected while also clarifying the distinct contribution of each article within the broader research framework.

3.7.1: Article 1: Unraveling Iran's Sport Landscape in the Shadow of Political Control

Article 1 was developed to provide the broader social, political, and institutional context for the present research. The primary objective of this article is to offer a foundational understanding of the structures, governance practices, and power relations shaping sport in the Islamic Republic of Iran, with particular attention to the extent and mechanisms of state intervention in sport. Because Article 1 relies primarily on prior professional experience, publicly available materials, informal conversations, and contextual observations gathered before the formal commencement of the doctoral project, this component was not conducted as part of the formally approved empirical data collection process. The purpose of this article is not to present systematically generated empirical findings in the same manner as the subsequent articles, but rather to critically illustrate the extensive and multifaceted forms of state involvement in sport. This contextualization is particularly important for readers who may have limited familiarity with Iran, as the scale and forms of institutional control and political intervention in sport may appear unfamiliar or unexpected.

3.7.2: Article 2: Iranian elite sportswomen: docile yet defiant bodies

Article 2 examines how elite Iranian sportswomen are constituted as ethical subjects within the regulatory and moral structures of Iranian elite sport. Using semi-structured and exploratory interviews, the article focuses on how dominant discourses, institutional governance, and relations of power shape women's visibility, conduct, and ethical self-relations across different sporting roles and contexts. Particular attention is given to processes of external surveillance, self-monitoring, and the internalization of disciplinary norms, as well as to the tensions emerging between state-regulated Islamic representations of womanhood and participants' understandings of athletic, professional, and national identity within elite and international sport settings. The

analysis further explores the operation of compulsory hijab, sex segregation, moral regulation, and the interplay between technologies of power and technologies of the self in shaping everyday sporting experiences. Drawing on Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, the study examines how elite sportswomen negotiate, internalize, resist, and strategically navigate institutional expectations and Islamic moral norms within elite sport.

3.7.3: Article 3: Sex segregation and mandatory hijab as protection? Narratives of sexual exploitation in Iranian elite sport

Article 3 focuses on sexual harassment and exploitation within Iranian elite sport and therefore adopts an ethical and methodological adaptation appropriate to the sensitivity of the topic. At the outset of the research process, the interviews were not originally designed to directly investigate sexual exploitation or to include specific questions regarding sexual harassment. However, following the completion of the interviews and during the process of reviewing and analyzing the transcripts, the issue of sexual exploitation emerged prominently from the data itself. In total, 11 of the 26 participants referred to this issue spontaneously during different parts of the interviews, without being directly asked about it. Some participants discussed their own personal experiences, while others described observations of sexual harassment and exploitation within Iranian elite sport.

Accordingly, the analysis presented in Article 3 developed inductively and in a data-driven manner around this issue. In situations where participants referred to such experiences indirectly or hesitantly, follow-up questions were only asked if participants felt comfortable continuing, and participants were explicitly informed that responding was entirely optional. This participant-led and open-ended approach allowed individuals to determine the depth, pace, and direction of disclosure themselves. This methodological adaptation functioned as a safeguarding strategy

intended to reduce emotional burden and minimize the risk of retraumatization while maintaining analytical depth.

3.7.4: Article 4: From lost to conditional generation: ethical subject formation in women's elite sport

Article 4 adopts a comparative and intergenerational analytical design to examine how elite sportswomen's ethical subjectivities are shaped across different historical and institutional contexts within Iranian elite sport. At the beginning of the research process, the interviews were not originally intended to be organized around predetermined generational groups. However, during the process of reviewing the interview transcripts and analyzing participants' demographic information, it gradually became evident that important differences existed between the experiences, interpretations, and understandings of older women and younger women who remain actively involved in elite sport.

Accordingly, similar to Article 3, Article 4 developed inductively based on patterns emerging from empirical data. Participants were analytically organized into two generational cohorts distinguished by age, professional trajectories, and historical periods of participation within Iranian sport institutions. This design enabled examination of continuities and discontinuities in discourse, regulation, and ethical subject formation across different post-revolutionary sporting contexts. Within this article, interviews were approached as situated discursive practices rather than fully transparent accounts of experience. Particular attention was given to tensions, contradictions, ambivalence, and forms of ethical self-reworking that emerged across different generations. This approach added a stronger historical and temporal dimension to the broader analytical framework and enabled examination of intergenerational differences in ethical subject formation.

CHAPTER 4 (ARTICLE 1): Iran's Sport Landscape under Political Power

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Unraveling Iran's sport landscape in the shadow of political control

Author Contribution Statement

This article was developed prior to the formal commencement of my doctoral studies at the University of Ottawa. In consultation with Dr. Dallaire, I collected and documented materials related to the sociopolitical organization of sport in Iran and prepared the manuscript. Dr. Dallaire contributed to shaping the broader research direction, the application of Foucauldian perspectives, and the interpretation of the sociopolitical context through which women's sport in Iran has been historically organized and regulated. She also provided guidance regarding the organization of the book chapter and the publication process.

Abstract

This chapter examines the intricate power dynamics within Iran's sport landscape, shaped by the regulatory reach of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Drawing on Foucault's concepts of power relations, it explores how the state leverages sport as a governance tool, seeking to assert control over both organizational structures and individual actions. Through exercising power, the government employs sport as a mechanism to consolidate political legitimacy both domestically and internationally. Yet, within these constraints, Iranian athletes, coaches, and fans engage in forms of resistance, using sport not only as physical engagement but as a medium for personal empowerment and community transformation. This chapter reveals how sport in Iran becomes a site of both control and resistance, reflecting a broader social struggle within a tightly regulated environment.

Keywords: Political control, power, gender segregation, disciplinary mechanisms, resistance, Iranian sport

Introduction

This chapter critically explores the intricate interplay between Iran's sports landscape, its social fabric, and the regulatory dominance of the Islamic Republic. The opacity of policy implementation, operational practices, and lack of public access to annual reports have significantly hindered a comprehensive understanding of Iran's sport system. Since the 1979 revolution, Iran's unique governance, blending theocratic authority with republicanism, distinguishes it from the predominantly Sunni-led regimes of the Middle East. This Shia-majority state's complex sociopolitical structures and influential role in the MENA region demand deeper sociological inquiry (Loft, 2023). Notably, Muslim nations differ in their interpretations of Islamic teachings and societal norms (Çeviker et al., 2024; Kay, 2016), and Iran's distinct position, particularly its efforts to export its Islamic Revolution since 1979 (Mandeville & Hamid, 2018), suggests that these findings are specific to Iran and may not be representative of sports landscapes in other Islamic countries. Instead, this chapter examines the state of sport in Iran from its stakeholders' perspective.

The understanding of the interconnected concepts of power and resistance has significantly evolved in the early 21st century (Baaz et al., 2017), making it a useful theoretical framework for exploring how the Iranian government uses sports to advance its political agenda, and for understanding how citizens resist the state. This chapter begins by defining dominance, power, and resistance through a Foucauldian lens, and explaining their relevance to analyzing the Iranian sports landscape. It then explores the relationship between the Iranian government and sport, emphasizing structural changes that have expanded state control across various facets of sports. Building on this foundation, the chapter sheds light on how power dynamics shape both organizational structures and individual behaviours in Iranian sports (Foucault, 1991, 1982). This

chapter will show how the Iranian government strategically uses sport as a vehicle for ideological and political influence, both domestically and internationally, to reinforce the values of the Islamic Republic.

Power, Domination, and Resistance: Fluid Interaction in Iranian Sports

Foucault conceptualizes power as a dynamic, relational network permeating all aspects of society, enabling both agency and oppression (Smith Maguire, 2002). He identifies three forms of power: sovereign power, disciplinary power, and biopower. Sovereign power operates overtly through laws, prohibitions, and public displays, such as punishment (Dean, 2009; Foucault, 1990). In contrast, disciplinary power subtly molds behaviour through societal norms enforced by institutions, producing self-regulating individuals under perceived surveillance (Foucault, 1979; Kallman & Dini, 2017; Taylor, 2014). Biopower, focusing on populations, manages societal conditions like health and birth rates, often blending state and private interventions (Dean, 2009; Foucault, 1990). These forms of power interact differently, with sovereign power being overt, disciplinary power insidious, and biopower operating on a collective level over time (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014). Foucault further differentiates power from domination, the latter arising when power relations become rigid, enabling one group to suppress another's freedom (Cooper, 1994; Munro, 2003). While power is fluid and relational, domination is static, often consolidating control for the benefit of a specific group. This "power-over" contrasts with "power-to," which emphasizes the capacity for individual or collective action (Haugaard, 2022; Pansardi, 2012).

Resistance is inherently intrinsic to power dynamics, functioning as a counterforce that challenges or undermines authority (Smith Maguire, 2002). Under disciplinary power, resistance often takes subtle forms, such as sarcasm, foot-dragging, or passiveness, when overt defiance is risky (Scott, 2016). Foucault also highlights self-transformation as resistance, where individuals

redefine their identities and practices to subvert dominant structures (Burkitt, 2002; Lloyd, 2012). This interaction of power, resistance, and agency demonstrates the continuous negotiation within societal structures.

In post-revolutionary Iran, power dynamics in sports have been shaped by war, political decisions, and economic sanctions (Fereidouni et al., 2015). The Iranian government has increasingly interfered in sports, implementing gender segregation policies and restricting athletes' autonomy. However, these measures have provoked resistance from athletes and fans, manifesting in both overt defiance and constructive alternative behaviours (Lilja, 2021; Raby, 2005). Resistance in Iranian sports highlights the dynamic interplay between dominant and marginalized groups, where power and resistance coexist and evolve over time. This chapter, as such, emphasizes the fluidity of power and the centrality of resistance, illustrating how these forces are intricately linked in shaping the social fabric of Iranian sports.

The Intersection of Politics and Sport in Iran

Sport diplomacy is a widely employed strategy, allowing states to attract attention, convey information, and enhance their global reputations while contributing to nation-building (Murray, 2012; Postlethwaite et al., 2023). Examples include South Korea's use of sports to foster social development and international connections (Na & Dallaire, 2022) and Hungary's investment in hosting international events to bolster its global presence (Garamvölgyi & Dóczi, 2021). Middle Eastern nations, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, have also adopted sports diplomacy to advance modernization, diplomacy, and soft power. Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup and Saudi Arabia's funding of major sports properties exemplify this trend, although such initiatives have faced criticism as "sportswashing" for masking internal issues within their respective nations (Boykoff, 2022; Søyland & Moriconi, 2022).

In Iran, sports have long been intertwined with politics, serving as a tool for gaining both domestic and international legitimacy (Chehabi, 2002). Since the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian government has strategically used sports for social, cultural, economic, and political purposes, aiming to promote its ideological goals and enhance national pride (Dousti et al., 2013). However, this politicization has at times fueled conflict and anti-diplomatic rhetoric, highlighting the dual potential of sports as both a unifying and divisive force (Murray, 2022).

A pivotal moment in the nation's institutionalization of sports governance occurred on December 28, 2010, when Iran's Islamic Consultative Assembly established the Ministry of Sports and Youth. This ministry, formed by merging the Physical Education Organization and the National Youth Organization, is responsible for developing Iran's sport policies. Almost a decade after its inception, the mission and duties of the Ministry of Sport and Youth were officially defined in 2020, following government approval (Law, mission, duties, and authorities of the Ministry of Sport and Youth, 2020). The anticipation within the Iranian sport community was grounded in the expectation that this structural reform would significantly elevate the status of sports in the country. The envisioned outcomes of the ministry include sport becoming a key determinant in enhancing the overall health of Iranian society, the equitable reinforcement of sports infrastructure across the nation's provinces, and strengthened sports leagues, which will help position Iran as a formidable presence at both the Asian and global levels (Askarian et al., 2021; Naderi Nasab, 2017).

Despite these expectations, the primary role of sport in the Islamic Republic of Iran has remained unclear (Dousti et al., 2013) and a lack of a well-defined national sport policy persists as a major challenge. The Ministry's structural changes have also increased the government's influence on the country's sport infrastructure, with political and military organizations taking over many professional sports clubs and national federations over the past two decades (Foroohar,

2021). In doing so, sport has become a tool for advancing the ideological agenda of the Islamic Republic, transforming the sports arena into a contested battleground for competing political factions (Younesipour, 2020). Consequently, sport has become a powerful instrument for state propaganda, which has also sparked new forms of political engagement, with Iranian sportspeople challenging religious and governmental oppression (Dousti et al., 2021).

Exercising Power through Sport: Iranian Sports Under State Control

In various Middle Eastern nations, including the Islamic Republic of Iran, sports play a critical role in shaping the normative and aesthetic frameworks of societies aspiring to modernity (Sorek, 2019). The Iranian government has strategically used sport to bolster its image and exert influence in the region. However, the country now faces a multifaceted crisis encompassing socioeconomic, political, and ecological issues (Fathollah-Nejad, 2020). To divert attention from contentious policies, the government frequently amplifies the achievements of Iranian athletes, particularly in prominent sports like football and in international events such as the Olympics and Asian Games to project an image of a united and thriving nation.

The Islamic Republic of Iran funds all sports organizations in Iran, including its National Olympic Committee (NOC), sports federations, and even professional sports clubs. While sport clubs carry names that suggest commercial sponsorship or professional status such as Persepolis F.C and Esteghlal F.C, they are predominantly funded by the state rather than private or corporate sponsors. The economy is also government controlled, and as such Iranian sport clubs are run by quasi-government entities (Torbat, 2020). As such, neither elite nor recreational sports in Iran are controlled by non-profit organizations or civil society, but rather by government forces.

In Iran, the International Olympic Committee's Global Basic Principles of Good Governance (GG) in the Olympic Movement (Chappelet & Mrkonjic, 2013; Mrkonjic, 2016) serve

primarily as a facade. Rather than foster genuine good governance and ethical behaviour, the Iranian government uses these principles as rhetorical symbols to justify its control over the sport sector, appointing loyal officials to ensure compliance with state policies. The Iranian government tightly controls national sports organizations, appointing officials loyal to the regime to ensure compliance with state policies (Foroohar, 2021), which contradicts the IOC's GG principles (IOC, 2022).

Iran's government does so through exercising sovereign power through laws, prohibitions, and censorship to control sports institutions. At the same time, it also employs disciplinary power by enforcing norms and behaviours that subtly coerce athletes into aligning with the state's image-building strategies. For instance, female athletes in Iran are required by law to wear the mandatory hijab and serve as ambassadors of purity and honor at international events, reinforcing the government's political ideology (Sobry & Hozhabri, 2022). Sportswomen operate under a panopticon-like system of constant surveillance, ensuring compliance with state ideology. Beyond enforcing dress codes as sovereign power, the system employs disciplinary power to shape women's behaviour, modesty, and identity, aligning them with religious and political doctrines while promoting ideals of purity and honor. This form of power is less about direct coercion and more about producing compliant individuals who internalize societal norms. The regulation of women's attire and behaviour in sports extends beyond individuals, influencing the broader population's social and moral fabric while projecting a specific image of Islamic values and political ideology.

State-controlled entities exert considerable influence over sports by assuming leadership roles within major clubs and federations. These entities actively regulate athletes' behaviour, both in public and on social media, by monitoring and controlling the content they share, ensuring strict

adherence to government policies (Rostampour, 2023; Owens, 2024). Sports administration prioritizes Islamic ideology over athletic objectives (Salami, 2024), with compliance enforced through personnel in national federations and the Ministry of Sports. These measures severely undermine athletes' autonomy, directly contravening the principles of good governance outlined by the International Olympic Committee (IOC, 2022).

As a result of the government's heavy involvement in sport in Iran, sports organizations and individuals have been forced to follow strict regulations aligned with government demands (Salami, 2024). In addition to formal regulations, there are unwritten rules that must be followed in Iranian sports. For instance, Iranian athletes and teams are prohibited from competing against Israel, as the Iranian government does not recognize Israel as a country and strictly forbids any sports interactions with Israeli athletes (Abrahamson, 2019). In instances where Iranian athletes are matched against Israeli competitors, they are often compelled to withdraw by feigning illness, intentionally losing earlier matches, or abstaining from participation altogether (Salami, 2024). On September 11, 2021, Supreme Leader Khamenei met with Iranian Olympic and Paralympic medalists, commending their courage in refusing to acknowledge "Israel" by abstaining from interactions with its representatives, despite the potential competitive repercussions. He emphasized the significance of this stance, urging Iranian sports officials and athletes to remain proactive in addressing this matter rather than adopting a passive approach (Al Mayadeen, 2021).

This matter carries profound sensitivity for the Iranian regime, but it is unclear to what extent the Iranian population shares this animosity towards Israel. In 2023, weightlifter Mostafa Rajaee faced a permanent ban from participating in sporting events after shaking hands with an Israeli athlete during an international competition. The Islamic Republic of Iran has construed this behaviour as antithetical to its values. Rajaee, who clinched the silver medal in the competition,

received a lifetime ban from all sports for actions deemed unacceptable and unforgivable by the head of Iran's weightlifting federation (Salem, 2023b).

Fellow Iranian athletes have faced setbacks due to an unwritten rule against competing with Israeli athletes, including Saeid Mollaei, an Iranian judoka and 2018 world champion. In 2019, he was ordered to withdraw from the World Judo Championships to avoid a potential match with Israeli competitor Sagi Muki. Ignoring these demands, Mollaei advanced to the semifinals but feared for his family's safety due to pressures from Iranian authorities (Dubinsky, 2024). Mollaei expressed his frustration, explaining that he wanted to compete but feared severe personal and professional consequences, stating, "I wanted to win, but it wasn't an option" (Church, 2021). The International Judo Federation (IJF) responded to Iran's interference by suspending the country from international competitions, citing violations of ethical codes, including directing an athlete to deliberately forfeit. Following these events, Mollaei left Iran, obtained Mongolian citizenship, and went on to win a silver medal at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021. In a gesture of gratitude, he dedicated the medal to Israel, acknowledging the support he received by saying, "Thank you to Israel for all the good energy – this medal is dedicated to you" (Ruiz, 2021).

Due to these occurrences, social media discussions created divisions among the Iranian people at the time. Mollaei was hailed as an Iranian hero and praised for his courage by some but was considered a traitor by others. His story portrays the challenges faced by many Iranian elite athletes caught in political conflicts, who often must decide whether they should continue to represent the Islamic Republic of Iran or compete under another national banner. Five members of the 29-athlete refugee team at the Tokyo Olympics and 14 members of the 37-athlete refugee team at the Paris Olympics were Iranian (Refugee Olympic Team, 2024), indicating the significant outflow of Iranian sport talents and its broader implications for sport and society.

Interference in National Sports Federations' Affairs and Violation of International Standards

A striking example of power relations in Iranian sports involves the exercise of sovereign power, which is explicitly and traditionally enforced by rulers through laws, prohibitions, interventions, and censorship (Dean, 2009; Foucault, 1990). This type of power is evident in the relationship between Iran's Ministry of Sport and Youth and national sports federations, as well as professional sports clubs. The relationship is hierarchical, with the ministry compelling the federations and professional sports clubs to follow specific directives (Foroohar, 2021). This includes mandates such as wearing the hijab and maintaining strict dress codes at sports events, as well as interference in the internal affairs of national federations and professional sports clubs to ensure that the principles of the Islamic Republic are upheld in every sport, both nationally and internationally.

The Ministry of Sport and Youth frequently intervenes in sports federation elections and undermines federation-established protocols, which raises concerns about the autonomy and integrity of Iran's sports governance (Biglari et al., 2023; Golkar, 2015). This concern extends beyond national borders as, notably, FIFA suspended Iranian football in 2006 due to governmental interference. Despite statutory revisions in 2011, persistent issues led to the suspension of the 2020 election of the Iran Football Federation, further exposing governance inefficiencies on the global stage (Ghodsirad et al., 2023). There are strict rules against government involvement in national federations by international sports bodies, such as FIFA (Biglari et al., 2023). There is an ongoing struggle within Iranian sports between national political power and the need for independent, transparent governance that adheres to international standards.

There also remains a significant gap in the development of professional sports and the process of privatization in Iran. Government-related interest groups and quasi-governmental organizations have been the primary beneficiaries of privatization efforts, with football serving as a prime example of state interference stalling progress (Pedram, 2023). Over the past two decades, football has become a pseudo-professional sport, largely due to the Iranian government's involvement. The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) recently disqualified Iranian clubs Persepolis and Esteghlal from the Asian Champions League due to their failure to meet infrastructure, administrative, legal, and financial standards. Both clubs, owned by Iran's Ministry of Sport and Youth, violated AFC regulations requiring clubs to operate as independent economic entities (Duerden, 2022), which is difficult in Iran due to the country's peculiar economic structure. Government interference has restricted the development of genuine multisport clubs, as seen in Esteghlal and Persepolis, which focus solely on men's football (Reiche & Brannagan, 2022). The private sector, meanwhile, has refrained from investing capital into sports, citing perceived revenue hindrances (Gharehkhani et al., 2017). Bureaucratic constraints also act as a deadweight by firmly anchoring the sports economy to prevent the sector from becoming more progressive and dynamic.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has increasingly prioritized embedding its ideological values into sports, a trend evident in both the domestic and international arenas. In 2023, during a ceremony honoring Iranian athletes, the Minister of Sport and Youth stressed the nation's commitment to "values-based sports," asserting that sports without these values "hold no validity" under Iran's political system (Mehr News Agency, 2023). The government's ideological framework, rooted in political Shia Islam (Golkar, 2023), also influences professional football. For example, in 2023, a high-profile match between Saudi Arabia's Al-Ittihad and Iran's Sepahan FC

was disrupted when the Saudi team objected to the placement of a bust of Qasem Soleimani, a former Quds Force commander, near the pitch entrance. This led to a forfeiture by Sepahan, which resulted in financial penalties, and a temporary stadium ban imposed by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) (Morse et al., 2023). Iranian fans expressed discontent, with chants demanding that "politics stay out of football" (Associated Press, 2023; Salem, 2023a).

Iranian authorities, as such, leverage sports as a platform for ideological propagation, reinforcing domestic norms and projecting power internationally. Instead of fostering rapprochement during events like the Saudi team's visit, the government prioritizes divisive actions aligning with its political agenda (Kobierecki, 2020; Murray, 2022). This undermines sports' diplomatic potential, contrasting with ideals of sportsmanship and cooperation. Domestically, hierarchical control through the Ministry of Sport and Youth normalizes directives, shaping athletes' and organizations' behaviour. These mechanisms reflect broader strategies of social control, reinforcing gender roles, modesty, and the hijab (Hargreaves, 2006; Foucault, 1979). Internationally, Iran weaponizes sports as soft power to promote Islamic ideology, signaling political narratives globally. Incidents like Al-Ittihad highlight such tensions by showcasing the regime's prioritization of ideological dominance over genuine diplomatic or sporting relationships.

Methodology

This study forms part of a broader research project investigating the complexities of Iran's sport landscape. Employing an exploratory qualitative approach, it examines the intersection of politics and sport in Iran, with a particular focus on the interplay between state policies, Shia Islam, and the Iranian sports system. The primary objective is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the power dynamics shaping Iran's sports sector and the behaviours of its stakeholders. Data for this study were gathered from multiple sources to ensure a holistic approach. The primary data

collection involved unstructured interviews with a diverse group of stakeholders, including athletes, coaches, referees, sports fans, and officials. Given the politically sensitive nature of the research, particularly during the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement, oral consent was obtained to protect participants, and all identities were anonymized using pseudonyms.

In addition to interviews, personal narratives shared by elite Iranian athletes on social media platforms were analyzed, alongside mainstream media content such as publicly available posts, videos, and news coverage. These narratives were further complemented by firsthand observations from an academic and sports manager with extensive experience in Iran's sports organizations. This multi-faceted approach allowed for a nuanced exploration of the sociopolitical and cultural dimensions of Iranian sports. However, the sensitive political environment and pervasive censorship in Iran presented significant challenges, particularly in securing participants willing to share their experiences. Despite these obstacles, the study integrates both a diversity of perspectives and data sources.

Results

The findings of this study highlight how the Iranian government utilizes mechanisms of control within the sphere of sports, particularly through the institutionalization of gender segregation, to reinforce a conservative Islamic lifestyle. These practices are analyzed as extensions of the broader sociopolitical and ideological framework of the Islamic Republic. Additionally, the results also demonstrate forms of sport-based resistance that subvert and contest the authority of the state, providing insight into the dynamic relationship between power and resistance in Iran's sport landscape. The findings show that there are three areas where gender segregation in Iranian sports that systematically expose and perpetuate inequality: sport organizations, sport services, and sport venues.

Gender Segregation in Sports Organizational Charts

Vertical gender segregation has historically resulted in men occupying most of the prestigious and lucrative roles in society (Reisel et al., 2015). This pattern is evident in Iran's sports institutions, such as the Ministry of Sport and Youth and various sports federations, where separate divisions for men and women are maintained. Women typically hold lower-ranking positions within these organizational structures (Ehsani et al., 2016), reflecting the broader vertical gender-based segregation present in the country's sports administration (Saffari, 2022). In Iranian sports organizations, women's sections refer to departments within all sports federations and the Ministry of Sport and Youth that focus exclusively on women's programs. Managed by women but separate from men's divisions, these sections are often overshadowed by their male counterparts, limiting women's agency and self-reliance. Saba, 40 years old, served as the women's vice president of one of the national sports federations. In Iranian sport, a woman vice president is responsible for the section responsible for women, which is usually the highest position for women in Iranian sports organizations. She describes her perspective on the position:

I've never had any interest in getting a job within the sports federation solely because of my gender. I believe in earning positions based on merit, not on gender. Why should femininity dictate our roles? As a woman vice president of the Federation, I felt inadequate and undervalued when I held the position. As a matter of fact, I was only a ceremonial member of the Federation. If I had kept quiet and obeyed the orders of the senior managers, I could have kept my position. Actually, the position of vice president of women in our sports federations is ineffective whether it exists or not.

The systematic segregation of women from men in sports organizations, both recreational and elite, hinders the advancement of women's sports in Iran. Segregation in male-dominated areas prevents women from gaining independent resources and decision-making power. Moreover, instead of fostering growth, this hierarchical structure reinforces women's dependency on other

sectors within sports organizations, where men's divisions and leadership dominate. These male-led sectors control decision-making and resource allocation, requiring women's divisions to rely on them for approvals, funding, and policy direction, which ultimately constrains the development and independence of women's sports.

Gender Segregation in Sports Services

Gender segregation not only exists on organizational charts but within the physical environment such as sport facilities. Whether catering to recreational sports or elite sports, sports facilities enforce strict gender divisions by separating women from men and prohibiting their simultaneous presence within their spaces. Some sports venues offer services based on gender, meaning they are available to only men or women (Shahrokni, 2019). Usually, this segregation occurs through the scheduling of sport activities, allowing men access during preferable times such as after work or on weekends, while women usually get less optimal hours such as mornings and afternoons. This scheduling assumes that women's primary responsibilities revolve around domestic duties, such as taking care of their children and husbands. As a result, Iranian women have unequal opportunities for leisure sports activities due to gender-based segregation in sports scheduling (Zarezadeh & Rastegar, 2023). The Iranian cultural ideology, coupled with systematic procedures enforcing gender segregation, engenders a sense of guilt among some Iranian women regarding their participation in sports and recreational activities. This guilt stems from the notion that they have fewer opportunities to pursue leisure (Zarezadeh & Rastegar, 2023), because they are burdened by the heavy responsibilities of caring for their children and spouses (Rezania et al., 2021).

In the Islamic Republic, Iranian sport is structured to further entrench sexist ideologies. These norms are subtly cultivated and perpetuated through gender separation in sports, illustrating

how power relations shape the Iranian lifestyle. This segregation reinforces societal norms that confine women to the private sphere, focusing on roles such as caring for children and husbands (Zarezadeh & Rastegar, 2023). Furthermore, the gender-based procedure is criticized by most national female elite athletes due to increased discrimination and access to unequal equipment. According to Maryam, a 29-year-old elite athlete:

We're supposed to get global medals, but with what facilities? While we are not allowed to train with male athletes or coaches, our international counterparts train with male athletes year-round and under male coaches, which gives them a competitive advantage.

The religious law Sharia, as enforced by the Iranian government, prohibits the mixing of unrelated men and women due to concerns about social and physical interactions (Van Geel, 2012; Shavit & Winter, 2011). Elite female athletes' training conditions are significantly impacted by this prohibition. Restrictions against mixed-gender participation in sports like recreational volleyball in urban parks also continues to raise questions about gender-based segregation in outdoor and public recreational spaces, even as Iranian men and women freely interact in various social settings such as cinemas, shopping malls, and restaurants.

Gender Segregation in Sports Venues

For years, both Iranian women and men fans have desired to attend sports stadiums and indoor arenas together to support their beloved teams and athletes. However, sports fandom in the Islamic Republic of Iran remains gender-segregated and exclusively for men (Eskandari, 2022), and women are generally not allowed to enter sports stadiums as spectators (Rahbari et al., 2019). Yalda, 31 years old, mentions with anger the meaning behind the name of Iran's largest sports stadium, "Azadi," which means "freedom" in the Persian language.

For a sports stadium that bars women from entering, the name "Azadi" mocks liberty notion (sic). Every match held there stands as a symbol of patriarchal oppression and a disregard for women's rights.

Despite the ban, women's resistance to this restriction has persisted over the years. Female fans often disguise themselves as male fans, wearing makeup and male attire to enter stadiums, risking arrest or other violent consequences. In one tragic incident, a 29-year-old female football fan, known as the Blue Girl due to her support for Esteghlal Football Club, which has a deep blue team color, set herself on fire while being sentenced to three years in prison for attempting to enter a stadium disguised as a boy (Azad, 2023). Sahar Khodayari, who was facing a possible prison sentence for her actions, protested punishment by setting herself on fire in front of the Islamic Revolutionary Court in Tehran. She suffered severe burns and passed away a week later (Abtahi et al., 2022). Khodayari's story exemplifies how Iranian women have responded to the Iranian state's domination on gender segregation, which limits women's freedom and exerts strict control over their bodies and appearances. In this context, Iranian women, seen as guardians of Islamic morality, face more intense scrutiny than men (Shahrokni, 2019). One female fan, Melika, 21, says she watches most games of her favorite team in disguise in the stadium.

It is so ridiculous! My dad, brother, and I went to a concert last month without any problems, but today I went cross-dressing to watch an Esteghlal game at Azadi stadium. You can't watch a game on TV like you can in a stadium. While my parents thought I went to my friend's house, I actually went to the stadium.

The innovative and bold strategies employed by young women in Iran, such as wearing disguises, to defy restrictions on their participation in sports stadiums reflect a dynamic and evolving form of resistance, indicating a level of resilience and ingenuity in confronting gender-based discrimination. Additionally, they demonstrate the resourcefulness and determination of

Iranian women in circumventing oppressive regulations that are intertwined with pervasive religious and cultural values, which are not only prevalent in public spaces but also deeply ingrained in the fabric of traditional families and communities. The act of wearing disguises to attend sports events carries symbolic significance, serving as a direct challenge to anti-feminist policies and laws that aim to curtail women's freedom of movement and participation. By asserting their presence in traditionally male-dominated spaces, these women not only claim their right to access public venues but also challenge patriarchal norms that confine them to domestic spheres. Unlike more overt forms of protest or activism, such as public demonstrations or rallies, this covert tactic allows women to challenge gender-based restrictions at a relatively lower risk.

The issue of women not being allowed in sports stadiums has generated a great deal of media attention in recent years. In response to international pressure from FIFA and the AFC, certain categories of women, including journalists, athletes' relatives, and sports organization employees, have recently been granted access to stadiums (Sepehri Far, 2023). However, the opportunity for women to obtain tickets remains limited, and seats designated for female fans are often relegated to the upper tiers or in other unfavorable positions. The overall number of female fans permitted entry into sports stadiums remains severely restricted. The fragile access to sports stadiums for women is subject to numerous restrictions and tensions and can be revoked at the slightest provocation (France 24, 2022). This right is still not fully recognized for Iranian women, as both the Iranian government and clerics are reluctant to endorse it, and clerics have become increasingly associated with the government in recent years. (Eskandari, 2022). Their concerns are exacerbated by the potential spread of images and videos depicting women joyfully dancing and not adhering strictly to Islamic hijab within Iran, which contradicts their idealized image of women and asserts that women must be shielded from the sight of men wearing semi-clothes (France 24,

2022). This reflects the ongoing struggle for Iranian girls and women to gain unrestricted entry into sports stadiums, which continue to be managed and controlled based on gender.

A particularly egregious event occurred on March 29, 2022, when Iranian authorities used pepper spray to forcibly deter dozens of female spectators from attending a FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualifying match between Iran and Lebanon at the Imam Reza football stadium in Mashhad (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Despite international criticism, Iran's Interior Minister, Ahmad Vahidi, dismissively claimed that women were not explicitly banned from football stadiums, citing variations in sports facilities' readiness to accommodate female spectators. However, the lack of transparency within the Iranian government's explanation raises significant concerns, as it evades elaborating on readiness specifics or justifying why sports stadiums are inexplicably deemed exclusively masculine spaces. As such, the Islamic Republic of Iran has systematically attempted to silence Iranian women's voices and impose domination by constructing normative behaviour and establishing socially constructed meanings, including maintaining clear forms of sport-based gender segregation. Women face unequal access to sports facilities, entry to sports stadiums, and are relegated to secondary status within sports organizations. This systematic exclusion reflects a broader trend over the last 45 years, wherein the Islamic Republic has utilized sports as a tool to normalize the secondary role of women and limit their participation in social arenas.

Rewriting Identities: Resistance Against Government Ideology

The recent migrations of Iranian athletes show a great deal of resistance on the part of the Iranian sports community to oppressive ideologies. One major consequence of the Iranian government's sports policies has been the inability to retain its elite athletes. For example, the IOC Refugee Olympic Team at the Paris Olympics included 37 athletes from 11 countries, 14 of whom were Iranians (Refugee Olympic Team, 2024). Kimia Alizadeh, the first Iranian woman to win an

Olympic medal, competed for Bulgaria at the Paris Olympic Games, symbolizing an act of defiance and resistance against the political and ideological constraints she faced in Iran. Three years after receiving the Olympic medal for Iran, she moved to Germany as an asylum seeker and stated:

I'm one of millions of oppressed women in Iran...I wore what they [authorities] told me to wear. I repeated their words. They used my medals to propagate the Islamic hijab. I wasn't important for them. None of us are! We are only their tools (BBC, 2020).

Athletes like Alizadeh seek environments where they can freely pursue their careers without state-imposed restrictions. Their decision to compete under foreign flags represents a clear act of defiance against the Iranian government's control over sports. This resistance weakens the sovereign and disciplinary power that the Iranian state exercises and exposes the vulnerabilities in its efforts to enforce ideological uniformity. Foucault's concept of reverse discourse is applicable here, as these athletes rearticulate their identities outside of Iran's control, and in doing so challenge the government's dominant norms (Butler, 2014). Alizadeh, once used by the Iranian government to promote the Islamic hijab after her Olympic victory in Rio, also openly discloses that she was forced to wear a hijab by Iranian authorities (BBC, 2020). Now she competes without the mandatory hijab and represents Nike's new face (British Vogue, 2024). By leaving Iran during a critical juncture in her professional career to live and compete in Europe, Alizade disrupts the dominant narratives imposed by the Iranian government.

The exodus of elite athletes from Iran is evidence of the failure of the government's sports policies, which prioritize ideological control over the needs and aspirations of its athletes. Competing under the flag of a foreign country is undoubtedly a challenging decision for any athlete. However, decisions like those made by Alizadeh represent powerful acts of resistance, directly questioning the ideological boundaries imposed by the Islamic Republic. Alizadeh's

departure not only highlights the state's inability to maintain control over individuals within the realm of sports but also serves as a broader symbol of defiance against an oppressive regime. By asserting agency over her body and performance, she disrupts the submissive image of women perpetuated by state ideology, and replaces it with a narrative of agency and autonomy. The migration of Iranian elite athletes subverts the state's mechanisms of control and serves as a potent reminder of the persistent potential for resistance, even under restrictive conditions. Iranian women also often employ techniques of self-reflection and transformation to reconcile their religious beliefs with their desire to participate in sports and redefine their identities (Burkitt, 2002; Lloyd, 2012). The 26-year-old Zahra expressed herself as follows

For woman like me who come from small traditional town in eastern Iran near Afghanistan border, winning matches isn't everything. It's about expressing who I am, what I can do, and what I want. I'm here to show my true self, not the ideal housewife my society expects me to be. I am a Muslim female professional athlete!

This process allows them to navigate the complex interplay of societal expectations, religious norms, and personal aspirations, asserting their autonomy in a context that seeks to regulate their bodies and behaviours. Iranian women engaged in sports are participating in a process of self-transformation that challenges traditional gender roles, redefines their relationship with their bodies, and reimagines their societal roles. This form of resistance, according to Foucault, is not necessarily about grand, overt acts of defiance but rather about subverting norms imposed by disciplinary power through everyday actions (Scott, 2016). By asserting their agency and autonomy, these women are challenging dominant power structures and creating new definitions and expressions of femininity and body that are not constrained by Islamic norms.

From Street Protests to Sporting Venue Protests

An Iranian Kurdish woman, Mahsa Jina Amini, 22, died in Guidance Patrol custody on September 16, 2022, for allegedly violating the hijab rule. This led to nationwide protests and the birth of a feminist movement dubbed "Women, Life, Freedom" (WLF). Beginning in Saqqez, her hometown, and spreading rapidly, the protests were unprecedented in scale and prominently led by women (Khatam, 2023; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2023). At least 1158 out of 1265 protests led by women occurred between September 16 and November 11 (Wintour, 2022). Women engaged in acts of civil resistance, such as removing and burning headscarves, cutting hair, chanting anti-government slogans, vandalizing symbols of state power, and defying Islamic Republic laws (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2023). As protests against the government intensified, elite athletes also supported protesters to defy oppressive regulations.

Elnaz Rekabi, a female Iranian climber, defiantly competed without a headscarf at the 2022 IFSC Asian Climbing Championships taking place in Seoul, South Korea in solidarity with the WLF movement. Parmida Ghasemi, an elite female archer, similarly and boldly removed her hijab during an archery award ceremony in Tehran in the presence of Iranian authorities (Alkhaldi, 2022). Additionally, athletes from the women's Muay Thai squad disobeyed the ban on the headscarf by competing in Tashkent, at the Asian Championships (Sinaiee, 2023). The decision of these athletes to openly defy the mandatory hijab at sports events symbolized overt acts of resistance, all while they were still residing in Iran. The protests in this movement spread across more than 160 cities in Iran, uniting diverse groups such as women, students, workers, and ethnic and religious minorities, and reaching both major urban centers and smaller peripheral areas (Eikdar, 2024).

Resistance through Sport Fandom

Sport in Iran serves not only as a platform for athletes, coaches, and female spectators to express their opinions, but also as a means for ethnic groups to oppose government policies.

Football, an especially popular sport, emerges as a potent tool for expressing suppressed sentiments, notably among ethnic minorities. The professional Tractor Club's role in the Persian Gulf Pro League illustrates this phenomenon vividly. The matches of the Tractor Football Club have evolved into focal points for Azeri ethnic -Turkic ethnic background- activists to articulate their demands for linguistic rights, education in the Azerbaijani language, and economic equality (Javan & Shafigh, 2024). Article 15 of the Iranian Constitution explicitly gives citizens the right to study in their mother tongue along with Persian (Farsi) in schools, but this right has never been implemented. During Tractor matches, gatherings in Tabriz city's main square burgeon with youths boarding buses, emphasizing their distinct ethnicity. Political slogans reverberate through the air, ranging from moderate appeals such as advocating for Azerbaijani language education in schools (Mostafa, 2017), to chants demanding the release of incarcerated Azeri rights activists (Center for Human Rights in Iran, 2019). This utilization of football as a medium by Azeri ethnic minorities reflects their resistance against the dominant Persian-centric narrative of Iranian nationalism (Kashfi, 2023). The intersection of sports and identity thus emerges as a vital platform for challenging entrenched norms and voicing dissent.

In contemporary Iran, certain sports stadiums have evolved into battlegrounds for expression and resistance against deeply entrenched power dynamics. Within a society where women's voices and other minority groups are routinely silenced and their autonomy systematically constrained, these arenas have become platforms for challenging the status quo. Rather than only perpetuating gender segregation and discrimination, they are also transformed into arenas of defiance, where marginalized voices find resonance and agency. These stadiums cease to be mere venues for sports; they become symbols of feminist resistance, challenging the oppressive structures that seek to suppress minorities' autonomy and perpetuate state control.

Conclusion

Iran's sport landscape embodies the interplay of power, domination, and resistance, reflecting the complex relationship between politics, religion, societal expectations, and modern sports norms. The establishment of the Ministry of Sports and Youth in 2010 promised reform but has largely reinforced state control over sports. The government's pervasive influence, including interference in federations, professional clubs, and enforced gender segregation, has undermined good governance, perpetuating corruption, inequality, and mismanagement. Sports arenas have become contested spaces where the state promotes ideological propaganda both domestically and internationally. However, these same spaces also foster resistance. Strategies such as reverse discourse, everyday defiance, and self-reflection have enabled Iranian athletes and communities to challenge dominant narratives, redefine identities, and reimagine the role of sports. This duality illustrates how sports in Iran serve not only as tools of state domination but also as platforms for agency and social transformation, demonstrating the power of resistance in shaping society.

CHAPTER 5 (ARTICLE 2):

Iranian elite sportswomen: Docile yet defiant bodies

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Iranian elite sportswomen: Docile yet defiant bodies

Author Contribution Statement

This article was developed based on interviews conducted as part of the doctoral thesis project. I conducted all interviews, transcription, data analysis, and preparation of the manuscript. Through the process of applying Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, ongoing discussions with Dr. Dallaire helped shape the conceptual direction of the article and the interpretation of the findings. She also provided continuous supervision and extensive feedback throughout the writing and revision process.

Abstract

This article examines how elite Iranian sportswomen are governed and constituted within a sex-segregated sport system shaped by religion, state surveillance, and regime representation. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with elite athletes, coaches, and referees, the study uses a Foucauldian framework to analyze how technologies of power, including compulsory hijab, institutional monitoring, and symbolic national representation, regulate women's bodies, conduct, and visibility. Findings show that elite sportswomen are produced simultaneously as docile bodies and moral symbols of the Islamic Republic, while also internalizing disciplinary surveillance through practices of self-regulation and concealment. At the same time, women enact resistance through negotiation, covert defiance, reverse discourse, and, in some cases, overt refusal and exile. By centering elite sportswomen's narratives across multiple sporting roles, this study advances scholarship on surveillance, subjectivity and resistance in elite sport, offering new insight into how Muslim women navigate religious domination while actively reshaping their identities within and beyond restrictive state systems.

Keywords: Foucault, women, technologies of power, resistance, subjectivity, Iran, Muslim.

Introduction

In March 2024, Iranian referee Mahsa Ghorbani faced one of the most difficult and dangerous moments of her career. She broke barriers as the first Iranian woman to officiate a men's international soccer match between Tajikistan and Afghanistan (Tehran Times, 2022). Since starting her refereeing career in 2012, she has built a strong reputation, joining the international ranks in 2017. Despite her qualifications and global recognition, her path was repeatedly blocked by systemic exclusion within Iran's football institutions, including restrictions on officiating men's matches and the refusal to nominate her for major tournaments (Younesipour, 2024). When appointed as a Video Assistant Referee (VAR) official for the highly anticipated Esteghlal vs. Persepolis derby in March 2024, security forces intervened, falsely declaring her mentally unfit and threatening her with acid attacks and even a staged fatal accident (Fathi, 2025). She resisted, but her appointment was withdrawn by football authorities under pressure from security forces outside the national football federation. Shortly after, she left Iran.

Mahsa's experience displays the rocky conditions faced by Iranian elite sportswomen, where even international recognition does not shield them from exclusion, threats, and surveillance. Her story demonstrates how women's sporting lives are entangled with broader mechanisms of control that regulate bodies. To analyze these configurations, this study draws on Foucault's concepts of power, dominance, and resistance, to explore how female Muslim athletes, coaches, and referees are produced as subjects within systems of surveillance and regulation, and how they negotiate spaces of agency within these constraints. The central research question guiding this study is: How are elite Iranian sportswomen constituted through technologies of power, and how do they resist?

Foucault's Technologies of Power and Resistance

Foucault's perspective provides a framework for analyzing the interplay of power, domination, and resistance (Heller, 1996). Instead of viewing power as centralized and solely repressive, he reconceptualizes it as relational, distributed, and productive, operating through everyday practices instead of emanating from a single authority (Christensen, 2024; Foucault, 1980; Smith Maguire, 2002). Power circulates through discourse, shaping knowledge, practices, and identities (Foucault, 1975; Kallman & Dini, 2017). Discourses classify and normalize behaviour, with knowledge deployed through discourse to legitimate the exercise of power through surveillance, regulation, and disciplinary mechanisms (Lawlor & Nale, 2014). In high-performance sport, this reinforcing system of power-knowledge appears in the disciplinary practices governing athletes' bodies. Technologies of power operate through institutions and expectations that shape athletes to fit dominant norms, while technologies of the self capture how individuals discipline and transform themselves to meet both personal aims and external demands (Shogan, 1999). These processes produce compliant subjects.

The concept of the docile body illustrates how disciplinary power produces individuals who are obedient and productive (Foucault, 1975). In elite sport, this regulation is evident in training regimens, performance standards, and institutional expectations that cultivate conformity while constraining autonomy (Shogan, 1999). Extending the analysis beyond the individual, governmentality captures how policies, and cultural norms regulate conduct at the population level, aligning personal behaviour with broader objectives such as morality, national identity, or political economy (Lawlor & Nale, 2014; Smith Maguire, 2002). For Muslim sportswomen, this dual regulation operating simultaneously at the bodily and population levels is visible in sex segregation policies, state-imposed dress codes, and bureaucratic structures that govern access to participation. Docile bodies and governmentality reveal how disciplinary techniques intersect with

broader sociopolitical mechanisms to shape subjectivities, constraining agency, yet at the same time allowing negotiation and resistance.

Foucault distinguishes fluid power relations from domination, the latter representing fixed configurations in which freedom is severely curtailed, resistance is minimized, and control is concentrated in the hands of dominant groups or institutions (Haugaard, 2022; Munro, 2003). Such relations of power reinforce structural inequalities and limit agency (Haugaard, 2022; Pansardi, 2012). Yet, power is never absolute, and resistance is inseparable from its operation in the former omnipresent configuration of power relations. Resistance may appear as overt defiance, everyday acts of subversion, or covert strategies when open opposition is too risky (Scott, 2016; Smith Maguire, 2002). It can also take the form of reverse discourse, where dominant categories are reappropriated to challenge authority (Butler, 2014). Through techniques of the self, individuals reflect on and reshape their subjectivities, carving out new spaces of agency within or against disciplinary structures (Burkitt, 2002; Lloyd, 2012). For Muslim women, these technologies operate through persistent social and political judgments that define what it means to be a good Muslim woman. Such comments, advice, and evaluations function as reflective mechanisms through which women reassess their Muslimness (Martin-Anatias, 2019). The experiences of elite Iranian sportswomen can be understood within a relational interplay of power, domination, and resistance, where agency is constrained but not eliminated.

Women, Sport, and State Power in Post-Revolutionary Islamic Iran

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has been reconstituted as a theocratic state grounded in Shi'i Islam and the doctrine of Velayat-e faqih, placing religion at the core of political authority, national identity, and moral regulation (Koo, 2024). The regime consolidates legitimacy through politicized Islamization and regional Shi'i influence abroad, reshaping institutions and culture (Haghighi, 1993). Within this system, Iranian women are inescapably constructed as

Muslim and their bodies and roles are central to biopolitical governance, mobilized to sustain religious virtue, moral order, and national purity (Afary & Anderson, 2023).

Intergenerational tensions and reformist demands have intensified the politico-religious Islamization project, culminating in the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom protests following the death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini, exposed deep fractures in national identity and the authority of the Islamic Republic (Koo, 2024). Arrested by the morality police for alleged improper attire and violation of hijab rules, Mahsa died shortly after in custody, triggering nationwide outrage. Her death sparked a wave of anti-government protests that quickly evolved into the feminist and civil rights movement known as Women, Life, Freedom, led largely by women and girls who appeared publicly without the mandatory hijab. Human Rights Watch (2024) reports that security forces have killed more than 500 protesters, at least 68 children, and have arrested over 20,000 people. Demonstrations spread to more than 100 Iranian cities, with solidarity protests in 146 cities globally (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). This broader transformation is visible across public life, including elite sport, where the global presence of Iranian sportswomen highlights both the constraints imposed on their bodies and the everyday acts of resistance through which they challenge those constraints.

This sociopolitical shift underscores a central feminist insight: the category of woman cannot be treated as singular or universal. Feminist theorists argue that identity politics often assumes internal homogeneity, obscuring the diversity of women's lived experiences and the situated nature of their social positions (Yuval-Davis, 2019). In Iran, women's identities are relational and shaped through intersecting forms of power. They become at once objects and subjects of conduct as they navigate gendered spaces structured by state authority and heteropatriarchal norms. Patriarchal values shape their roles and expectations (Bagheri, 2014). Yet

they are not passive; Asl (2022) portrays their responses as counter-conduct, acts through which women resist dominant Islamic norms and reimagine alternative subjectivities.

Sports research in Iran reflects these dynamics in selective and analytically shallow ways. Persian language research adopts a managerial and cautious tone, focusing on cultural, financial, and structural barriers while avoiding interrogation of the political and religious forces that produce them (Arian & Ghaderi, 2021; Godarzi et al., 2024; Maleki & Mallaei, 2021). Even Iranian scholars writing in English often present themselves as conservative researchers, overlooking the Islamic state's central role in shaping current conditions. Boloorizadeh et al. (2013) describe women coaches' challenges in balancing professional and family roles amid male dominance, traditional gender expectations, limited sponsorship, low salaries, and irregular work hours. At the participation level, Javani (2022) shows that girls and women still lack equal sport access and opportunity. However, such studies do not examine how state power combined with religion directly sustain these inequalities in the gender-segregated sport system. In contrast, Iranian scholars publishing internationally after leaving Iran adopt more critical analyses foregrounding power, bodily autonomy, and state intervention. Saffari (2025) shows how the Islamic state uses sport as a tool of governance, enforcing sex segregation in sport federations and stadiums, restricting athletes' autonomy, monitoring social media, mandating hijab, prohibiting competition with Israeli athletes, and appointing loyal officials, mechanisms that institutionalize political control and intensify gendered inequality. Mohammadi (2021) similarly demonstrates how state power operates through coercion and ideology, from barring female athletes to detaining female fans, while women resist through advocacy and reform. Rahbari (2017) illustrates how restrictive gender norms shape women's participation in equestrian sport, and their later work shows how female bodybuilders use Instagram to challenge boundaries by posting images without the hijab

(Rahbari, 2019). Fozooni (2008) documents women football fans' subversive practices, including cross dressing and intoxication, while Rahbari and Mahmudabadi (2022) examine the stigmatization of muscular female bodies. Despite strict prohibitions, women continue to train in banned sports such as boxing and wrestling, often doing so in informal, non-sanctioned spaces to avoid surveillance and punishment (Bockman, 2023; Mowat, 2017). The Iranian case reflects broader challenges Muslim women face in sport, as they navigate tensions between religious norms, patriarchal structures, and modern sporting participation. These tensions are intensified in Iran, where elite women must comply with both international sport regulations and government mandated religious norms, including attire approval and vetting. This analysis explores how sociopolitical constraints and religious expectations shape the experiences and subjectivities of Iranian elite sportswomen, while also highlighting how these athletes exercise agency and enact resistance within and against the structures that govern their sporting lives.

Methodology

We employed a qualitative research design using online semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection, balancing a set series of questions with flexibility to explore themes emerging in the conversations (Kallio et al., 2016; Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Following approval from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board (Ethics File Number H-04-25-11346), elite females who had represented Iran at major international events such as the Olympics, World Cups, Asian Games, and the FISU World University Games were recruited from June to October 2025. Recruitment began through the first author's professional connections, established during her career in Iran's sport management sector, supplemented by snowball sampling through referrals from participants. The interview guide was shared with participants in advance, enabling them to reflect on the questions beforehand and fostering thoughtful,

comprehensive discussions. Ultimately, 12 athletes, 9 coaches, and 5 referees, aged between 22 and 58 years old, representing 18 different sports participated in interviews that lasted between 51 and 179 minutes.

At the time of the interviews, seven participants lived outside Iran while the remainder lived in Iran. Including elite sportswomen residing both inside and outside Iran was particularly important, as those abroad often felt freer to share their experiences without fear of social or political consequences. Given the sociopolitical sensitivities, only verbal consent was recorded. All identifying details such as names, events, specific sports, and places of residence were anonymized and pseudonyms are used throughout this article to protect participants from potential exclusion from the national team or other adverse consequences. However, some participants explicitly requested to disclose their names and sports. All interviews were conducted in Persian with audio-recording (rather than videorecording) then, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently coded through Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA).

Following Riley et al. (2021) and Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2017), the FDA coding proceeded in sequential steps. First, we traced problematizations, the points at which elite women's participation in sport was constructed as an issue, thereby opening the discursive field to power and knowledge relations. In this study, problematizations included sex segregation, compulsory hijab and Islamic dress codes as nation-branding, the state's deliberate staging of female athletes, coaches, and referees to reinforce an Islamic state identity, and the broader framing of women's participation as a morally sensitive and politically risky domain that demands regulation, justification, and containment. Second, we mapped dominant and competing discourses and their associated regimes of truth to identify what becomes sayable, thinkable, and naturalized within this context. Third, we examined the operation of technologies of power, which regulate and

discipline elite women's conduct, alongside technologies of the self, through which they adapt and regulate themselves. In the next step, we identified the subject positions made available within these discourses and analyzed how participants positioned themselves in talk. Finally, we examined resistance as a discursive practice together with processes of subjectification to highlight how elite women are constituted as particular kinds of subjects through the interplay of regulation and practices of the self.

Elite sportswomen resisting despite a regime of surveillance

In Iran's sex-segregated sport system, surveillance operates through intertwined legal, institutional, and organizational mechanisms that separate women from men and construct them as distinct, morally regulated subjects. In this context, surveillance extends far beyond the physical separation of genders. It is enacted through bureaucratic structures and hierarchies and the pervasive expectation that women conform to Islamic codes of modesty in dress, conduct, and interaction. Elite sportswomen's narratives reinforced our previously published analysis of how these mechanisms shape the everyday realities of women's sport: women's programs receive fewer resources, women are appointed to leadership roles that are largely symbolic and devoid of real decision-making power, and the administrative design of federations keeps women's sport marginal and structurally dependent on male-dominated divisions (Saffari, 2025).

Within this sex-based institutional environment, women's very presence in elite sport becomes problematized, constructed as an issue requiring regulation, justification, and containment, especially as heightened visibility in national and international arenas attracts greater scrutiny. External mechanisms impose overt and implicit monitoring of women's bodies and conduct (Bigo, 2024), while elite sportswomen absorb this scrutiny, transforming it into self-policing practices (Marinković & Ristić, 2024). Hence, surveillance in this context operates

through both external regulation and an internalized gaze, producing a regime of suspicion in which women anticipate constant monitoring. The Iranian sport system renders elite women visible within a disciplinary order that problematizes their bodies, behaviours, and private lives. Framed as Islamic moral oversight, this regime scrutinizes sportswomen not only for athletic performance but also for hijab compliance, bodily comportment, interactions, and relationships. A 22-year-old national athlete described this normalized surveillance:

“We’re always under supervision. Our social media is monitored, and most of us keep a private account alongside our public one. I think the main job of the Federation’s security staff is to check our Instagram posts and stories.”

These private accounts typically reflect elite sportswomen’s lived realities and are shared only with familiar and trusted individuals. Crucially, ordinary aspects of their lives must be concealed from the Ministry of Sport and Youth or federation security staff to protect continued inclusion on the national team. The persistent risk of exclusion, long-term suspension, or other sanctions therefore shapes how women manage visibility across both public and private spheres. As Sefiha and Reichman (2017) show in elite sport, social media does not simply add a new layer of monitoring but amplifies existing surveillance practices, intensifying scrutiny of athletes’ bodies, behaviours, and moral character. Noshin, 40, an elite referee extended this point, noting that:

“Last year, after the women’s basketball league ended, some of the players from the Sahar Academy [league champion team] recorded a video of their championship celebration in their official basketball uniforms. The video was really beautiful... it was their own creative idea. The girls in basketball have very athletic bodies and great height... and basketball uniforms, even with hijab and arm and leg sleeves, look very nice on them. And it is like anything that is beautiful becomes a problem. After that championship clip was posted, all their Instagram pages were shut down.

Many international media outlets, showed the video too. Then they were forced to go to Mr. ... [the vice president of Iran] and apologize, say it was a mistake... and then they deleted the clip. After that, their pages were reopened.”

External mechanisms of surveillance extend beyond the playing field, training contexts and social space as sportswomen are regulated not only as athletes, coaches, or referees but as political and moral subjects. The forced removal of referee Mahsa from the Tehran derby under fabricated claims of mental unfitness (Fathi, 2025), claims unrelated to her professional competence or officiating expertise, illustrates how surveillance operates beyond athletic performance, positioning even internationally recognized women as perpetual subjects of regime control. These pressures also extend beyond national borders, as security forces intimidate the families of prominent athletes who have left Iran, reinforcing fear and dependency. Nasim, a 28-year-old national athlete, recalled how even small acts, such as acquiring training shoes through a foreign male player, were treated as violations:

“They said: first, why did you speak to a strange man? And second, why did you give your personal information to a player from another country? All our actions and movements during international competitions are under surveillance... they even watched us while eating or going out, just to make sure we didn’t consume pork or drink alcohol.”

These examples reveal how the disciplinary regime operates through institutional surveillance and the constant threat of sanction. Athletes such as Fatemeh, 24, received anonymous warnings on the eve of the opening ceremony of the Olympic:

“Do you think we don’t know you have a boyfriend? We will tell the National Olympic Committee of the Islamic Republic, so they know who their flagbearer really is.

The Ministry of Sport and Youth, the disciplinary committees of sports federations, and state media act as capillary mechanisms of power, extending regulation into female athletes' most intimate and private lives. Fatemeh, who comes from a religious family with a father particularly sensitive to such matters, described how these threats pushed her into declaring a false engagement to deflect scandal. She explained that after receiving the anonymous messages, she suffered a panic attack that left her shaken before the Games.

The reach of this disciplinary system is further evident in how surveillance is reproduced by women themselves. As one referee recalled:

“There were a series of unwritten rules, and, for example, this woman (head of one of the federation committees) acted like a morality police officer herself. She would say, ‘Make sure your hijab is in place; no one should use nail polish, especially in bold and striking colors.’ These regulations were announced to us in the preseason meetings, and then we were expected to follow them and also monitor the players to ensure they complied.”

Here, female officials, often former athletes, enforce federation expectations and extend surveillance to other women, disciplining both themselves and others. Their actions demonstrate how disciplinary power circulates through capillary networks, with women becoming agents of enforcement who help produce compliant, regulated bodies (Foucault, 1975). This power operates through surveillance and normalization: restrictive rules become internalized as common sense, prompting women to anticipate scrutiny and regulate their conduct even in private settings. Bitā, 23, a national athlete, displays this internalization:

“We are not allowed to train with male sparring partners or male coaches, it’s against the rules... I do train with boys... But I’m always worried someone might find out. That fear is constantly in the back of my mind... probably I’ll be banned

from the national team, and everything I've worked so hard to build will be destroyed.”

Her experience reflects panoptic uncertainty, in which the possibility of surveillance is internalized even in the absence of a direct observer (Foucault, 2004). Importantly, this internalized gaze does not lead to withdrawal or compliance. Bitra continues to train with male sparring partners because she believes such training is necessary to improve her performance, despite knowing it violates official rules. At the same time, she remains fearful of discovery and appears to manage this resistance carefully, anticipating surveillance and taking precautions to avoid detection. In this sense, internalizing the gaze does not simply produce a docile body but reshapes how resistance is practiced. Disciplinary power reorganizes defiant action rather than eliminating it, producing forms of resistance that are cautious, concealed, and carefully calibrated.

Soheila, 54, a former national volleyball player with 14 years of experience, captain of the national team, and an international referee for a decade, described the impossibility of openly living as a homosexual in Iran:

“When I looked at myself at age 45, what did I really have? I could not even build a family. If they had found out, they would have killed me. That is why I left for another country, so I could finally be myself.”

While living in Iran, Soheila was able to participate in elite sport only by conforming to a dominant regime of truth that defined which identities and moral practices could be publicly recognized (Weir, 2008). Within this regime, veiled femininity and heterosexuality were treated as the only acceptable truths for elite sportswomen, while other forms of identity were excluded from recognition. Compliance with Islamic dress codes and Islamic moral expectations allowed her to remain visible as an athlete and referee, but only at the cost of concealing her private life. During

this period, Soheila was repeatedly presented by the Islamic Republic as a propaganda symbol. She was celebrated as the first and only veiled Muslim woman officiating at international tournaments and showcased globally as evidence of the compatibility of Islam, modesty, and sporting excellence.

Soheila's conduct within the Islamic Republic can be understood as participation in a specific game of truth, that is, a set of historically and socially organized practices that regulate who may speak the truth, what may be shown, and under what conditions (Lorenzini, 2015). In this game of truth, remaining intelligible as an elite sportswoman required self-regulation, silence, and concealment. Her actions were shaped not by the absence of agency, but by the obligation to manage visibility in ways that avoided sanction. After emigrating to the United States, Soheila entered a different game of truth. She married and publicly shared her wedding and family photos on Instagram and within the Iranian volleyball veterans' community. This act exemplifies reverse discourse as resistance, through which previously excluded identities are made visible and articulated on new terms (Butler, 2014). Outside the Iranian regime of truth, Soheila was no longer required to erase aspects of herself in order to remain legitimate. Her narrative illustrates how elite sportswomen's identities are shaped under constraint through regimes of truth that authorize certain ways of being while excluding others. It also shows how games of truth organize everyday conduct, compelling individuals to regulate what they reveal, conceal, or live as true.

Within this disciplinary framework, Iranian elite sportswomen are constituted as docile bodies and moral representatives of the nation, expected to embody modesty, obedience, and religious values. They are simultaneously celebrated as symbols of progress and placed under permanent suspicion, their legitimacy dependent on compliance with regime norms. Navigating this paradox requires constant negotiation. To manage these pressures, they often conceal aspects

of their personal lives while performing behaviours that signal conformity. For example, many wear the hijab loosely so that parts of their hair, ears, neck, or a few centimeters of their arms and legs remain visible, maintaining the appearance of compliance without fully adhering to the Islamic dress code. Similarly, some elite sportswomen train secretly with male athletes or male coaches in defiance of sex-segregation rules, while taking careful measures to avoid detection in order to protect their positions within elite sport. Others maintain same-sex relationships in secrecy, concealing their identities to prevent exclusion, sanction, or violence. Sportswomen do not simply comply with disciplinary norms; rather, they internalize the gaze and regulate their own visibility, selectively hiding parts of themselves to ensure continued inclusion in the elite sport and protect themselves.

Such practices illustrate how disciplinary domination restricts freedom (Munro, 2003), yet also how resistance emerges within its very limits. Resistance here does not take the form of open refusal but of calculated defiance shaped by fear, anticipation of surveillance, and the need for self-protection. In this sense, elite sportswomen embody docile yet defiant bodies, tactically bending regulations and cultivating resistant selves that negotiate authority without openly breaking it. Once they leave Iran, these negotiations often transform into overt resistance, as elite women reclaim their subjectivity by rejecting compulsory norms and producing reverse discourses that challenge the regime of truth they were once compelled to embody.

Surveillance practices are common in elite sport, where professional institutions deploy networked systems combining data, technology, and human supervision to discipline athletes' bodies and normalize conduct, treating self-regulation of body composition as a condition of participation (Cosh et al., 2012; Manley, 2012). However, the Iranian case demonstrates a qualitatively different configuration of surveillance. Here, the regulation of elite sportswomen

extends beyond performance, health, or institutional accountability and becomes embedded within the religious project of the Islamic Republic. Elite women's bodies are not only athletic resources but political and moral symbols, subject to continuous scrutiny for their capacity to represent Islamic virtue, national morality, and regime legitimacy. Surveillance therefore exceeds the boundaries of sport, operating as a gendered technology of governance.

Elite sportswomen within the duality of national and Islamic regime representation

The Islamic Republic regime strategically showcases the participation of Iranian sportswomen in international events, to promote its Islamic state project and defend its legitimacy. The problematization of women's participation through the imposition of an Islamic state identity becomes evident in the regime's deliberate staging of female athletes, coaches, and referees in compulsory hijab and Islamic dress codes during international competitions, on the playing field, at opening ceremonies, on podiums, and in media zones. These orchestrated displays operate as disciplinary technologies that recast their achievements to reinforce regime legitimacy, and simultaneously diminish their agency while shaping them as Islamic subjects. Following Foucault, power is simultaneously individualizing and totalizing. Individualizing power operates as each sportswoman comes to recognize herself as a gendered subject within the Islamic Iranian regime, internalizing regulatory norms that shape her as a docile body while also enabling forms of negotiation and resistance. At the same time, totalizing power functions through classificatory and regulatory procedures that render elite sportswomen visible as a distinct population, governed collectively and produced as representatives of the Islamic state and its moral order (Foucault, 1982; Villadsen, 2024). This tension opens a field of struggle around a central question of identity: Who am I? Are these sportswomen representatives of the Iranian nation or embodiments of the

Islamic Republic? The statements of female national athletes illustrate a clear rejection of the Islamic state identity. Kiana, 23, a national athlete, addressing players from other countries, says:

“Don’t be afraid of us. ... If we wear hijab or follow a specific dress code, it does not mean we are terrorists or that we have bad intentions. Political issues should not create such a distance between people that they start seeing us differently. Even athletes from other Muslim countries, countries where we share the same religion, sometimes look at us differently, even with a sense of hostility. And that is really painful for me. I have not done anything wrong. I have not caused any hatred. So why should I be treated with hatred? Why should my team be viewed as a team you dislike?”

Kiana stated that she is not one of them, not the person they try to portray, and it makes her feel uneasy about being positioned as a representative of the Islamic Republic. She said that neither she nor her teammates have had any role in the hatred and foreign policy actions the Islamic Republic of Iran has carried out in the Middle East in recent decades. Her narrative shows the tension between being recognized as citizens representing Iran and being framed as extensions of the Islamic Republic’s political project. Fatemeh, 24, a national athlete described a similar contradiction:

“In so many official talks they would say, ‘Our female flagbearer who went to the competitions wearing hijab.’ But I was nothing more than a doll for them, a puppet to showcase and justify their Islamic agenda: ‘Look, we send women to the biggest international stages. They compete in hijab, and they succeed; we even make them Olympic flagbearers.’ For them I was just a headline. But no one knew what I endured in the hours before those photos of me with the flag of the Islamic Republic appeared. All because of their laws, because of the Islamic Republic. My efforts were for Iran, for the name of Iran.”

Fatemeh's account draws a clear boundary between national belonging and regime identification. Her insistence that her efforts were "for Iran" reflects attachment to Iraniyat, understood as Persian cultural linguistic heritage and territorial belonging, rather than allegiance to Islamiyat. Iranian national identity has historically been constructed through the interaction of Iraniyat and Islamiyat, alongside attachment to territory as a central pillar of national belonging (Kashani-Sabet, 2011). While the Pahlavi state privileged Iraniyat through cultural homogenization and symbols, the 1979 Islamic Revolution reconfigured nationalism as religious nationalism, collapsing representation of the nation into loyalty to the Islamic Republic (Litvak, 2017). Fatemeh's narrative illustrates how elite sportswomen contest this fusion by reclaiming national representation through Iraniyat while rejecting identification with the Islamic regime's religious project.

Within elite sport, national identity is increasingly understood as fluid, relational, and contested rather than fixed. Elite sport has become a key site where national belonging is made visible and policed through symbolic and embodied markers such as dress, language, comportment, and public affect (Jansen & Skey, 2020). Prior research shows that states mobilize elite athletes as symbolic representatives, recasting individual achievements as collective national accomplishments and aligning athletes' bodies and biographies with dominant national narratives. During the Cold War, Soviet athletes were systematically produced as ideological symbols of the socialist state, with medals and records framed as proof of political and moral superiority, while behavioural regulation and propaganda sought to erase individual deviation (Mertin, 2009). MacLean and Field (2014) demonstrate that the nation-state nexus in sport is often taken for granted, obscuring the political work required to align athletic representation with state legitimacy. Dallaire and Harvey (2016) illustrate how sport in Canada can unsettle dominant national

identities, particularly within tensions between Quebec nationalism and Canadian nationalism, revealing how athletes and sport institutions may refuse or rework imposed national meanings.

Elite athletes are not passive bearers of national symbolism but are constituted as political subjects through regimes of representation, discipline, and recognition. Athletes emerge through both individualizing and totalizing forms of power, while retaining the capacity for negotiation, distancing, and refusal. The Iranian case extends this literature by demonstrating how elite athletes may oppose the fusion of nation and political regime, rejecting identification with the Islamic state while continuing to claim Iranian national belonging. Iranian elite sportswomen thus expose the fragility of state-centered assumptions about representation in sport. Within dominant logics, the nation is often assumed to be synonymous with the state and sport to naturally represent it; the Iranian case, however, shows that elite athletes can actively oppose imposed state identities. Aso, 38, a soccer referee now living in Canada, described:

“With the Mahsa movement, Woman, Life, Freedom, I decided I would no longer act as a representative of the Islamic Republic or follow its frameworks. I said: out of respect for those who were killed because of the hijab... if I am ever to step onto a football field again, I will not do it wearing a headscarf. I stand with the people who are protesting. By leaving football, I declared that I am no longer part of their game. I am not a soldier of your country; I am not a soldier of the Islamic Republic. I am an Iranian woman.”

Her stance exemplifies counter-conduct, refusing the procedures of individualization that sought to fix her identity, such as wearing the hijab while performing her role as a referee (Foucault, 2007). Rather than internalizing the regime’s subject position, she reclaims representation through resignification, situating herself as a resisting subject within Women, Life, Freedom rather than a docile subject of Islamic moral discourse, thereby turning subjection into a

site of political reversal (Butler, 2014; Pickett, 1996). This decision reflects what Foucault describes as the moment when an individual becomes critically aware of the limits of the self within a given cultural condition and begins to transform herself accordingly (Markula, 2003). Soheila, 54, who in 2006 became the first Iranian woman to referee at the world volleyball championships under compulsory hijab, was celebrated by state media as “The Pride of Muslim Women Referees.” She recalled:

“When I saw that description, I laughed. Muslim? Hijab? I am personally a critic of the hijab.”

Although she personally rejected the Islamic identity attributed to her, the public circulation of her image as a compliant, veiled Muslim woman referee has played, and continues to play, a significant role in legitimizing the Islamic Republic’s sexual and moral order through elite sport. Her experience reveals a broader and recurring pattern in which the bodies and achievements of thousands of Iranian female athletes are systematically appropriated into official representations, overriding personal belief, opposition, and lived identity. The Islamic Republic deploys a set of concrete techniques to produce elite sportswomen as symbolic representatives of the state. At the level of individualization, women athletes’ bodies are continuously regulated through the compulsory enforcement of hijab and Islamic dress codes across international sport spaces, including the playing field, official ceremonies, and media appearances, producing them as disciplined and governable subjects. At the level of totalization, state media detach athletic success from personal conviction and reinscribe it within a collective narrative of Islamic morality. By portraying elite sportswomen as symbols of “Muslim women’s pride” and exemplary Islamic Iranian women, the state transforms individual achievement into evidence that Islamic governance enables women’s global participation.

Alongside these techniques, women athletes resist in varied ways, with the most severe form taking the shape of overt acts of refusal. Kimia Alizadeh, Iran's first female Olympic medalist, sought refuge abroad and now competes for Bulgaria (Rosemain, 2024). After leaving Iran, she publicly condemned compulsory hijab, describing herself as "one of the millions of oppressed women in Iran" and writing: "Whatever they said, I wore. Every sentence they ordered, I repeated" (CBC, 2020). Elnaz Rekabi removed her hijab during international competition in October 2022, an act that coincided with the Women, Life, Freedom protests, after which she was placed under house arrest, banned from international competition, and later relocated to Canada (Ghobadi, 2022). Mitra Hejazipour, a chess grandmaster, also rejected compulsory veiling and now represents France, stating: "I started wearing the hijab when I was 5. I couldn't take it anymore" (Schneider, 2024).

Such overt resistance carries heavy costs, including disrupted professional careers, sanctions, and exile. Yet these acts also operate as practices of self-formation. From a Foucauldian perspective, elite sportswomen who reject imposed subjectivities engage in techniques of the self through which they actively rework who they are and how they are governed (Burkitt, 2002; Villadsen, 2024). By refusing compulsory hijab, withdrawing from national representation, or publicly denouncing the regime, they render dominant discourses governing femininity, morality, and athletic nationalism open to critique and select alternative subject positions (Markula, 2003). Given the intensity of repression, such forms of resistance are often only sustainable outside Iran, where women can speak, appear, and act without immediate coercion.

These forms of resistance parallel, but are not identical to, those enacted by non-athlete Iranian women. Research on non-athlete women shows that resistance frequently takes the form of sustained civil disobedience, collective presence, and everyday practices that challenge state

power and force women's freedom onto the political system (Sajadi, 2023). Other studies describe how women enact presence-as-resistance by making their bodies visible in public spaces to negate gender norms and sexual regulation (Pourmokhtari, 2022). Elite sportswomen participate in this wider field of resistance but do so through a distinct modality shaped by the mediatized nature of elite sport. Because international competitions and global media amplify their visibility, acts such as unveiling, leaving national teams, or speaking publicly circulate transnationally and acquire symbolic force beyond individual intent. In this way, elite sportswomen's refusals function not only as personal acts of dissent but also as highly visible interventions that expose the instability of state-centered identities and demonstrate how women, within and beyond sport, actively transform themselves through resistance.

Conclusion

We extend scholarship on women in sport in Iran by moving beyond leisure contexts, online activism, or small elite samples to examine a substantive group of athletes, coaches, and referees who competed on the international stage. Drawing on a multi-sport dataset and a Foucauldian framework, we show how Iranian elite sportswomen are simultaneously constituted as docile bodies of the Islamic regime and as agents of resistance. Our analysis deepens understanding of Iranian sportswomen experiences while contributing to broader global debates on sex-based power relations, surveillance, and subjectivity in elite sport. Across the findings, we demonstrate that Iranian elite sport operates as a regime of surveillance and representation that exceeds conventional athletic governance to focus on the production of moral models of Muslim Iranian women. Surveillance functions through legal, institutional, and cultural mechanisms that render women's bodies, conduct, and private lives continuously visible and governable, while representational practices collapse national belonging into loyalty to the Islamic Republic.

Importantly, disciplinary power does not produce simple compliance. Instead, elite sportswomen negotiate visibility, conceal aspects of the self, refuse imposed identities, and rework subject positions within and against intersecting regimes of surveillance and state religion.

Empirically, we show that elite Muslim Iranian sportswomen are not merely athletes, coaches, or referees but political subjects formed within overlapping regimes of power. Their participation in elite sport remains conditional, celebrated when it serves regime legitimacy yet always vulnerable to restriction or withdrawal. This conditionality helps explain why many elite sportswomen ultimately leave Iran during or after their sporting careers (Refugee Olympic Team, 2024; Saffari, 2025). Such migration is rarely motivated by financial or professional advancement; rather, it reflects the cumulative effects of disciplinary governance on sporting subjectivities and personal identities. Celebrated symbolically yet denied substantive authority, autonomy, and security, these women confront a regime of truth in which their bodies are regulated, their movements monitored, and their lives morally scrutinized. Paradoxically, while the Islamic Republic has been unable to export its religious project internationally, it has produced the very conditions that compel its elite sportswomen to leave. Even when migration entails relinquishing national status and symbolic capital, leaving Iran becomes an act of self-formation. Through everyday tactics, overt refusals, and reverse discourse, elite sportswomen actively reject imposed subject positions and claim alternative identities as defiant Iranian women, independent sporting subjects, and self-determining individuals beyond the Islamic regime discourse.

CHAPTER 6 (ARTICLE 3):

Sex Segregation, Hijab, and Sexual Exploitation in Iranian Elite Sport

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Sex segregation and mandatory hijab as protection? Narratives of sexual exploitation in Iranian elite sport

Author Contribution Statement

This article emerged through brainstorming sessions and ongoing discussions with Dr. Dallaire during the writing and submission process of the first article. I prepared the initial draft of the manuscript and developed the analysis presented in the article. She supervised the research process and contributed to strengthening the conceptual framing, refining the arguments, and shaping the broader direction through which the article approached questions of sexual exploitation, protection, and regulation within Iranian elite sport.

Abstract

This study examines how religiously framed systems of protection in Islamic societies, particularly those regulating women's dress and interactions between the sexes, operate within Iranian elite sport in the absence of effective legal safeguards. Drawing on empirical evidence, it argues that elite sport becomes a high-risk site where sex, power, religion, and governance intersect, producing conditions in which sexual exploitation is structurally enabled rather than exceptional. Extending scholarship on sexual exploitation and sport, the study shows how institutionalized regimes of sexual control function through power and knowledge to construct Iranian women athletes' bodies as inherently vulnerable and sexually accessible, rendering participation conditional and exploitation normalized. Policies such as mandatory hijab and sex segregation discipline women as Muslim subjects and shift responsibility onto survivors, and enable perpetrators to frame abuse as care. The study further reconceptualizes silence not as individual failure but as an institutional survival strategy and technology of governance that protects sport organizations, sustains moral order, and forecloses accountability.

Keywords: Pastoral power, Muslim, Iran, women, silence, sexual abuse, Foucauldian discourse analysis

Born and raised in Iran, I have repeatedly encountered sexual discrimination, harassment, and abuse across a wide range of social settings. These experiences were not confined to a particular age, role, or social status, nor to whether I wore an Islamic hijab. They began when I was almost nine years old while playing at a relative's house, continued during adolescence as I rode my bicycle through the streets of my neighborhood without a hijab, and extended into adulthood, including during my tenure as a university faculty member and later as a member of the executive board of a national sports federation. Threats of violence, and even threats of acid attacks following my rejection of unwanted romantic advances, became part of the everyday conditions through which I learned how to conceal my personal life within the chilling atmosphere of a patriarchal society. At the time, I sought to minimize these encounters through silence and patience, trivializing their significance and, often unknowingly, becoming complicit in the normalization of unequal power relations. As a survivor, it is evident to me that these experiences were not exceptional; rather, they reflect a broader structural reality shaping the lives of many Iranian women, particularly those born in the 1970s and 1980s in the early years following the Islamic Revolution, who learned to live under regimes of religious and Islamic moral regulation. This article begins within that silence and seeks to break it."

Introduction

Empirical research demonstrates that sexual abuse in religious environments is both pervasive yet systematically concealed through institutional power, legitimizing moral discourses, and enforced silence, processes that foreclose recognition, accountability, and redress (McKinzie & Richards, 2022). Similar dynamics are evident within elite sport, where athletes' narratives frequently reveal that sporting achievement is forged through pain, suffering, and multiple forms of interpersonal violence and sexual exploitation. Within sport culture, harmful behaviours are often tolerated, normalized, and institutionalized as part of the athletic experience (Mountjoy et al., 2024).

Drawing on a Foucauldian epistemological approach, we interrogate sexual exploitation among elite Iranian sportswomen through an analysis of their narratives of harassment in training and international competitions. Rather than treating abuse as isolated misconduct, this study is concerned with how sexual exploitation is produced, regulated, and rendered invisible within elite sport, particularly in contexts such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, where the protection of women is mobilized as a religious, moral, and political project. Using empirical data from elite sport settings, we examine whether sex-based policies and laws in the Islamic Republic function as safeguards for women or instead operate as mechanisms that reproduce vulnerability, unequal power relations, and silence.

Conceptualizing Sexual Exploitation in Sporting Settings

Despite the seriousness of its consequences, sexual harassment remains difficult to define, which complicates efforts to measure and address it empirically (Fasting et al. 2011). Most definitions emphasize behaviours that are unwelcome, threatening, distressing, insulting, or otherwise offensive to those who experience them (Fasting & Sand 2015). However, there is no single, universally accepted definition that applies consistently across actions or contexts (Hunt et al. 2010; Timpka et al. 2015). In response to this definitional ambiguity, Fitzgerald et al. (1995) propose a widely used framework that distinguishes among three forms of sexually harassing behaviours: gender harassment, characterized by hostile or degrading attitudes toward women; unwanted sexual attention, involving offensive and unreciprocated behaviours; and sexual coercion, defined as pressure to engage in sexual cooperation in exchange for job-related benefits.

Within sporting contexts, these dynamics unfold within environments shaped by dominant masculine values, where the subordination and sexualization of women are normalized, creating conditions that enable harassment (Harvey, 1999; Gage, 2008). Building on this context,

Brackenridge and Fasting (2002) extend existing conceptualizations by framing sexual exploitation as an interconnected set of practices encompassing sexual discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual abuse. Sexual discrimination is embedded within institutional practices, organizational cultures, and gendered occupational structures that undermine women's confidence, performance, safety, and opportunities for advancement, producing what has been described as a chilly climate for women in sport (Brackenridge & Fasting 2002). Sexual harassment, in turn, refers to unwanted sex-based behaviours or approaches enacted interpersonally over time through repeated intrusions into athletes' privacy, territory, or thoughts, often experienced as non-consensual invasions. Sexual abuse represents the most extreme manifestation of exploitation and involves groomed or coerced sexual acts within relationships of trust marked by unequal power, authority, and dependence (Brackenridge & Fasting 2002). We use sexual exploitation as the overarching concept in this study because it captures these interconnected practices, from sexual discrimination and harassment to sexual abuse, while emphasizing the unequal power relations through which they occur.

Conceptualized as a continuum, these practices link everyday gendered inequalities in sport to more severe forms of sexual violence (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2002). This continuum perspective aligns with broader scholarship that highlights a grey zone between harassment and abuse, extending from sex discrimination to gender-based harassment, sexual harassment, and ultimately sexual abuse (Fasting & Sand, 2015). Across this spectrum, sexual harassment and sexual abuse constitute violations of personal rights with profound and long-term physical, psychological, social, and performance-related consequences for athletes (Mountjoy et al., 2024).

A growing body of scholarship has more recently examined sexual harassment in sport, showing not only its persistence but also important shifts in how it is understood. For instance,

Sarwar (2024) identifies harassment in Pakistan as shaped by organizational climates and culturally embedded sexism that sustain silence; Sutton et al. (2021) demonstrate how vulnerability and institutional context in the United States interact to structure risk; Ohlert et al. (2020) reveal cross-context patterns of victimization in Germany extending beyond sport; and Parent et al. (2016) highlight how consensual coach–athlete relations may obscure and underestimate abuse in Québec, Canada. Research on sexual harassment and abuse in Iranian sport, as well as in other Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East (Sarwar, 2024; Low et al., 2024; Mohebbi et al., 2026), has been comparatively cautious and conservative, often addressing the issue indirectly and rarely drawing on empirical data grounded in elite athletes lived experiences or first-person narratives. Obtaining reliable empirical data on sexual harassment in Iran is particularly difficult because the sensitivity of the topic, risks associated with disclosure, and institutional and moral pressures can constrain both reporting and research access. Within the Islamic Republic of Iran, existing scholarship has largely focused on identifying contributing factors through expert perspectives (Mohebbi et al., 2026), developing safeguarding or protective frameworks (Bakhtiyari Nia et al., 2024), or mapping the general dimensions of abuse in sport (Rasekh et al., 2023). This body of work remains predominantly descriptive and stops short of critically engaging with the structural foundations of abuse embedded within the Iranian sport system. Political and institutional arrangements, religious norms, and gendered social roles that actively regulate women’s participation in sport and normalize unequal power relations remain largely unexplored. Instead, abuse is frequently framed as an interpersonal or psychological issue (Mohebbi et al., 2026), rather than being situated within broader relations of power, gender hierarchy, authoritarian governance, and patriarchal sport institutions. Consequently, the voices of elite Iranian sportswomen remain largely absent from the scholarly record. In these contexts, sexual harm is

frequently approached through discourses of protection, morality, or cultural sensitivity, which can obscure the structural conditions that enable harassment and abuse. This study seeks to address this gap by examining sexual discrimination, harassment, and abuse within elite women's sport in Iran.

Since the Islamic Revolution, all Iranian women are designated as Muslim women by the state and their protection as Muslim women has been repeatedly invoked as a political justification for regulating women's participation in sport. Policies such as mandatory hijab, Islamic dress codes, and sex segregation not only produce Iranian women as Muslim women, they have also been publicly framed as measures designed to safeguard Muslim women's dignity and moral status, both domestically and internationally. However, these Islamic-based policies in Iranian sport are not merely cultural practices; they are institutionalized through legal and regulatory frameworks. Article 4 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran requires that all laws and regulations conform to Islamic criteria (Algar, 1980), within which the mixing of men and women is prohibited (Ahmad et al., 2020). Despite these claims of protection, there is little empirical evidence demonstrating whether, or to what extent, such policies effectively prevent sexual harm or create safer sporting environments. This study examines the broader systems of power that shape elite Iranian sportswomen's experiences, systems that remain underexamined in existing research. By situating sexual harassment and abuse within the intersecting dynamics of political authority, religious governance, and gendered institutional arrangements, this study moves beyond individualistic explanations and contributes to a structural understanding of sexual harm in elite women's sport in Iran.

A Foucauldian Framework for Understanding Sexual Exploitation

We draw on Foucault's work to conceptualize sexual exploitation as a phenomenon rooted in power relations. Central to his analysis is the idea that power operates through the disciplining and regulation of bodies, shaping conduct, subjectivity, and social relations (Foucault, 1978). Power, in this sense, is not something possessed by particular individuals but a productive and relational force that circulates through everyday practices and institutional arrangements. Feminist scholars have drawn on this perspective to examine how women's bodies are regulated at both individual and population levels, particularly within gendered social and organizational contexts (Sawicki, 2005). We argue that sexual exploitation cannot be understood outside the gendered power relations in which it occurs. Power is therefore central to explanations of sexual harassment (Fasting & Sand, 2015), especially in settings characterized by significant asymmetries between men and women (Hunt et al., 2010). These asymmetries are embedded in institutional environments and gendered organizational structures, which have consistently been identified as the strongest empirical predictors of sexual harassment (Pina et al., 2009).

We use Foucault's concept of pastoral power to sharpen this analysis, drawing attention to how power operates through care, guidance, and protection rather than direct coercion. In Foucauldian terms, care is not external to power but one of its key modes of operation. Pastoral power is an individualizing form of power whose object is the life of individuals, functioning through moral authority, guidance, and seemingly benevolent protection (Follett, 1986). At the same time, it operates according to the logic of *omnes et singulatim*, addressing populations as a whole while simultaneously regulating individuals in detail. Through this dual operation, pastoral power produces normative control and corrective discipline, encouraging individuals to regulate their own conduct in accordance with socially defined norms (Carrette, 2013). Although its origins lie in religious institutions, pastoral power later extends beyond the Church and becomes

incorporated into the political rationalities of the modern state, where care and protection function as techniques for governing populations (Follett, 1986).

We contend that dominant discourses on sexual harassment do more than describe harmful behaviours; they function as forms of power/knowledge that actively participate in the production of sexual and gendered subjects. Sexual harassment knowledge tends to position men as active and potentially dangerous sexual actors and women as passive and vulnerable victims, shaping how individuals come to understand themselves and their capacity for action (Brewis, 2001). The effects of this knowledge lie in the (re)production of the subject positions of harasser and recipient within relations of power that present themselves as inevitable and without alternative. As a result, these relations are often acted upon as true precisely because they are believed to be true, underscoring the need to interrogate sexual harassment knowledge as a historically contingent artefact rather than a neutral description of reality (Brewis, 2001; Foucault, 1986).

These relations of power are sustained through disciplinary and normalizing practices embedded in institutional cultures. Fahs et al. (2018) show how dominant sexual discourses compel women to internalize patriarchal norms through self-monitoring, compliance, and the internalization of blame when sexual encounters become harmful or uncomfortable. Similarly, McLaughlin et al. (2017) demonstrate that sexual harassment is embedded within hostile institutional environments where power operates through observation, assessment, and regulation rather than overt authority (Foucault, 1980). Women who challenge these arrangements may experience ostracism or reputational harm, even when they are not the direct targets of harassment, rendering sexual harassment a scarring event with enduring consequences for women's professional trajectories. We use these Foucauldian concepts to illuminate how sexual exploitation is reproduced through interconnected mechanisms of discipline, care, knowledge, and

normalization. Institutional arrangements that present themselves as inevitable and without alternative play a central role in sustaining these relations of power (Gutting, 2005). Within this continuum, harm operates through internalization, conformity, and self-renunciation, shaping subjectivity as a mode of self-relation. Shame, sexual humiliation, and silence thus emerge not as individual failures but as effects of power operating through subjectivity. Against this backdrop, acts of speaking out about sexual exploitation may disrupt prevailing relations of power despite the significant risks involved (Taylor, 2019).

Constructing Womanhood in the Islamic Republic

We propose that understanding the position of women in contemporary Iran requires close attention to how the religious foundations of the Islamic Republic have shaped and continue to shape political, legal, and social structures. In this study, Iranian sportswomen are not treated as inherently “Muslim”; rather, they are understood as athletes who are constructed and represented as Muslim subjects within the religious framework of the Islamic Republic, irrespective of their personal beliefs. Following the 1978–79 Islamic Revolution, the theocratic state grounded in Shi‘i Islam and the doctrine of Velayat-e faqih places religion at the center of political authority, national identity, and moral order (Koo, 2024). Since then, human rights violations are routinely justified through religious discourse, with women’s rights and freedoms being disproportionately constrained (Kar, 2007). The regime consolidates its legitimacy through narratives of martyrdom, self-sacrifice, and anti-imperialism, frames dissent and alternative perspectives as existential threats, and exports its religious project through support for Shi‘i movements across the Middle East. Through this ongoing process of politico-religious Islamization, key institutions, including education, culture, media, and systems of governance, are restructured and governed to consolidate clerical authority (Haghighi, 1993).

Gender norms are reproduced from early childhood through families, schools, state media, and peer networks, embedding patriarchal expectations into everyday life (Babakhani, 2024). Within this process, the Islamic state advances a model of femininity rooted in piety, modesty, and domestic devotion, positioning women as mothers, educators, and moral guardians, reinforced through educational reforms and media representations that emphasize chastity and sacrifice (Afary & Anderson, 2023; Haghayeghi, 1993). The regime's doctrine frames traditional gender roles as divinely ordained and gender equality is rejected as a Western intrusion. Ideal womanhood is modeled on Islamic figures such as Fatimah, the Prophet's daughter, associated with obedience and devotion, and Zaynab, whose courage is celebrated only insofar as it serves the defense of Islam. This religious project is translated into concrete legal and social interventions aimed at redefining the figure of the revolutionary Muslim woman (Kian, 1997). Through this religious discourse, women's roles are defined not in terms of individual rights but as religious obligations aligned with the state's ongoing project of moral discipline and spiritual unity (Nashat, 2021). This emphasis on women's domestic roles and limited public presence reflects a protective logic in which restrictions on women are justified through claims of safety and moral protection. In the Iranian context, this logic operates through Islamic moral regulation, making women's participation in public spaces, including elite sport, conditional on compliance with norms of modesty, dress, and gender segregation. At the level of everyday regulation, women are expected to wear dark, modest clothing and to limit their presence in public spaces. Over time, veiling evolves from a personal act of faith into a compulsory and enforced public duty (Friedl, 2021). Teimouri (2026) argues that the Islamic Republic uses the hijab not merely as a religious requirement but as a political institution central to sustaining patriarchal authority. Since 1988, the regime has responded and continues to respond to women's resistance through pro-hijab rallies,

morality campaigns, and coercive enforcement, revealing how control over women's bodies remains integral to the state's political legitimacy.

The implementation of the Islamic Republic's postrevolutionary doctrine produces and continues to sustain sweeping legal and social transformations that redefine women's position in Iranian society. The regime repealed laws that conflicted with Islamic law, particularly the Pahlavi-era Family Protection Law (1925–1979), which had provided limited protections for women in matters of marriage, divorce, and custody. Systematic legal sex discrimination is embedded within both family and criminal law (Kar, 2007). As Moghadam (2004) explains, the replacement of this legal framework with a Sharia-based system institutionalizes patriarchal authority, subordinates women to male guardianship, and reasserts the dominance of clerical interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence. Under this legal order, men are granted unilateral rights to divorce, polygamy, and child custody, while women lose significant legal autonomy. The minimum marriage age for girls set at nine is later raised to thirteen, and marriage requires the consent of a male guardian, typically a father or grandfather. Women are prohibited from serving as judges and face restrictions in employment and mobility, often needing a husband's permission to work or travel.

The penal code (*Qanoon-e Qessas*) establishes unequal treatment by valuing a woman's life and legal testimony at half that of a man's. Marriage laws also institutionalize *tamkin* (obedience) and *nafaqa* (maintenance), linking a wife's right to financial support to her sexual compliance. While women retain control over personal property, their broader economic and legal independence remains severely constrained (Moghadam, 2004). Iranian criminal law provides limited recognition of sexual harassment and sexual violence. Sexual harassment is not a specific, independent offence and is addressed under the general offence of harassment in Article 619 of the 1996 Ta'zirat Act, which may exclude some forms of sexual harassment from criminal prosecution

(Ahangaran & Saberi Majd, 2024). Rape outside marriage is addressed as *zena-e ba onf va ekrah* (adultery with force and duress) under *zina* (sex outside marriage), rather than as a distinct offence. The definition does not cover all forms of forced sexual activity, and rape within marriage or intimate relationships is not legally recognized (Aghtaie, 2017).

These legal reforms, together with social policies such as retirement programs that encourage women to leave the workforce after as little as fifteen years of employment, daycare closures, and gender segregation in education and workplaces, reinforce women's dependency on men and their confinement to domestic roles (Nashat, 2021), producing a gender hierarchy that permeates both private and public spheres. The constitution explicitly ties women's rights to Islamic principles, guaranteeing equality only in accordance with the laws of Islam. This formulation entrenches women's subordination within the legal system by presenting gender inequality as both morally justified and divinely sanctioned. Iran's refusal to sign the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) further reflects the regime's commitment to sustaining a patriarchal order grounded in religious authority (Moghadam, 2004).

Methods

This qualitative study draws on a larger research project examining women's experiences in Iranian elite sport. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board (Ethics File Number: H-04-25-11346). Given the political and social sensitivities of conducting research in Iran under a religious authoritarian regime in 2025, the study was not initially designed to ask participants directly about experiences of sexual harassment or abuse. Avoiding direct questioning did not limit disclosure. Rather, the prevalence and salience of sexual harassment and exploitation within Iranian elite sport became evident as 11 of the 26 elite women interviewed raised these issues spontaneously, without prompting, explicitly discussing either their

personal experiences of sexual exploitation or their observations of sexual exploitation within Iranian elite sport. This methodological decision functioned as a safeguarding strategy intended to reduce emotional burden and minimize the risk of retraumatization, while still allowing participants to disclose sensitive experiences on their own terms (Shannon, 2022). Accordingly, interviews were conducted using an open-ended, participant-led approach that enabled elite women to determine both the depth and direction of disclosure.

As trust and rapport developed and elite women felt sufficiently safe, some gradually began to speak about difficult and painful aspects of their experiences in elite sport, including sexual harassment and exploitation. These disclosures were often accompanied by visible and emotional reactions. When recounting personal experiences or observations of sexual discrimination, harassment, and abuse, some women spoke with intense anger or sadness; in several instances, participants cried, their faces became visibly flushed, or their hand gestures and facial expressions conveyed distress and emotional strain. When such experiences were mentioned indirectly or articulated with hesitation, participants were invited to respond to follow-up questions only if they felt comfortable doing so. Follow-up questions were explicitly framed as optional and under the participant's control, ensuring that emotional safety and individual agency remained central throughout the research process. All interviews were conducted by the first author in Farsi (Persian) online via video calls. With participants' informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim, with. At the time of the interviews, participants resided both within Iran and in the Iranian diaspora. The final analytic sample included both active and retired elite sportswomen.

Given the sensitive context surrounding women's participation in elite sport in Iran and the potential risks of disclosure, confidentiality was treated as a central ethical concern. All

participants remained anonymous, and identifying information, including names, sport disciplines, and years of international competition, was removed from transcripts and analysis. Pseudonyms were assigned, and only limited demographic information is presented in Table 1. Following Swann et al. (2015), elite women are defined in this study as those estimated 4000 sportswomen who have represented the Islamic Republic of Iran at least once in high-level international competitions, including Asian, world, or Olympic events over the past ten years. Participants occupied diverse positions within elite sport, including roles as athletes, coaches, and referees. This diversity enabled a broader examination of sexual exploitation across elite sport settings, without limiting the analysis to a single professional role.

We employed Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) to interrogate sexual exploitation in Iranian elite sport as a product of power and knowledge relations within the Islamic Republic of Iran, rather than as isolated incidents of individual misconduct. We treated dominant discourses as institutionalized systems of knowledge that shape what can be said, known, and enacted within elite sport contexts. Consistent with FDA, we focused on how discourse actively produces subjectivity rather than merely representing experience (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2017).

Table 6-1. Participant Demographics (Article 3)

We began the analytic process by centering the participants' experiences, observations, and

#	PSEUDONYM	AGE	TOP-TIER SPORT EVENT	ROLE	PLACE OF RESIDENCE AT THE TIME OF INTERVIEW	EDUCATION
1	Mitra	39	Asian games	Coach	Iran	PhD
2	Noshin	40	Asian games	Referee	Iran	MA
3	Fatemeh	24	Olympic	Athlete	Germany	High school diploma
4	Maryam	37	Asian games	Athlete	Iran	PhD
5	Shahnaz	38	World championship	Athlete	Canada	MA
6	Rana	52	World Cup	Athlete & coach	Iran	MA
7	Roya	30	Asian games	Referee	Iran	MA
8	Toba	37	Word cup	Athlete & coach	Iran	PhD
9	Mahshid	54	Olympic	Coach	Iran	PhD
10	Fereshteh	43	Olympic	Athlete	Iran	BA
11	Bitā	23	World championships	Athlete	Iran	BA

interpretations, which were shaped through the first authors' years of involvement in Iranian elite sport. We then identified a corpus of statements drawn from interview transcripts in which elite sportswomen described their experiences and observations of sexual exploitation during training sessions, national and international competitions, and within national sport federation buildings. We analyzed these statements as sites where sexual exploitation was problematized, rendering women's participation in elite sport conditional, risky, and regulated through Islamic moral

frameworks. We paid particular attention to how two central Islamic state policies governing sport structured the discursive conditions under which sexual harm was anticipated, normalized, and rendered difficult to contest. We further used FDA to trace the operation of technologies of power, including disciplinary surveillance, moral regulation, rumor, and threats of exclusion, alongside technologies of the self through which women were encouraged to self-monitor, remain silent, and manage risk in accordance with dominant gendered and Islamic norms (Foucault, 1988; Fahs et al., 2018). We examined these mechanisms in relation to pastoral power, whereby care, protection, and moral guidance functioned as techniques of discipline rather than safeguards (Carrette, 2013; Follett, 1986).

(Re)Producing Gendered Subject Positions through Discourses of Sexual Exploitation

First, we examine how the dominant discourse of sexual exploitation in Iranian elite sport operates as a form of power/knowledge that produces gendered subject positions rather than merely describing harmful behaviours. Within this discourse, women's participation in elite sport is problematized and rendered conditional, establishing the terms through which sexual harm is understood and anticipated in elite sporting contexts. These discursive conditions constitute elite sportswomen in Iran as vulnerable bodies under harassment, and frame their participation through a sporting system that renders them sexually accessible subjects. Sexual propositions are not understood as isolated abuses (Egan, 2016) but as practices embedded within relations of power that act upon women's possible actions. As Foucault (1982) explains, power functions as an action upon an action, shaping what individuals can or cannot do. In this context, harassment restructures sportswomen's choices, including whether to compete, resist, remain silent, or withdraw, such that even refusal is conditioned by threats of exclusion or scandal. Mitra's account illustrates how these dominant discourses are lived and reproduced in everyday sporting contexts.

A national coach explained with a saddened expression, ending her account with a bitter smile:

“When you are a man, you can socialize, move around freely, and build networks with others in other sport federations, the National Olympic Committee, and the Ministry of Sport. But if you are a woman, you will definitely be groped, you will receive sexual propositions, countless rumors will be attached to you, and many troubles will come your way. In the end, you will not reach the goal you are aiming for.”

Her account highlights how gendered mobility and professional legitimacy are differentially distributed, positioning men as legitimate actors while framing women’s participation as inherently risky and suspect. Similar discursive logics emerge in other institutional domains of elite sport. Noshin illustrated how this discourse also operates within the politics of sponsorship and access to international opportunities, where sexual favors are implicitly expected in exchange for advancement in sport. Women’s access to sponsorship, licenses, or international competition is not perceived as the result of merit alone, but becomes entangled with expectations of sexual compliance. As a result, when women achieve such opportunities, rumors often emerge that attribute their success to sexual relations with powerful men rather than to their athletic ability or professional competence. These rumors function as disciplinary mechanisms that simultaneously normalize expectations of sexual favors and undermine women’s legitimacy in elite sport. Noshin spoke with visible anger, at times raising her voice and looking directly at me as she explained:

“In Iran it is very common that the first thing they require are sexual favors in order to secure their sponsorship... When I earned an international license, they told me I got it because I slept with someone... But in Iran you never hear such accusations behind a man’s back.”

This account reveals how rumor and suspicion function as disciplinary mechanisms that police women's proper place in sport while leaving men's reputations intact. With a visibly embarrassed expression, Rana described how these gendered subject positions are reinforced through selection processes:

“Our female athletes receive inappropriate offers of a sexual nature. They are threatened that if they do not give in, they will not be sent to competitions.”

In addition, Fatemeh's voice became noticeably louder as she spoke with visible anger about the widespread nature of abuse:

“Sexual abuse is something undeniable. Women are always looked at differently, with another gaze. In Iranian sport, in these environments, no one can deny this reality.”

Within this power/knowledge regime reflected in participants' accounts, men are constituted as legitimate, mobile, and socially entitled actors, while women are positioned as inherently vulnerable, sexually accessible, and morally accountable subjects. These subject positions are shaped not only within sporting institutions but also through broader gender discourses through which femininity is constructed in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Moghadam, 2004; Nashat, 2021). This Shi'i Islamic framework shaping women's lives stands in serious tension with elite sport cultures that institutionalize identities, lifestyles, and professional standards that athletes are expected to follow (Tjørndal, 2019b). Women's public visibility, mobility, and bodily performance can therefore be interpreted as departures from normative expectations of respectable Islamic femininity and may conflict with dominant Islamic norms emphasizing modesty and restrained female visibility (Benn & Dagkas 2017; Pfister, 2010). As a result, their participation

may be interpreted through sexualized assumptions that frame them as morally suspect and therefore more readily exposed to sexualized attention or abuse.

Elite sportswomen are discursively constructed as legitimate sexual targets in the absence of effective protective laws. Women's bodies are socially produced as already marked for violation (Cahill, 2017), where vulnerability is produced through gendered relations of power rather than understood as inherent to women's bodies, constantly sexualized and disciplined through threat, which makes them appear always violable (Henderson, 2007). The pervasive threat is not violence alone but a sexualized mode of control in which the body itself becomes the terrain of subjugation (Gordon, 2018). This configuration reflects what Brewis (2001) identifies as the discursive production of men as active and potentially dangerous sexual actors and women as passive recipients of sexualized attention. Such an assumption is deeply problematic, as it reproduces existing relations of power and normalizes gendered vulnerability within Iranian elite sport.

Participation, mobility, and professional ambition are understood through the constant anticipation of sexual threat, restructuring the conditions under which women can act, refuse, or remain in sport. These relations are enacted as truth precisely because they are widely believed to be real, thereby reinforcing the subject positions of the harasser and positioning elite female athletes, coaches, and referees as recipients within everyday sporting practices. Existing sport scholarship conceptualizes harassment and abuse as forms of non-accidental violence rooted in structural power inequalities and organizational cultures, with evidence showing that risk intensifies at higher levels of performance and elite sport participation (Mountjoy et al., 2024). While this body of work has been crucial in advancing prevention, safeguarding, and policy-based governance responses (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Fasting, 2021), it remains largely focused on

managing risk rather than interrogating how dominant moral and gendered discourses actively constitute vulnerability itself.

From Protection to Discipline: Pastoral Power and Normalization

Following the 1978 Islamic Revolution, women's participation in Iranian elite sport was reorganized through two interrelated policies that were publicly presented as protective measures intended to safeguard the dignity of Iranian women, as Muslim women, and to provide morally appropriate and safe environments for their participation: mandatory hijab and Islamic dress codes, and systematic sex segregation. Both policies were framed through discourses of care, protection, and Islamic morality, positioning regulation as a necessary condition for Muslim women's legitimate presence in elite sport. The first policy, mandatory hijab and sport-specific Islamic dress regulations, required Iranian women and girls to wear loose, long garments that conceal both hair and bodily contours. These regulations were justified as mechanisms of moral protection, yet in practice they transformed women's athletic bodies into persistent sites of Islamic moral scrutiny (Saffari & Dallaire, 2026). Through continuous monitoring of appearance and comportment, elite women's bodies became objects of supervision, exemplifying a form of pastoral power in which care and guidance function as techniques of discipline rather than protection (Follett, 1986; Carrette, 2013). Compliance was framed as Islamic moral responsibility, while deviation was individualized as failure, obscuring the institutional foundations of regulation and aligning obedience with Islamic virtue.

The second policy, systematic sex segregation, was introduced to limit interaction between women and men in sport settings and was similarly justified through discourses of purity and protection. Over time, segregation became embedded across all levels of Iranian sport, from national federation governance and organizational hierarchies to sport delivery systems and access

to stadiums as spectators (Saffari, 2025). Rather than ensuring safety, this system rendered women's participation conditional upon strict obedience to norms of modesty and segregation, while reinforcing patriarchal authority over women's bodily autonomy and public presence. As McKinzie and Richards (2022) show in gender-traditional religious contexts, such arrangements shift responsibility onto women by framing regulation as care, thereby limiting their ability to recognize these conditions as coercive or structurally produced.

Drawing on the experiences of elite women, we argue that these two policies failed to produce the safe and protective environments they purported to establish. This does not suggest that sex segregation itself directly causes sexual exploitation, or that its absence would necessarily reduce such harm. Rather, participants' accounts show how segregation operates alongside moral scrutiny and weak safeguarding mechanisms to regulate women's interactions, shift responsibility onto women, constrain reporting, and obscure institutional accountability. Pastoral power is therefore not understood here as a direct cause of sexual exploitation, but as a mode of power through which discourses of care, protection, and moral guidance can regulate women's conduct and shape the institutional conditions within which sexual harm is recognized, addressed, or silenced. These policies formed a mutually reinforcing system in which religious justifications were translated into everyday institutional practices that normalized restraint as care and subordinated women within male-dominated structures. Within the dominant discourse, a striking hypocrisy emerges: the same technologies of power that conceal women's bodies through hijab, modest clothing and segregation simultaneously produce them as targets of sexual exploitation. Women experience harassment not only during training but also at international competitions, often at the hands of Iranian men and officials tasked with enforcing modesty. As one female

international referee, Roya, described the incident, she avoided eye contact and kept her gaze lowered as she recounted the proposition she had received:

“I had signed up for the referee promotion course and was waiting for the results to be announced. One day I saw that the head of the federation’s refereeing committee was calling me. I was really surprised. When I picked up, after a few minutes of talking about the course details and when the final results would come out, he said, ‘I have a cottage in the north [a well-known tourist destination in Iran] ... a quiet, secluded place. Do you want to go there with me this weekend?’ I was shocked. I literally lost my voice. I just hung up the phone”.

In the absence of effective legal protection, these arrangements create high-risk conditions for elite sportswomen, producing environments in which sexual exploitation and harassment could occur while remaining difficult to name, challenge, or report (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2002; Fasting & Sand, 2015). As one national athlete, Shahnaz, explained:

“For the boys, international competitions were like an opportunity... they wanted to release some energy... flirt... drink... have relationships... they just wanted to enjoy and have fun. But we wanted to train more and focus on competitions. ...They tried to pull us into their plans; they kept bothering us... A lot of this happens in national-team camps and international trips. And the girls who went along with these situations felt like they had a strong team behind them. But the ones who didn’t, someone like me, would get mentally tortured in those situations, exactly when you’re supposed to be focused on the most important event of your life. Many times, because of these things, which felt like extra pressure on top of training pressure, I cried at night in my room. If we told the security officer who traveled with us, if we complained, it would get bad for us, really bad. They tend to usually take the boys’ side. They say it’s your own fault; you girls must have encouraged them. Fix your own behaviour.”

As Shahnaz recounted these experiences, the pain was evident in her voice; her eyes became visibly red and she began to cry. This account illustrates how mechanisms framed as protective care operate as interactional constraints that discipline women rather than address male misconduct. Complaint procedures shift, urging them to regulate their own behaviour while legitimizing male athletes' actions. Such responses reflect institutionalized moral logics that individualize responsibility and position sexual harm as a consequence of women's conduct rather than as a product of sex-based power relations embedded within sport organizations (Pina et al., 2009; McKinzie & Richards, 2022). A similar dynamic emerges in the account of a national team coach, Toba:

“I always tell my athletes to avoid the gossip; I tell them, ‘You are girls, you have to be even more careful.’ We had a female athlete who was dating the son of one of the federation officials. When their relationship ended, that boy, backed by his father, spread the story of their relationship to everyone... even the details of their sexual relationship. They easily pushed that girl out of the national team; she just disappeared...”

This narrative demonstrates how Islamic moral surveillance and honour operate to exclude elite women through processes of normalization. The female coach's advice to be careful reflects individualized moral regulation, consistent with Carrette's (2013) account of pastoral power acting on individuals one by one while serving a collective moral order. The athlete's removal from the national team illustrates corrective discipline imposed on elite women. Even experienced female athletes and coaches reproduced these moral logics, reinforcing expectations that women must self-regulate according to ideals of purity and modesty to remain within elite sport. Care and protection thus function not as safeguards but as technologies of governance that produce self-regulation, exposing entrenched structural weaknesses in Iran's sport governance. Situated within

this broader pattern, when Islamic regulations in professional sport are framed as care in the absence of enforceable legal protections, and visible Islamic conformity is prioritized over substantive safeguarding, spiritual power normalizes unequal relations and obscures institutional accountability. As Moghadam (2024) explains, the replacement of the legal framework with a Sharia-based system institutionalizes patriarchal authority and subordinates women to male guardianship; within Iranian elite sport, this same logic produces male perpetrators of sexual exploitation as moral guardians, enabling them to frame abusive practices as forms of care rather than sexual harm. In such contexts, sexual exploitation is not prevented but rendered possible within environments presented as morally protected. This reflects a wider safeguarding failure in which responsibility is individualized and harm is depoliticized rather than addressed as a product of organizational and structural power relations (Bekker & Posbergh, 2022). Addressing these failures requires the active involvement of international sport governing bodies, which must move beyond rhetorical commitments and reconceptualize safeguarding in elite sport by assuming collective responsibility and enforcing binding accountability mechanisms across all levels.

The Production of Silence as a Strategy of Survival

We argue that the discursive construction of gendered subject positions, combined with the operation of pastoral power in Iranian elite sport, produces concrete institutional and interactional effects that render sexual exploitation systematically unreportable. These regimes do not simply regulate women's conduct; they actively generate conditions in which silence, concealment, and non-reportability become normalized modes of participation. Elite women are compelled to hide any professional collaboration with men, as disclosure carries severe penalties, including multiyear or permanent exclusion from national teams (Saffari & Dallaire, 2026). Under such conditions, experiences of sexual abuse or harassment cannot be safely reported or legally pursued.

This silence is not an individual failure but a socially organized outcome of power relations. As Patton (1989) argues, silence is structurally enforced through institutional norms, dominant moral discourses, and the anticipation of punishment. Hershcovis et al. (2021) further conceptualize this process as network silence, whereby targets, bystanders, and organizational authorities collectively sustain inaction through everyday practices of ignoring, minimizing, or deflecting harm. Empirical evidence from organizational research further demonstrates that self-reporting sexual harassment often results in retaliation, reputational damage, social isolation, and career penalties, rendering silence a rational response to anticipated institutional punishment rather than a sign of passivity or compliance (Hart, 2019).

In Iranian elite sport, male coaches, trainers, and peer athletes, often occupying central and influential positions within federations and governance structures, are acutely aware of women's lack of legal protection. This awareness produces an environment in which sexual exploitation is both enabled and protected. When exploitation occurs, responsibility is displaced onto women through discourses of lost purity, modesty, and moral transgression. Speaking entails serious risks, including exclusion, moral condemnation, and damage to athletic and personal reputation. As a result, silence is internalized as a strategy of survival rather than resistance. Within this continuum, sexual harm operates through disciplinary processes of internalization, conformity, and self-renunciation, shaping athletes' subjectivities through technologies of the self that compel constant self-monitoring and restraint (Taylor, 2019). Shame, sexual humiliation, and silence thus emerge not as individual or moral failings of elite Iranian sportswomen, but as effects of power operating through embodied athletic subjectivity. Maryam, a national athlete, stated:

“According to the rules, we were not allowed to train with male coaches. But we had a male coach that we trained with secretly. He was a well-known coach, and everyone wanted to train under him. Our training always started at 10 in the morning.

After a while, he told me, ‘You come at 9. I have special training planned for you.’ When I went at 9, I realized that no one was there except me and the coach. Training started... he came and did the exercises by touching my body, and this happened many times. He kept asking me to come earlier. At first, I thought this was just part of the training... but later I became sure that he kept rubbing up against me. I was scared to tell anyone. In our religious community no one would take my side... they would say it was my fault, that I had no right to train with a male coach, that I must have wanted it.”

As Maryam recounted this experience, her hands remained tightly clasped, her forehead appeared sweaty, and her cheeks became visibly flushed. Previous studies demonstrate how patriarchy and traditional gender roles contribute to gender harassment in Muslim countries like Iran (Low et al., 2024; Pourya Asl, 2022). Particularly, the cultural emphasis on modesty and honor reinforces harassment by placing guilt on women for their attire or behaviour, while also justifying men’s dominance. Harassment of women is thus enacted to perpetuate power imbalances and sustain a culture of traditions where women fear stigma and retaliation (Pourya Asl, 2019). Maryam’s account illustrates this dynamic clearly. Although she recognized the abuse she experienced during clandestine training sessions with a male coach, the absence of viable complaint mechanisms and the certainty of moral blame rendered disclosure impossible. Her silence reflects not ignorance but the management of risk within a punitive moral order. Similar patterns emerge across roles and levels of elite sport. A nationally recognized coach, Mahshid, spoke with a trembling voice as she described repeated nighttime harassment during international competitions and her decision to remain silent to avoid losing her position or creating controversy:

“When I was the national team coach, on several occasions during international competitions, there would be knocks on my door at 2 or 3 a.m. Many nights I couldn’t sleep

from the stress. I never said anything, only to avoid losing my job and to prevent creating controversy. I kept my head down, remained silent, and tried to stay focused on my work.”

These accounts echo Wilson and Thompson’s (2001) concept of sex-role spillover, whereby women are perceived primarily as sexualized bodies rather than legitimate professionals. Sex-role spillover helps explain how actors within national sport federations interpret harassment through gendered stereotypes, thereby legitimizing silence and deflecting responsibility. Noshin’s experience as an international referee further demonstrates how silence is actively produced through institutional responses:

“During a period when I was performing really well in competitions, I was even praised by the Asian federation. And then the rumors started. I’m single and live alone, and they took advantage of exactly that point. Some of the federation staff, who were actually my friends, began saying that I had a relationship with this person or that person... that someone had come to my place... that someone had introduced me and supported me. It really hurt me. I went to the president of the federation and said, ‘Why do you allow people to talk about me like this?’ He said, ‘Just ignore it, don’t take it seriously...’ I told him, ‘But with your silence, you’re allowing these rumors to continue.’”

Instructions to “ignore it” function as disciplinary techniques that protect organizational reputation while shifting responsibility onto women, rendering harm invisible and politically illegible. These dynamics reveal that women’s silence in Iranian elite sport is not a matter of choice, but a condition produced through a system of power relations. Drawing on our empirical findings, we theorize this condition as a regime of enforced silence in which non-disclosure is systematically produced and maintained. Silence is therefore not only a cultural or moral phenomenon but also an organizational outcome actively enforced by national sport federations, as breaking silence threatens institutional reputation, legitimacy, and public standing while

provoking political and moral controversy at the national level. National sport federations function as key enforcers, actively suppressing disclosure to preserve institutional legitimacy and public standing in a setting where exposure risks political and moral backlash. When such debates emerge around sport federations and women's sport, radical Islamist actors and clerical authorities frequently question the legitimacy of women's sport itself, portraying it as morally dangerous and incompatible with the values of an Islamic state. Under these conditions, federations are incentivized to suppress disclosure in order to protect symbolic authority and avoid religious and state backlash. Athletes' silence, in turn, reflects a calculated negotiation of risk within a punitive moral and institutional order. Silence thus operates as a technology of governance that sustains institutional stability, shields perpetrators, maintains Islamic moral order, and normalizes exploitation. Against this backdrop, speaking out about sexual exploitation entails significant personal and professional risks but also holds the potential to disrupt normalized relations of power (Taylor, 2019). As Hershcovis et al. (2021) emphasize, it is precisely this collective and relational production of silence, extending beyond victims to managers, officials, and peers, that makes sexual harm both persistent and resistant to disruption.

Conclusion

This study shows how Iranian elite sport becomes a site of heightened danger in contexts where gender, power, religion, and governance intersect. Drawing on empirical evidence from elite sportswomen, we demonstrate that opportunities for sexual exploitation are not anomalous or incidental but are structurally produced under the umbrella of Islamic policies in the absence of effective legal protection. Sexual exploitation in sport is not unique to the Iranian context; what is examined here is the particular way it intersects with religious governance, moral regulation, and sex segregation within Iranian elite sport. Our central contribution lies in showing how religiously

framed systems of protection actively generate vulnerability, rather than merely failing to prevent harm. We argue that the discourse of protection shaping Muslim women's experiences in Iranian elite sport is systematically inverted. Claims of safeguarding do not operate as insufficient or poorly implemented protections; instead, Islamic policies function as active mechanisms through which vulnerability is produced and normalized. This inversion is not simply a matter of hypocrisy or institutional inconsistency. Rather, it reflects a structural effect of pastoral power, whereby Islamic moralization and care operate simultaneously to discipline women's bodies, regulate their conduct, and foreclose the recognition of harm as abuse. The relatively high educational attainment of participants should also be considered in interpreting these findings, as education may shape access to information and the ways sexual exploitation is recognized, interpreted, and articulated. The experiences documented here therefore cannot be assumed to reflect those of elite sportswomen with fewer educational or social resources, whose encounters with sexual exploitation may be differently recognized, negotiated, or expressed. Examining how educational and socioeconomic positions shape these experiences represents an important direction for future research. Further lines of enquiry could also examine how men within elite sport may differently reproduce, negotiate, or challenge these gendered relations of power, including their potential roles as allies.

Extending existing scholarship on sexual exploitation and sport, this study demonstrates that sexual exploitation in Iranian elite sport is enabled through institutionalized regimes of sexual control that operate through moralized forms of sexual control, power, and knowledge, constructing Muslim women's bodies as inherently vulnerable and sexually accessible. By shifting analytic attention away from isolated acts of misconduct, we show how dominant moral and gendered discourses actively produce vulnerability itself, a dimension that remains underexamined

in much of the safeguarding, abuse-prevention, and sport governance literature. When the Islamic regime formally subordinates women to male guardianship across social and legal spheres, this same logic operates within Iranian elite sport to position male perpetrators of sexual exploitation as moral guardians, enabling them to frame abusive practices as forms and experiences of care rather than as sexual harm.

These findings demand serious attention from international sport governing bodies. Safeguarding frameworks that focus narrowly on individual reporting mechanisms or risk management are insufficient when harm is embedded within moral and institutional structures. We argue that international sport organizations must move beyond rhetorical commitments to Iranian and Muslim women's protection and assume collective responsibility by enforcing binding accountability mechanisms, particularly in contexts where religious discourses are mobilized to discipline women and suppress disclosure. Without confronting how power, morality, and governance actively produce vulnerability and silence, sexual exploitation in elite sport will remain not only persistent but structurally protected.

CHAPTER 7 (ARTICLE 4):

From Lost to Conditional Generation in Women's Elite Sport

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From Lost to Conditional Generation: Ethical Subject Formation in Women's Elite Sport

Author Contribution Statement

This article emerged through repeated readings of the interview transcripts as well as ongoing discussions with Dr. Dallaire regarding the themes and narratives that appeared across the interviews. Through engagement with literature on ethical subject formation within Foucauldian ethics, I developed the idea of examining women athletes' ethical formation within a historical and intergenerational framework and prepared the initial draft of the manuscript. She contributed to strengthening the arguments, refining the Foucauldian ethical analysis, and shaping the broader direction through which the article approached questions of generational difference, ethical self-formation, and changing conditions of visibility within Iranian elite sport.

Abstract

This article examines intergenerational differences in ethical subject formation among elite Iranian sportswomen within a highly regulated sport system, extending Foucauldian ethics by theorizing generation as a structuring condition of ethical subject formation. Drawing on semi structured interviews, we analyze two generational formations, the lost generation and the conditional generation. Across generations, ethical substance remains anchored in the visibility of women's participation, while the mode of subjection shifts from enforced exclusion to negotiated compromise as a condition of participation. Ethical work takes the form of withdrawal, self-regulation, and silence, while telos diverges between rupture and continued pursuit of aspirations. Ethical subject formation unfolds through ongoing negotiation between self and system under conditions of domination.

Keywords: Generation, compromise, visibility, elite sport, Foucauldian ethics.

Introduction

“Being a female athlete in our time was difficult; you had to make a choice. A woman who pursued elite sport, where training and competition became the main part of her life, had to fight against many taboos. Many of my friends couldn’t handle the pressure. They left sport, got married, and devoted themselves entirely to family life. They became what people call ‘proper women.’ But for our generation, a female athlete was not a ‘proper woman.’ A woman with a muscular body, who didn’t know much about cooking or housework.”

Sima, a 58-year-old former national athlete

Sima’s account of being an elite female athlete in Iran after the Islamic Revolution reflects more than a personal memory. Her narrative points to a historically specific moral order shaped by the religious project of political Islam and institutional arrangements that defined what forms of femininity were thinkable, desirable, and legitimate within public life. As Corsten (1999) and Pilcher (1994) argue, the concept of generation is not simply a matter of biological succession but a sociohistorical analytical category that situates individuals and groups in time. We sought in this paper to bring generational positioning into dialogue with Foucauldian analyses of ethics to understand how shifting historical, institutional, and discursive conditions shape ethical self-formation within the tightly regulated field of Muslim women elite sport. Focusing on two generations of Iranian elite sportswomen, those active in the early decades following the Islamic Revolution and those currently competing. We therefore ask how generational location shapes ethical self-formation among elite Muslim women in Iranian sport and what forms of conduct emerge under changing gendered moral and regulatory regimes.

First, we provide a historical overview of women’s sport in Iran from the pre-Islamic Revolution to the present, highlighting key transformations in institutional structures, gendered discourses, and regulatory frameworks. We then outline our theoretical framework by examining

the relationship between power, discourse, and ethics, drawing on Foucault's understanding of ethics as practices of self-relation and self-work, while drawing on the concept of generation as a sociohistorical formation that shapes orientations toward the self and the world. Finally, we present our methodological approach and empirical analysis, using narratives from women in earlier and younger generations to examine modes of conduct and self-regulation.

Iran's women's sport: Historical Contexts of Ethical Subject Formation

The evolution of women's sport in Iran reflects a complex relationship between religion, state ideology, and cultural norms. Women's sport in Iran entered a process of development earlier than in many Muslim-majority contexts (Pfister, 2005), before undergoing a significant ideological reconfiguration following the Islamic Revolution. Iranian women's bodies have long served as symbolic battlegrounds, alternately embodying aspirations of Western modernity (Hargreaves, 2000) and the ideological tenets of Islamic governance (Hargreaves, 2006). Modern physical education entered Iran in the mid-nineteenth century through transnational influences, introducing new understandings of the body and physical discipline (Jahromi et al., 2011). Christian missionaries played a central role in introducing physical education to girls' schools, framing bodily training as part of education, initially within non-Muslim communities. As upper-class Muslim girls gained access to these institutions, they encountered new bodily practices that gradually challenged existing gender norms (Chehabi, 2002). The primary obstacle they faced was a dominant moral understanding that positioned women's engagement in sport as unnecessary and incompatible with accepted feminine roles (Khosrozade & Azizi, 2021).

The year 1935 marked a turning point, as reforms including the establishment of the Iranian Women's Center, preparatory programs for girls, and the unveiling decree reconfigured the moral and symbolic status of women's bodies in public space (Khosrozade & Azizi, 2021). Under Pahlavi

monarchy modernization policies, unveiled women were positioned as symbols of state-defined progress, while structural secularisation expanded women's access to education and public visibility, rearticulating norms of appropriate feminine conduct (Tortolini, 2025). These policies facilitated the introduction of physical education in girls' schools and the creation of the Ladies' Center, which promoted women's physical fitness. In 1939, Iran held its first national women's championships in athletics and swimming, marking the formal recognition of women's athletic bodies within national sporting institutions.

Despite conservative opposition rooted in religious beliefs and gender norms (Chehabi, 2002), upper- and middle-class women negotiated emerging educational and sporting spaces, gradually expanding the boundaries of acceptable feminine conduct. Under the Pahlavi era, sport functioned as a state-sanctioned marker of progress, with women's participation promoted as part of a modernizing project that aligned bodily display with national ideals and extended into international sporting arenas, including Iranian women's debut at the 1958 Tokyo Asian Games (NOC Iran, 2023). Educational reforms during the 1960s, alongside women's enfranchisement in 1963, expanded women's access to university enrolment (Pfister, 2005) and reconfigured expectations surrounding women's participation in sport (Jahromi et al., 2011). Iranian women's participation in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and the hosting of the 1974 Asian Games in Tehran further institutionalized the visibility of female athletic bodies within international sport (Brown & Connolly, 2010; Hareuveny & Blanga, 2023). However, despite expanded access to education and public visibility during the Pahlavi monarchy, these transformations were not accompanied by subjective secularization. The rapid pace of change prevented these shifts from becoming deeply embedded within society, leaving women's participation largely shaped by externally defined

norms, even as limited counter-discourses emerged through journals and educational spaces (Tortolini, 2025).

Post-Islamic Revolution

In the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, women's public presence was sharply constrained as dominant moral discourses reasserted women's roles within the family and private sphere (Nashat, 2021). In the first two decades following the Islamic Revolution, women's sport was reconfigured within a project of moral regulation aimed at producing the ideal of the virtuous woman, redefining the boundaries of women's visibility, bodily autonomy, and public participation through compulsory veiling and the disciplining of feminine conduct (Tortolini, 2025). Women's bodily autonomy and public participation were curtailed through regulation of clothing, movement, and public conduct (Kohan, 2022). Elite women's sport, still in its infancy, was effectively stalled by policies emphasizing modesty, traditional gender roles, and social control (Paidar, 1997), a situation further intensified by the confinement of women's physical activity to largely sex-segregated and supervised settings (Chehabi, 2002). Nonetheless, women-only institutional structures gradually emerged to regulate participation within ideologically defined moral boundaries (Brown & Connolly, 2010). However, public competition remained contentious. Some religious authorities endorsed private, non-competitive activity for women but rejected public or international competition (Yousefi et al., 2024). International participation was restricted to sports compatible with Islamic dress codes, such as shooting and chess (Jahromi et al., 2011).

Since the 1990s, Iran has established women's sport organizations within a gender-segregated framework, including the Muslim Women's Sports Federation (MWSF), the Islamic Countries Women's Sports Federation (ICWSF), and the National Women's Sports Administration (NWSA), under the Deputy President for Women's Sport (Steel & Richter-Devroe, 2003). In a

patriarchal and religiously conservative society, women-only structures became the only means through which the near dormant body of women's elite sport in Iran could remain alive after years of inactivity. The 1990s also brought the reestablishment of national women's teams and renewed competition under hijab-compliant uniforms (Jahromi et al., 2011). A notable moment occurred in 1996 when Lida Fariman participated in the Olympic Games in shooting, ending a 32-year Olympic absence (Malanski, 2024) and marking a limited re-entry of Iranian women into international competition. Within this context, the Muslim Women's Games, held in Tehran between 1993 and 2005, emerged as a women-only multinational sporting event designed to enable Muslim women to engage in competitive sport while adhering to the principles of Sharia. Women occupied all leadership and operational roles, including athletes, spectators, judges, journalists, doctors, and coaches, while men were permitted to attend only the opening ceremony. The final edition in 2005 brought together 1,587 athletes from 39 countries, positioning the Games as a flagship initiative in women's elite sport (Brown & Connolly, 2010).

Contemporary Period

Social and cultural transformations associated with exposure to Western lifestyles, which began prior to the Islamic Revolution, were disrupted but not extinguished, becoming visible by the end of the second post-revolutionary decade through a gradual reconfiguration of the "woman question" in Iran (Tortolini, 2025). As Friedl (2009) notes, processes of individuation that predated the revolution accelerated in the Islamic Republic, accompanied by growing demands for autonomy and the freedom to make life choices, resulting in patterns of behaviour characterized by assertion, demands, and confrontation with paternal or fraternal authority.

These broader shifts extended into women's sport. From the early 2000s onward, Iranian women gradually re-entered international competition as select disciplines obtained authorization

under Islamic dress regulations, enabling limited but symbolically significant visibility. During the twenty-first century, the arrival of foreign coaches, alongside the certification of Iranian coaches and referees, contributed to the partial professionalization of women's sport (Hosseini Khah, 2018). A landmark moment occurred in 2016 when taekwondo athlete Kimia Alizadeh became Iran's first female Olympic medalist by winning bronze at the Rio Games. Her achievement challenged dominant gender norms, inspired a new generation (BBC, 2019).

Team sports also witnessed significant milestones, as the Iranian national women's kabaddi team won a historic gold medal at the 2018 Asian Games and accounted for 31% of Iran's total medals at the 2022 Hangzhou Asian Games. Despite these developments, women's sport in contemporary Iran remains embedded within restrictive moral and institutional frameworks governing bodily visibility and participation. Gendered dress codes and segregation policies continue to shape women's athletic participation (Saffari, 2025), while ideologically shaped decision-making structures delimit the conditions under which women athletes pursue elite sport (Brown & Connolly, 2010). As a result, women's access to sport remains uneven across disciplines, with persistent exclusions justified through regulatory discourses surrounding bodily visibility and religious propriety (Enderle, 2021; Rahbari, 2019).

Ethics, Generation, and Ethical Subject Formation in Sport

Ethics, rather than referring to abstract moral principles or universal norms, can be understood as a historically situated and embodied process through which subjects are formed (Diprose, 1991). Derived from the Greek term *ethos*, meaning both character and habitat, ethics points to habitual ways of living shaped through repeated practices within specific social and material conditions (Scott, 1998). Such an understanding shifts ethical inquiry away from rule based moral judgment toward an analysis of how subjects actively constitute themselves within

historically structured environments, a move most clearly articulated in Michel Foucault's later work.

Foucault (1986) described morality as a system of rules and defined ethics instead as a practice of self-formation: the reflective relationship individuals establish with themselves as they seek to act morally. He identified four interrelated aspects through which individuals constitute themselves as ethical subjects: ethical substance, mode of subjection, ethical work, and telos (Foucault, 1985, 1986). Ethical substance refers to the aspect of the self identified as the primary material of moral conduct, that is, the dimension of behaviour, identity, or embodiment deemed in need of ethical work (Denison & Markula, 2026). Mode of subjection concerns how individuals recognize their obligation to a moral code and establish their relationship to normative expectations within relations of power (Foucault, 1985). Ethical work refers to the practical and reflective activities through which individuals actively shape themselves as ethical subjects in relation to these norms. Finally, telos denotes the broader existential aspiration or mode of being toward which ethical practice is oriented, providing direction and coherence to the process of ethical self-formation (Foucault, 1986; MacKay & Dallaire, 2013).

A growing body of sport scholarship has drawn on this Foucauldian framework to move beyond analyses of discipline, surveillance, and normalization, examining sport as a site of ethical self-formation, although problematization has often been conceptualized as an explicit and rational process (Crocket, 2017). Pringle & Hickey (2010) demonstrated how athletes negotiate moral codes embedded in sporting cultures, showing that ethical subject formation emerges through engagement with power rather than simple obedience or resistance. Similarly, Kuklick (2023) illustrated how athletes problematize dominant sporting truths and reorient their self-governance through ongoing ethical work. Studies of women athletes further show how ethical self-formation

unfolds through practices of interpretation, self-presentation, and negotiation of gendered discourses. Thorpe's (2008) analysis of female snowboarders showed how athletes assessed, reproduced, and resisted dominant media representations of femininity, while MacKay and Dallaire (2013) showed how female skateboarders constituted themselves as ethical subjects through the collective production of a sport blog. Athletes identify dimensions of their embodiment, identity, or conduct as ethically significant, negotiate their relationship to governing norms, engage in practices of self-work, and orient their conduct toward particular ways of living (MacKay & Dallaire, 2013; Pringle & Hickey, 2010; Gerdin, 2023). Collectively, this literature shows that ethical self-formation in sport is situated, relational, and shaped by historically specific conditions.

Research on different generations in sport, elite sport, and women's sport has become highly compartmentalized, with studies of earlier and younger athletes developing in parallel but rarely intersecting. While ethical practices are widely understood as historically situated, generational location has seldom been theorized as an analytical lens through which ethical self-formation is differentiated. Sociological theories of generation provide a way of engaging this limitation. Mannheim conceptualized generations not as biological cohorts but as sociohistorical formations constituted through shared experiences of particular historical conditions, producing distinct orientations toward the world (Mannheim, 1952). Generation in this study is defined through participants' positioning within historically specific periods of post-revolutionary Iranian sport and the distinct conditions shaping women's participation within those periods. Chronological age and birth cohort serve as contextual markers, while generational membership is primarily determined by shared sociohistorical location. Generational location does not imply homogeneity. Following Mannheim (1952), different generational units may coexist within the

same sociohistorical location, reflecting different responses to shared historical and social conditions. Subsequent scholarship emphasizes that generations emerge through collective interpretations of historical events, functioning as dynamic sites of meaning-making and action (Pilcher, 1994; Foster, 2013). Within elite sport, however, generation remains underutilized as a framework for examining how ethical subject formation varies across historically distinct contexts.

While this body of work has been crucial in advancing analyses of ethics and ethical self-formation in sport, it has largely been developed in Western or relatively liberal sporting contexts, where participation is commonly assumed to rest, at least in part, on moral alignment or belief in governing norms (MacKay & Dallaire, 2013; Pringle & Hickey, 2010). Consequently, less attention has been paid to how ethical subject formation unfolds within highly regulated and coercive sport systems particularly religious political regimes characterized by compulsory moral codes, sex segregation, and state oversight. In such contexts, elite women athletes navigating mandatory dress codes, restricted bodily visibility, and ideologically shaped institutions remain insufficiently examined. This gap reflects broader critiques that women's sport, especially women's elite sport in non-Western settings, continues to be theorized through frameworks derived primarily from men's experiences (Fraser & Kochanek, 2023). Attending to generational location, this study examines how shifting historical, discursive, and institutional conditions configure different ethical substances, modes of subjection, forms of ethical work, and ethical aspirations.

Methodology

To examine elite sportswomen experiences within shifting contexts, semi structured interviews were conducted with athletes, coaches, and referees who had represented Iran in international sporting events at least once during their careers. All 26 interviews were conducted in 2025 via video call and, following participants' verbal consent, were audio recorded. The study

received ethics approval from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board (ref # H-04-25-11346). Given the sensitive political and social context of Iranian women's elite sport, confidentiality procedures were discussed with participants. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and identifying details such as specific sports, competitions, and dates were anonymized or omitted, unless participants explicitly requested to be identified.

Drawing on the first author's professional network within Iranian elite sport, an initial list of potential participants was developed and additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed two generational formations distinguished by age, period of sporting activity, and professional trajectories within Iranian elite sport. The distinction between these formations was grounded primarily in the historically different conditions under which participants entered and experienced elite sport. The earlier generation developed their sporting trajectories during the first post-revolutionary decades, when women's elite sport was effectively stalled and women's public and international sporting visibility was severely restricted. The younger generation entered elite sport following its gradual re-emergence, when national teams, international competition, and women's athletic visibility had become possible under tightly regulated conditions. These formations therefore reflect distinct sociohistorical locations within Iranian elite sport, with chronological age serving only as a contextual marker. The first group, referred to as the earlier generation, consisted of 17 women aged between 37 and 58 years old, including former national level athletes and international level coaches and referees whose careers unfolded within earlier post-revolutionary institutional arrangements. At the time of the interviews, five members of this generation lived outside Iran, while among those who remained, all except one were active as international level coaches or

referees. One participant had been banned from professional activity for more than ten years by the relevant sports federation due to her critical public statements.

The second group, referred to as the younger generation, included participants aged between 22 and 31 years old, comprising two referees with international officiating experience and seven athletes who had competed in Asian, world, and Olympic events. No national level coaches were included in this group, which reflects their earlier elite career stage. With the exception of one participant, all resided in Iran and were active members of national teams across different sport disciplines.

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis and Intergenerational Ethical Subject Formation

We employed Foucauldian discourse analysis to examine how elite Iranian sportswomen were constituted as ethical subjects across two historically distinct sporting regimes. Discourse was treated not as individual expression but as a historically specific system of rules and practices through which knowledge, power, and subjectivity are produced (Foucault, 1972), focusing on the conditions under which particular statements, practices, and forms of subjectivity become intelligible and legitimate within Iranian elite sport. The interview corpus was organized around two historical periods, the decades following the Islamic Revolution and the contemporary era, enabling an intergenerational comparison of continuities and discontinuities in dominant discourses. Interviews were approached as situated discursive practices rather than transparent accounts of experience (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017). Through iterative readings of the transcripts, we identified recurring discursive patterns, justificatory logics, silences, and tensions within and across generational groups. Particular attention was given to moments of contradiction, ambivalence, or strain, as these instances indicated sites where ethical reflection and reworking of self-relations were taking place under specific historical conditions.

Ethical Substance: From Erasure to Conditional Visibility of Women

We conceptualize the ethical substance not as the female body itself, but as the visibility of women's participation in elite sport. In the 1980s and 1990s, this visibility was problematized as a site of moral regulation, where appearance and mobility were subjected to ethical judgment (Foucault, 1985; Denison & Markula, 2026). For the earlier generation of women, as illustrated by Sima's account, such visibility was constructed as a deviation from dominant ideals of proper womanhood (Kohan, 2022), rendering women's participation morally problematic rather than socially legitimate. This moral coding operated through the regulation of visual representation, restricting women's presence within dominant discursive spaces (Wyn Schofer, 2005). As Tannaz, a 52-year-old athlete from the earlier generation, explains:

“One of the biggest sorrows for all the athletes of my generation is that we do not have a single proper photograph from our athletic careers. We were not allowed to take photos at competitions, training sessions, or even medal ceremonies. If any photos from that time still exist, they were taken secretly from far away. We had to trick security guards just to get a camera into the competition hall, sometimes with the help of the team doctor, just so we could have at least one image from one of the most important moments of our lives. At the Islamic Solidarity Games, because I was part of the technical staff, the organizers finally allowed filming, but only on the condition that the footage would later be destroyed. After the competition, we insisted that the videos not be erased and that we be allowed to watch them at least once to correct our technique. Once, we hid the camera above the ceiling, but it was discovered and we were suspended.”

During the three decades following the Islamic Revolution, some elite sportswomen withdrew from elite sport altogether, some pursued migration, and others continued to train within private settings. Elite sportswomen were compelled to comply with an ethical order that rendered them hidden and excluded them from public recognition. Ethical substance was sustained through

the regulation of visibility, as athletic practices were confined to spaces outside public recognition and excluded from symbolic and ethical recognition (Mellick & Fleming, 2010). In this period, such visibility was constructed as incompatible with sanctioned ideals of femininity, rendering it morally problematic and the visibility of women's participation in elite sport was constituted as an object of moral governance rather than sporting evaluation (Cordner, 2008; Wyn Schofer, 2005).

Nearly half a century later, the ethical substance remains largely unchanged, as the visibility of the female athletic body continues to be problematized, even as its mode of governance has shifted, allowing for forms of controlled visibility that can be selectively mobilized. In the years following the Islamic Revolution, a range of restrictions grounded in Sharia were imposed on women, regulating the conditions under which their visibility in public and athletic spaces could be expressed, controlled, and rendered acceptable. Those who remained in public life were compelled to conform to new Islamic codes that strictly regulated how their visibility could be expressed, often rendering them nearly invisible in public space (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2021). For what we refer to in this study as the lost generation, elite sporting trajectories were suspended before they could fully take shape; their athletic futures were suddenly silenced within a regime of exclusion and enforced invisibility. By contrast, we conceptualize the younger cohort as the conditional generation, whose participation occurs within a regime of conditional visibility rather than total erasure. We conceptualize conditional visibility as regulated forms of appearance. Accounts from elite sportswomen in the younger generation illustrate that participation is permitted only under tightly regulated conditions that govern how and when visibility can be expressed. Here, such visibility is no longer framed as deviant femininity, but as a normalized form of acceptable womanhood subject to continuous moral regulation. As one participant's account illustrates the tightly regulated conditions under which visibility is permitted:

“We are sent to many international competitions and know red lines very well. Without permission from the coach or security, we’re not allowed to go to certain places or communicate with players from other teams. We’re not supposed to take photos with other players. We know what we can say and what we shouldn’t say in post-game interviews. There are sensitivities around hijab, taking photos, and interacting with other teams. Even if no one says it directly, you know you have to follow the rules. And we do follow them, because otherwise you can be removed very easily. No one wants to be removed.”

Following the Islamic Revolution, the visibility of women’s participation in sport shifted from complete erasure to tightly controlled forms of appearance, not as a sign of ethical progress or expanded autonomy, but as its incorporation into a state-defined model of legitimacy. What is transformed, therefore, is not the ethical substance itself, anchored in women’s visibility, but the mode through which that substance is problematized and governed (Denison & Markula, 2026). As Markula and Pringle (2007) argue, the Foucauldian subject is reshaped through changing relations of power that organize how subjects can appear and be governed. Our findings extend this insight by demonstrating that, in post-revolutionary Iran, the ethical substance remains anchored in the visibility of women’s participation, while the form of subjectivity shifts from erasure to conditional visibility under changing regimes of governance. These generational experiences reveal a continuity in the moral regulation of visibility within Iranian elite sport, even as the conditions under which that visibility is governed have been reconfigured. The transition from erasure, which characterizes the lost generation, to the regulation and instrumentalization of conditional visibility signals a transformation in the technologies of power.

Mode of Subjection: Compromise as a Condition of Elite Sport Participation

The mode of subjection concerns how a sportswoman establishes her relationship to a given moral code and how she comes to understand why she should engage in a particular ethical task

(MacKay & Dallaire, 2013). Iranian elite sportswomen came to understand that abiding by the norms imposed by the state was the only way to remain within elite sport and pursue their sporting ambitions, not because they believed in these norms, but because non-compliance resulted in exclusion. As Mahshid, 54, explains

“The peak of my playing career coincided with the early years of the Revolution. Because we were women, we were pushed to the margins of sport and effectively wasted as athletes. We had no international opportunities. It felt as though we were an extra burden on the sports system. Nothing was said explicitly, but in practice the message was clear: go home, professional sport is not for you. At that time, I trained only for myself. I lowered my expectations of sport, because I knew we would not be given opportunities.”

For the earlier generation, subjection was shaped by constrained engagement with the imposed moral code, as limited opportunities led women to adjust their expectations, retreat from visibility, and regulate their ambitions in order to remain intelligible within elite sport (Isard et al., 2023; Gerdin & Pringle, 2025). Aso, as an earlier referee said:

“I was a referee; I was not morality police. I was responsible for enforcing the rules of the game, not for controlling female athletes. They would tell me, ‘Stop the match, give a card, because her hair is showing, because her sleeves are rolled up.’ I would say, ‘I’m not that lacking in dignity to become morality police. And I don’t allow you to ask that of me either.’ I was reprimanded many times over this. But I did not accept playing the role of a moral enforcer. Because of this, I eventually decided not to continue refereeing”

These narratives illustrate that subjection operates through unequal relations of power while producing differentiated responses: some women comply strategically as a condition for remaining within elite sport, whereas others reject the imposed norms and exit when such compromise becomes untenable. For what we conceptualize as the conditional generation, elite

women are included within elite sport only if they abide by the imposed moral code, making compliance a condition of participation rather than a reflection of belief. As one elite female referee, 30, reflects:

“I have accepted everything: the hijab, the restrictions, the rules. All of these are imposed on us as strict regulations. They may go against my personal beliefs, but when you attend international events as a representative of your country, you naturally feel a sense of responsibility to cooperate and comply, because you do not want to jeopardize your position.”

A similar logic appears in a national team athlete, 23:

“I’ve never been someone who stands up and asks why things are this way. I haven’t objected so far, because with the smallest objection, you’re easily pushed out of the national team and even banned from playing for your club. There’s honestly nothing we can do. I haven’t objected, and so I haven’t faced any pressure”.

In this study, the mode of subjection is best understood as negotiated compromise rather than moral alignment, departing from existing literature in which subjects are assumed to adopt and internalize the moral code they follow (MacKay & Dallaire, 2013; Pringle & Hickey, 2010). Iranian elite sportswomen conform to imposed norms not as a reflection of belief, but as a condition of participation, enacting compliance in the absence of moral alignment and, at times, through subtle forms of everyday resistance (Isard et al., 2023). This form of compliance challenges Foucauldian assumptions that ethical subject formation necessarily involves self-affirming agency, suggesting instead that subjection may operate as a technology of survival under conditions of domination.

In both generations, the mode of subjection is organized around a moral code that defines the conditions of participation and the boundaries of conduct and legitimacy in elite sport. However, the primary difference lies in the form through which subjection is enacted. For the lost

generation, subjection operated through partial resistance to the imposed moral code and compromise in adhering to it sufficiently to reproduce themselves as elite sportswomen; without engaging in the practices imposed by the moral code, they could not transform themselves as elite sportswomen. This form of subjection must be understood within a broader condition of domination in the early decades following the Islamic Revolution (Munro, 2003), when freedom was not promoted as a social or moral value, particularly for women, but was instead associated with moral transgression or disobedience to religious authority (Nashat, 2021). Under such conditions, only a singular and narrowly defined form of legitimate female presence in public space was rendered intelligible, one fundamentally incompatible with women's participation in elite sport. Ethical and social horizons were thus structurally foreclosed, rendering exclusion not a consequence of individual incapacity but the defining condition of what constitutes the lost generation. By contrast, for the conditional generation, subjection operates through conditional inclusion and disciplined visibility. Continued participation depends on compliance and sustaining one's intelligibility as a legitimate national representative. In this configuration, obedience functions as a strategic condition for maintaining one's position within elite sport, and professional survival depends on adherence to the imposed moral code.

Ethical Work as Self-Alignment: The Impossibility of Dual Moral Commitment

Ethical work refers to practices through which individuals act upon themselves to constitute themselves as ethical subjects (Foucault, 1986), emerges in participants' accounts as a reflexive process of self-formation in relation to their own moral values. Across narratives, ethical work is articulated not as passive obedience but as an ongoing effort to remain true to one's own moral code while negotiating tensions with the demands of elite sport and institutional authority. Among women of the lost generation, ethical work often unfolded through moments of critical

questioning that disrupted taken-for-granted expectations surrounding national representation and moral conduct. Nazi, 44, for instance, describes a process of self-interrogation through which her long-held roles as a national athlete and coach came to appear misaligned with her sense of self.

“At some point I started asking myself: why? Until when? Why should I keep playing a role that was never really me? It was enough. I spent years playing for the national team; years coaching the national team. I no longer wanted to worry about photos or videos of me without hijab coming out. I wanted to be free. I want to wear the clothes I feel like wearing. I don’t want to be afraid anymore of being summoned by the federation’s security office or the Ministry of Sport. I want to feel life. It no longer mattered to me what the federation wanted. I felt like my entire life had become sport and relationships that were not worthy of me. That space pushed me to a point where I left everything behind. I exiled myself to {country name}, and now here, I have made a new person out of myself.”

Her account illustrates how the conditions imposed to produce oneself as an elite sportswoman became too far removed from her own moral code, such that she could no longer sustain alignment with her own moral code while remaining within elite sport. After more than twenty-five years in elite sport, she ultimately stepped away. A related form of ethical work emerges in the account of another national-level athlete with Olympic experience, illustrating attempts to remain within elite sport through self-regulation.

“At first, I thought that if I wanted to survive in the Iranian sport system, I had to work on myself. I learned how to control myself so that less pressure would be placed on me. I tried to distance myself from external issues and focus only on training and performance. But eventually, I realized that it was not working. No matter how much I tried to remain detached, I kept finding myself drawn into conflicts under one pretext or another. At some point, I felt that I should not have to pay such a high personal cost for sport, for medals.”

Her account shows how ethical work initially took the form of self-regulation and self-control, but ultimately failed when the personal cost of conforming to imposed demands became too high to sustain alignment with her own moral code. As one national-level athlete, 24, states:

“Many times, for the benefit of my sport, so that my father’s efforts would not be wasted, and for my own dream, I tried to align myself with all the things that I myself did not believe in. By looking at the fate of champions who were a few periods before me, I learned how to behave, and I try to adjust my path in a way that my sporting future and all the efforts I have gone through so far are not put at risk.”

This account illustrates how ethical work can involve aligning oneself with practices one does not believe in. Another national team athlete, 23, recounts how ethical work involved pre-emptive self-restraint in response to explicit warnings from sporting authorities:

During the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, the federation president said, ‘You are not allowed to express your opinion; you are a national athlete, these issues do not concern you.’ I did not want to give the federation an excuse to remove me from the national team, so I decided to deactivate my social media accounts myself.

Here, ethical work takes the form of anticipatory self-restraint, where silence and self-censorship are enacted to avoid exclusion. Across these accounts, ethical work ultimately reveals the impossibility of sustaining alignment between one’s own moral code and continued participation in elite sport. Despite generational differences, ethical work across generations cannot be reduced to overt resistance or explicit opposition to dominant structures. These

narratives reveal the impossibility of sustaining alignment with both one's own moral code and continued participation in elite sport under imposed conditions. What differentiates generations, therefore, is not simply the form ethical work takes, but its ethical orientation. Ethical work is not directed toward maintaining the ethical substance but toward conforming to one's own moral code, rather than the one imposed by the Islamic state and national sport federations required to remain within elite sport.

For the lost generation, ethical work more often involved withdrawal, refusal, or a radical reorientation of the self beyond elite sport. These practices can be understood through what Hollander (2019) conceptualizes as indifference as resistance, signifying disengagement from imposed loyalties and authoritative structures. Withdrawal, refusal, and self-exile thus constituted a form of agency that disrupted regulated loyalty within Iranian elite sport. By stepping away, these women refused complicity in a moral order that rendered their athletic bodies ethically suspect. For the conditional generation, ethical work appears as strategic self-regulation, calculated silence, or selective compliance aimed at sustaining participation. These practices are historically situated techniques through which athletes actively constitute themselves as ethical subjects within the limits of elite sport. Consistent with Foucault's technologies of self, ethical work reflects processes of problematizing identity through self-formation (Markula-Denison & Pringle, 2007). Practices such as silence, self-regulation, and withdrawal thus signify distinct modalities of ethical agency within unequal power relations, rather than an absence of agency, and reveal, for elite Iranian sportswomen, the impossibility of dual alignment between one's own moral code and continued participation in elite sport.

Dual Telos of Ethical Subject Formation: Between Authenticity and Aspiration

Telos refers to the kind of person an individual aspires to become through moral action (Foucault, 1985; MacKay & Dallaire, 2013). Within disciplinary regimes, institutional demands align aspirations with dominant norms (Diprose, 1991). In this study, however, telos does not take a single form. Rather, it is marked by tension between being true to oneself and pursuing individual aspirations in elite sport. Among some athletes, this tension is resolved through an ethical rupture with the dominant elite sporting order in Iran. As one athlete from the earlier generation explains:

“During the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, when people were out in the streets and were being killed, I made my decision right then. I said to myself that I would no longer step onto a football field where I was expected to play under compulsory hijab, only for them to later say, ‘See, hijab is not a limitation. ’I would no longer go onto a field where my presence was used to legitimize their rhetoric. From that point on, continuing to play within their frameworks, the frameworks of the Islamic Republic, no longer made sense to me.”

Her decision reflects a rejection of a way of being that had been imposed for years in elite sport. As she explains, continuing to “play within their frameworks” no longer made sense, as her participation had come to reproduce the order she sought to resist. Here, telos is realized through ethical withdrawal, as she chooses to be true to herself. In contrast, for other athletes, telos is oriented toward achieving individual aspirations in elite sport. Bitā, 23, described elite sport as the central axis of her existence:

“I live because of the love I have for {name of sport}, and that is what truly keeps me alive. Competing changed my life. Over time, traveling for competitions helped me find my real self. I went through experiences that helped me get to know who I really am. In the end, it is enough for me to be good for myself and to be better than the person I used to be. I have put my whole life into competition, and right now, I do not have the ability to walk away from it or distance myself from it.”

Similarly, Sahar stated:

“The only thing that really feels enjoyable to me is reaching those medals I’ve dreamed about in my mind. I know it’s hard, it’s painful, and it comes with injuries. I feel like if I achieve those, my life will feel complete, it will feel beautiful. Other than that, I don’t feel like I have any purpose in life.”

In these accounts, telos is not oriented toward exit, but toward achieving individual aspirations through continued participation in elite sport. They describe staying in sport not because they agree with its conditions, but because it is the only way to pursue what they want to become. Their engagement, therefore, is not simple alignment with the system, but a choice to remain despite its constraints. For many of these athletes, elite sport also provides a space for self-expression within limits. In a context where mobility, visibility, and decision-making power remain constrained, it offers a meaningful field for identity expression (Saffari & Heidari, 2022). This orientation aligns with broader social shifts in which younger Iranian women increasingly pursue independence, education, and public presence (Mortazavi & Poelker, 2017; Amir-Ebrahimi, 2021), moving beyond prescribed post-revolutionary ideals of femininity (Tortolini, 2025). Telos here is oriented toward achieving individual aspirations, even if this requires continuing within a system, they do not fully accept (Salehi et al., 2020).

In this formulation, moral action among these athletes is directed toward achieving their individual aspirations through continued engagement in elite sport, rather than withdrawal. Elite sport becomes the primary means through which they pursue what they want to become, even while remaining within regulatory frameworks governing bodily visibility and moral conduct (Saffari, 2025; Brown & Connolly, 2010).

These accounts point to a tension in the telos of ethical subject formation, rather than a fixed generational divide. For some athletes, telos is realized through rupture, as moral integrity requires disengagement from a sporting order they no longer accept, particularly amid intensified

state regulation of women's bodies (Tortolini, 2025). For others, telos is oriented toward achieving individual aspirations within that same order, even though this requires remaining within conditions they do not fully accept. In both cases, telos is not based on alignment with institutional norms, but reflects different ways athletes negotiate the tension between being true to themselves and pursuing their aspirations within broader configurations of religion, state ideology, and gendered power shaping Iranian women's athletic participation (Hargreaves, 2006; Jahromi et al., 2011).

Conclusion

This study examined how generational location shapes ethical self-formation among elite Muslim women in Iranian sport under shifting gendered moral regimes. We demonstrate that ethical subject formation is structured by historically specific configurations of religion, state ideology, and gendered governance, extending Foucauldian ethics by conceptualizing a mode of subjection grounded in negotiated compromise rather than moral belief. Challenging dominant assumptions in sport ethics scholarship that compliance reflects moral alignment, this study shows how ethical self-formation can emerge through compromise under conditions of domination.

We distinguish between two sporting generations: a lost generation, whose athletic trajectories were shaped by exclusion and enforced invisibility, and a conditional generation navigating tightly regulated forms of participation and visibility. These sporting generations emerged through historically different conditions within Iranian women's elite sport. The distinction therefore does not rest simply on age or birth cohort, but on transformations within the sporting field itself. The lost generation entered and developed their sporting trajectories during the early post-revolutionary decades, when women's competitive opportunities, public visibility, and international participation were severely restricted. The conditional generation, by contrast,

entered a sporting field in which national teams, international competition, and greater public visibility had gradually become possible, although participation remained conditional upon compliance with gendered and religious regulations. These generational formations should not be understood as representing all Iranian elite sportswomen within the corresponding sociohistorical periods. They reflect dominant patterns identified within this sample and provide an analytical basis for examining differences in ethical subject formation. Across generations, the ethical substance remains anchored in the visibility of women's participation, even as the technologies governing that visibility are reconfigured. Finally, we show that telos is neither singular nor generationally fixed, but oriented toward an ongoing tension between being true to oneself and achieving individual aspirations. Ethical subject formation in Iranian women's elite sport thus unfolds not through moral alignment, but through sustained negotiation between self and system under constrained conditions of participation.



CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

8.1. Concluding Reflections on Power, Ethics, and Subjectivity in Elite Women's Sport

What began as an exploration of the lived experiences of women in Iranian elite sport developed into an analysis of the discursive and institutional conditions within which these experiences take shape. This dissertation proceeds from the premise that elite sport is not merely a site of individual performance, but a field in which power, morality, and institutional arrangements converge to shape experience. What initially appeared as individual narratives revealed, through analysis, recurring and structured patterns, demonstrating that these experiences are not isolated exceptions, but the outcomes of shared and continuously reproduced conditions. What became analytically visible was not simply the content of experience, but the conditions of its possibility, that is, how and why these experiences emerge within institutionalized relations of power, dominant moral norms, and specific regimes of truth.

This analytical shift makes it clear that the actions, silences, and decisions of elite sportswomen in Iran cannot be reduced to individual choice but must be understood as effects of structured conditions of action. This dissertation demonstrates that ethical subject formation in Iranian elite sport does not operate through moral alignment, but through historically situated conditions of constraint, negotiation, and survival. What emerges as central to this field is a set of persistent tensions between personal desire, institutional demands, and the limits of possible action. I hope to have shown that women's experiences in elite sport cannot be understood outside the structural conditions through which they are produced and regulated. The study shows that the elite woman in the Islamic Republic of Iran cannot be understood solely on the basis of international sporting success; rather, she is constituted as a subject within a complex configuration of power relations, moral expectations, and institutional constraints. The image of the veiled woman on the podium in international competitions, often represented through narratives of

discipline, training, and material limitations, carries deeper and less visible layers of experience that have largely been overlooked in conventional analyses of women's sport and does not necessarily reflect alignment with or endorsement of the religious norms she is seen to represent. Behind this representation, alongside the familiar pressures of elite sport and gender inequality, processes of multilayered control and continuous surveillance can be identified. These conditions produce a subject who is compelled to continuously navigate between institutional demands and personal beliefs and aspirations.

This dissertation shows that the consequences of the religiously governed sport system in Iran cannot be reduced merely to inequality or repression; rather, they give rise to a specific configuration of the ethical subject in which silence, compromise, self-censorship, and at times complete withdrawal from the field emerge as meaningful forms of ethical action. Within this framework, power not only regulates bodies and shapes subjects, but also preconfigures the horizons of what it means to act ethically, such that the possibilities of ethical action are reproduced within an established order. These findings should not be understood as suggesting that all elite sportswomen in Iran experience, negotiate, or resist these conditions in the same ways. Rather, the patterns identified in this research provide insight into how elite sportswomen who contest, negotiate, or resist the moral and institutional expectations of the Islamic Republic navigate their participation within this highly regulated sporting context. At the same time, elite sport itself requires forms of bodily visibility, public presence, competitiveness, mobility, and sustained commitment that are not always fully coherent with the Islamic Republic's prescribed model of Islamic femininity. This structural tension is therefore important for understanding the conditions within which elite sportswomen may negotiate, accommodate, or contest dominant expectations, without assuming that all elite sportswomen experience or respond to these tensions uniformly.

Experiences may also differ according to participants' religious beliefs, ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic positions, and relationships with state institutions, dimensions that were not systematically examined in the present study and therefore limit the range of perspectives represented in the sample. The composition of the sample and the timing of data collection further shape the boundaries of transferability. Data were collected in the summer of 2025, during heightened geopolitical tension and direct military confrontation involving Iran in the broader Middle East. The findings may therefore offer analytical insights into elite sportswomen navigating comparable institutional and sociopolitical conditions, while their transferability must remain sensitive to differences across sporting, historical, and political contexts.

This concluding chapter begins with a summary of the main findings of my research, bringing them together as an interconnected whole. Here, I weave together answers to my research questions concerning the ways in which mechanisms of power, surveillance, and control are employed by the Islamic Republic to regulate the bodies, conduct, and performances of elite sportswomen; the diverse forms of resistance and strategies through which elite sportswomen confront cultural and institutional constraints; and the ways in which they navigate and negotiate the intersection of state religious doctrine, governmental strategies, and the demands of international elite sport within their professional and personal lives. The findings are presented in three sections. The first section brings together the findings of the four articles to demonstrate how elite sportswomen in Iran are constituted as ethical subjects within regimes of surveillance, ideological control, moral regulation, and unequal power relations. In this section, I also show how the articles emerging from this dissertation challenge several dominant assumptions within the literature on sport, gender, and Foucauldian ethics. The second section discusses how this research contributes to scholarship by relating my findings to the literature on the sociology of sport, gender

studies, Foucauldian theories of power and ethics, scholarship on surveillance and governmentality, and research concerning Muslim women and sport within religious and authoritarian contexts. Finally, the third section discusses the doors that this research has opened and the possibilities it creates for future research.

8.2. Summary of Major Findings

The findings summarized below identify recurring patterns across the empirical material while also recognizing variation in how elite sportswomen experienced, negotiated, accommodated, and resisted these conditions.

The first article establishes the broader context by examining sport in Iran across recreational and elite levels, and across both women's and men's participation, with particular attention to the extent of state intervention. As many of the mechanisms shaping sport in the Islamic Republic are neither self-evident nor easily comparable for non-Iranian readers, this contextual grounding is necessary for situating the analysis that follows. The findings of the first article show that sport in the Islamic Republic of Iran is not merely subject to political influence, but is fundamentally reorganized within a religious logic of governance. Within this logic, sport functions as a key institutional site for the reproduction of political, moral, and religious order, with the state directly controlling the production, allocation, and regulation of sport resources.

The establishment of the Ministry of Sport and Youth, rather than leading to professionalization or transparency, intensified the centralization of power, weakened the autonomy of sport federations, and further integrated sport structures with political and military institutions. In the absence of a coherent national sport policy and under conditions of financial dependency on the state, sport-related objectives are subordinated to ideological and political priorities. As a result, a logic of survival, compliance, and alignment replaces principles of

development, equity, and governance. Power takes form through the overlapping deployment of three Foucauldian modalities. Sovereign power establishes boundaries through laws, interventions, and prohibitions; disciplinary power operates through monitoring and the internalization of obedience; and biopower regulates bodies, gender norms, and lifestyles, positioning sport as a mechanism of moral governance. At the same time, these mechanisms also generate spaces for negotiation and resistance.

These findings do not suggest that sport functions as a space of control only within authoritarian contexts, as existing sociology of sport scholarship has already demonstrated that sport in liberal democratic contexts also operates simultaneously through relations of regulation, discipline, freedom, and resistance. Rather, this dissertation highlights how the extent, intensity, and consequences of regulation differ across political and historical contexts. In the Iranian case, the possibilities for choice, self-construction, and resistance within elite sport are far more narrowly constrained by the moral, institutional, and regulatory logics of political Islam.

The findings therefore point to the importance of situating sportswomen's experiences within their specific social, cultural, political, and historical conditions rather than treating "sportswomen" as a universal or generic category. Sport is not detached from broader relations of power operating within society; rather, elite sport becomes one of the sites through which these wider moral, political, and institutional projects are reproduced, negotiated, and contested. What this dissertation demonstrates is that the forms of agency, negotiation, and ethical action available to elite sportswomen are shaped by the particular configurations of power within which they are embedded.

Building on this foundation, from the second article onward, the dissertation narrows its analytical focus to women in elite sport. The second article examines how the lived experiences of

Iranian elite sportswomen are constituted within regimes of surveillance, moral regulation, and governance organized through the political and institutional logics of political Islam, arguing that elite sport in Iran operates not merely as an athletic field, but as a gendered technology of governance through which women's bodies, conduct, and private lives are continuously regulated. Surveillance extends beyond formal institutional mechanisms to include informal and digital practices, such as social media monitoring and interpersonal relations, and is both externally imposed and internally reproduced. The findings illustrate how anticipated observation can lead elite sportswomen to engage in self-policing practices in order to sustain sport participation.

Power takes form through the simultaneous deployment of multiple Foucauldian modalities, producing athletes as both docile bodies and symbolic carriers of religious and national values, whose legitimacy depends on conformity to prescribed gendered expectations. Within this regime, elite sportswomen engage in technologies of the self to manage visibility through concealment, selective disclosure, and strategic compliance, including the maintenance of separate public and private identities, the adjustment of bodily presentation, and the concealment of relationships or everyday practices that contradict official expectations. These practices constitute ongoing ethical work through which individuals regulate what can be revealed or concealed in order to remain intelligible within dominant norms. Participation in elite sport thus unfolds through specific games of truth, in which only certain forms of femininity and morality are recognized as legitimate.

Resistance takes form within these same conditions rather than outside them. It appears across a spectrum of practices, from everyday and concealed forms such as covert training and partial non-compliance, to embodied and symbolic acts such as modifying dress and bodily presentation, to discursive refusals that distinguish between representing Iran and the Islamic

Republic, and more overt acts including leaving national teams, publicly defying compulsory norms, or migrating. These practices are often cautious, fragmented, and high-risk, shaped by the anticipation of surveillance and the need for self-protection. What emerges is a persistent tension: while elite sport functions as a site for the production of compliant and morally regulated subjects, it simultaneously generates conditions for resistance and self-reconfiguration. The findings indicate that elite sportswomen are not necessarily positioned as passive subjects within structures of power; rather, they may negotiate, reinterpret, and at times reject imposed subject positions.

Rather than treating elite sportswomen as autonomous individuals acting outside power, this article shows how women negotiate and reinterpret the very constraints through which they are governed. The article also challenges a broader tendency within parts of the elite sport literature to treat sport as politically neutral or to marginalize the constitutive role of the state and religion in shaping athletic participation and experience. The findings suggest that without attending to relations of power, surveillance, and religious governance, understandings of elite sport in such contexts remain fundamentally incomplete.

In the third article, I examine one of the central claims of the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding women, namely the protection of Muslim women. The findings indicate that the experiences of sexual exploitation documented in this study cannot be understood solely as isolated incidents; rather, they are embedded within broader conditions of religious governance, moral regulation, and unequal power relations. Rather than simply ensuring safety, the conditions documented in this study reveal how elite sport can become a high-risk site where sex, power, religion, and governance intersect, creating conditions in which sexual harm may become normalized rather than treated as exceptional. Dominant discourses of sexual exploitation operate as forms of power/knowledge that actively produce gendered subject positions. Within these

discourses, women are constructed as inherently vulnerable and sexually accessible, while men are positioned as legitimate and mobile actors. Across several women's narratives, sexual harassment emerged not simply as an exceptional event, but as an anticipated risk that shaped choices, mobility, and professional trajectories.

Practices such as rumor, sexual propositions, and coercive expectations function as disciplinary mechanisms that normalize exploitation and undermine women's legitimacy.

A central paradox emerges: policies such as mandatory hijab and sex segregation, framed as mechanisms of protection, operate instead as technologies of discipline. Drawing on the concept of pastoral power, care, guidance, and moral protection function here as techniques of control rather than safeguards. These policies regulate women's bodies, restrict interactions, and individualize responsibility, while simultaneously producing conditions in which sexual exploitation becomes possible yet difficult to recognize or contest. This inversion of protection is not incidental, but a structural effect of power, through which moral regulation obscures institutional accountability and enables abuse to be reframed as care.

Silence operates as a central mechanism of governance. It is not an individual failure, but a socially organized and institutionally enforced outcome of power relations. Through moral blame, reputational risk, lack of legal protection, and organizational suppression, women are compelled to remain silent in order to survive within elite sport. At the same time, silence functions as a technology of the self, as athletes engage in self-monitoring, concealment, and restraint to manage risk, while also operating as a technology of governance that protects institutions, sustains moral order, and forecloses accountability. Sexual exploitation is thus embedded within a broader system of gendered and religious power that constructs women's bodies as sites of both moral regulation and sexual control. Participation remains conditional, shaped by the constant

anticipation of threat and structured by relations of dependency and authority. Harm operates not only through direct acts of abuse, but also through processes of internalization, conformity, and self-renunciation that shape subjectivity at both individual and collective levels.

These findings have broader implications for how sexual exploitation in sport is understood. Existing safeguarding approaches, which rely on individual reporting or institutional mechanisms such as national sport federations, are insufficient in contexts where vulnerability and silence are structurally produced. Rather than safeguarding women from harm, these arrangements reorganize vulnerability and silence, rendering exploitation both structurally possible and difficult to contest. Under these conditions, silence often becomes a necessary strategy of survival.

In the fourth and final article, I examine how ethical subject formation among Iranian elite sportswomen is shaped by generational location within a highly regulated sport system. Ethical subject formation does not unfold uniformly, but is structured by shifting historical, institutional, and discursive conditions. Across generations, the ethical substance remains anchored in the visibility of women's participation in elite sport, yet this visibility is differently problematized over time. For the earlier cohort, conceptualized as the lost generation, visibility was rendered morally problematic and often erased, producing withdrawal, invisibility, or exclusion. By contrast, for the younger cohort, the conditional generation, visibility is permitted but tightly regulated. Participation becomes contingent upon adherence to norms governing appearance, behaviour, and interaction, producing a regime of conditional visibility rather than full exclusion. Across both generations, the findings show that compliance was not necessarily grounded in personal belief and, for many women, operated instead as a strategy for remaining within elite sport. For the lost generation, subjection operated through marginalization and constrained participation, often leading to withdrawal or refusal. For the conditional generation, it takes the form of disciplined

inclusion, where continued participation depends on strategic compliance and maintaining one's intelligibility as a legitimate athlete.

Ethical work emerges as an ongoing process of self-alignment under constraint. It does not take the form of simple obedience or resistance, but appears through practices such as self-regulation, silence, withdrawal, and selective compliance. Across many accounts, elite sportswomen described ongoing efforts to negotiate tensions between their own moral values and the demands imposed by Iranian political Islam as a condition of participation in elite sport. What becomes central here is a persistent tension between personal moral orientations and the conditions of continued participation within the system. This tension is intensified by the demands of elite sport itself, including bodily visibility, competitiveness, mobility, public presence, and sustained athletic commitment, which are not always fully coherent with the model of Islamic femininity promoted by the Islamic Republic.

For the lost generation, this often results in rupture, withdrawal, or self-exile. For the conditional generation, ethical work is oriented toward managing this tension in order to remain in sport, often at significant personal cost. Telos is not singular, but emerges as a tension between two orientations. For some athletes, it is realized through rupture, where being true to oneself requires leaving elite sport or rejecting imposed norms. For others, it is oriented toward achieving individual aspirations through continued participation, even within restrictive conditions. These orientations are not strictly generational, but reflect different ways of negotiating the relationship between authenticity and aspiration under conditions of constraint. What this study demonstrates is not simply that ethical subject formation unfolds under conditions structured by power, but that in some contexts the conditions of action become so tightly constrained that there is little space for choice in how one constructs herself as a sportswoman. Participation may therefore depend on

varying degrees of compliance with imposed norms, while negotiation, selective compliance, concealment, refusal, and withdrawal constitute different possible responses to these constraints. Ethical subject formation under domination is therefore shaped less by the possibility of freely constituting oneself than by the necessity of negotiating survival, intelligibility, and continued participation within highly restrictive conditions.

8.2.1. What the Dissertation Reveals as a Whole

The three empirical articles provide interconnected answers to the dissertation's research questions. For Research Question A, the findings identify a set of overlapping mechanisms through which Iranian elite sportswomen are regulated: state religious doctrine, sex segregation, surveillance, moral regulation, sexual exploitation, and enforced silence. These mechanisms shape women's bodies, conduct, relationships, visibility, and professional opportunities. Their operation has also changed over time, from exclusion and enforced invisibility to conditional inclusion and regulated visibility. For Research Question B, resistance ranges from calculated risk-taking, selective compliance, concealment, and subtle rule-breaking to withdrawal, migration, and overt refusal. Silence and compliance, however, do not carry a single meaning. In some circumstances, they allow women to remain in sport while negotiating or resisting particular demands; in cases of sexual exploitation, they may instead be necessary for survival when speaking carries the risk of blame, sanction, or exclusion. For Research Question C, women navigate state religious doctrine and international athletic demands through compromise, self-regulation, and careful management of visibility. They may follow rules they do not believe in to protect their sporting careers, while negotiating tensions between personal values, institutional expectations, and athletic aspirations.

Across the three articles, power, resistance, and negotiation emerge as interdependent rather than separate processes. The conditions that regulate women's participation also set the

boundaries within which they can negotiate and resist. This explains how compliance and resistance can coexist, and why the same practice, such as silence or concealment, can represent strategic negotiation in one context and constrained survival in another. It also shows that greater access to elite sport and international visibility does not necessarily mean greater autonomy: the shift from enforced invisibility to conditional visibility has changed how women are governed without removing the conditions attached to their participation. The dissertation therefore shows that Iranian elite sportswomen are neither simply compliant nor resistant. Their subjectivities are formed through continued negotiation of the conditions under which they can remain visible, pursue athletic aspirations, and act in relation to their own values.

8.3. Theoretical and Empirical Contributions

The findings of this dissertation extend beyond the empirical context of Iranian elite sport and speak to broader questions concerning power, governance, gender, and subject formation within the sociology of sport. By tracing how elite sport operates simultaneously as a site of regulation, moral governance, negotiation, and resistance, the dissertation offers several interconnected contributions that challenge dominant assumptions within existing scholarship.

8.3.1. Reconceptualizing Sport as a Tool of the State Religious Regime

What emerges from the findings is the need to reconsider how elite sport operates within centralized, authoritarian, and non-democratic political systems. Existing sociological scholarship has demonstrated that sport is deeply embedded within broader relations of power and operates as a site for the production and maintenance of social norms, values, and ideologies rather than as a neutral or autonomous domain (Coakley, 2017; Giulianotti, 2005; Hargreaves, 2006). Building on this scholarship, the dissertation conceptualizes elite sport in the Islamic Republic of Iran not simply as a politically influenced or imperfectly governed institution, but as a social and

institutional space through which political, moral, and religious orders are actively organized and normalized.

Rather than reducing state involvement in sport to questions of interference, inefficiency, or authoritarian control, the findings point to sport as a broader mechanism through which governance, morality, and political order are organized and sustained. Drawing on Foucauldian and governmentality perspectives, sport is examined as an apparatus of governance through which conduct is shaped, regulated, and normalized within specific socio-political conditions (Dean, 2010; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Rose, 1999).

This reconceptualization also challenges foundational assumptions within the sport governance literature concerning autonomy, neutrality, professionalism, and good governance. Mainstream governance frameworks frequently assume that national sport federations and National Olympic Committees operate as relatively independent entities guided by principles of transparency, accountability, and institutional autonomy (Chappelet & Mrkonjic, 2013; Geeraert, 2018; Henry & Lee, 2004). However, the findings of this dissertation demonstrate that such assumptions are difficult to sustain within highly centralized and authoritarian state systems.

Although these organizations may adopt the formal structures and symbolic language of international sport governance, their operational practices often remain deeply embedded within broader authoritarian political arrangements. What appears as institutional conformity to international standards may simultaneously function as an extension of state power within the governance of sport. This extends existing research demonstrating how states mobilize sport as a strategic resource for political legitimation, social control, and ideological maintenance while maintaining the appearance of institutional autonomy (Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Hong, 2011). Within this framework, elite sport functions as an institutional mechanism through which norms,

values, and forms of conduct are continuously shaped and aligned with broader state projects and the moral and institutional logics of political Islam.

8.3.2. Reworking Foucauldian Analytics of Power Relations in Sport

What the findings make visible is how relations of power are organized, negotiated, and sustained within a highly religious and authoritarian sporting system, extending Foucauldian understandings of sport, governance, and subject formation. Existing Foucauldian sport scholarship has demonstrated how sport shapes bodies, subjectivities, and everyday practices through disciplinary technologies, surveillance, normalization, and broader power/knowledge relations (Chase, 2006; Gerdin & Pringle, 2025; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Shogan, 1999). Rather than operating as separate modalities, sovereign, disciplinary, biopolitical, and pastoral forms of power intersect in ways that collectively shape the conditions through which women's sport is governed.

The findings also draw attention to how discourses of care, protection, and moral guidance operate within elite women's sport as mechanisms through which women's conduct, visibility, and participation are regulated. While Foucauldian scholarship conceptualizes pastoral power as operating through care, moral guidance, and the shaping of conduct and self-understanding (Carrette, 2013; Waring & Latif, 2018), the findings demonstrate how these forms of power function within elite women's sport in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Discourses of care, protection, modesty, and moral guidance operate not simply as cultural narratives, but as disciplinary and regulatory technologies through which inequality becomes normalized while institutional accountability is obscured. Historically rooted in religious institutions, pastoral power combines individualized attention, surveillance, and moral regulation in ways that produce obedient and self-regulating subjects (Stypinska & Rossi, 2025; Savic, 2023). Pastoral power becomes intertwined

with disciplinary and biopolitical forms of governance through continuous moral supervision, management of visibility, and the internalization of gendered expectations.

The dissertation also extends Foucauldian analyses of surveillance in sport. Existing scholarship has shown how surveillance and disciplinary monitoring shape athlete subjectivity within training and coaching environments (Gerdin & Pringle, 2025). Collectively, the findings draw attention to how surveillance extends far beyond formal institutional settings, shaping digital spaces, social relations, bodily presentation, and private life through both external monitoring and the internalized gaze.

The dissertation further extends Foucauldian ethics through the incorporation of generation as a sociohistorical condition of ethical subject formation. Rather than treating generation as a demographic category alone, the analysis conceptualizes it as a historically situated condition through which subjects become differently oriented toward moral codes, institutional authority, and possibilities of action. Sociological theories of generation have emphasized that generations are shaped through shared historical conditions and collective experiences (Corsten, 1999; Mannheim, 1952; Pilcher, 1994). Bringing these insights into dialogue with Foucauldian ethics (Diprose, 1991; Foucault, 1985, 1986), the dissertation demonstrates how ethical subjectivity is historically differentiated across generations and shaped by shifting regimes of power, discourse, and institutional regulation.

Existing Foucauldian sport scholarship has emphasized that ethical subjectivity emerges through situated practices of self-formation within relations of power rather than through universal moral principles (Crocket, 2017; Pringle & Hickey, 2010). Empirical studies have further shown how athletes negotiate dominant moral codes and engage in ethical work through self-regulation, interpretation, and resistance within specific sporting contexts (Kuklick, 2023; MacKay &

Dallaire, 2013; Thorpe, 2008). However, this body of research has paid limited attention to how ethical subjectivity may be historically differentiated across generations. By contrast, the findings of this dissertation demonstrate that ethical self-formation may unfold under conditions of severe constraint, where compliance does not necessarily reflect belief, but instead emerges as a negotiated and strategic mode of engagement with imposed moral orders (Isard et al., 2023). Collectively, these findings show how ethical subjectivity takes shape through historically shifting configurations of power within highly regulated sporting contexts.

While religion and political Islam are central to the analysis of governance, morality, and gender regulation throughout this dissertation, this study does not draw on the sociology of religion or examine religious authoritarianism as a distinct theoretical object. Rather, it focuses on how religiously grounded political and institutional arrangements operate through relations of power to shape the conditions of women's participation, visibility, and ethical subject formation in elite sport. Importantly, the study did not seek to assess participants' personal religiosity, levels of religious belief, or individual relationships with faith. Given the politically and socially sensitive context in Iran, questions directly concerning personal religious belief or degree of religiosity were intentionally not included in the interview guide and were not spontaneously addressed by interviewees either. Such questions may be experienced as highly sensitive and may not be answered openly or without concern about potential social or political consequences. This methodological decision was therefore intended both to minimize risk to participants and to maintain the study's primary focus on elite sportswomen's sporting experiences and how these experiences are shaped by institutional, political, and religious conditions within Iranian elite sport. Nor does the dissertation undertake a comparative analysis of different arrangements between religion and the state, including models of *laïcité* or state religious neutrality. These

questions extend beyond the theoretical and empirical scope of the present study. Bringing Foucauldian analyses of power, governmentality, and ethical subject formation into more sustained dialogue with the sociology of religion could therefore provide an important direction for future research, particularly for examining how different configurations of religion and state authority shape women's bodies, moral regulation, sporting participation, and possibilities for ethical action.

The analytical focus of this dissertation was primarily on how discourse and relations of power shape Iranian elite sportswomen's experiences. Greater attention to participants' emotional states when recounting these experiences could have added another layer to the analysis and provided further insight into how these relations of power are lived and experienced. The purpose of this dissertation was not to propose specific political strategies or pathways for institutional change, but to document and understand Iranian elite sportswomen's experiences and make visible the political, religious, and gendered discourses and relations of power that shape them. The findings show how women are disciplined through these discourses and how they respond through different forms of docility, negotiation, and resistance. Making these relations visible provides a basis for reflecting on what needs to change and how women may accept, negotiate, or resist the ways in which they are subjected to power. However, these possibilities depend on the freedom available to act, which is severely constrained within the Iranian context. The different experiences of the lost and conditional generations nevertheless show that conditions are not fixed. Small and repeated acts of negotiation and resistance may, over time, contribute to shifts in the conditions of women's participation in elite sport. In this sense, the dissertation provides a basis for understanding both the constraints under which Iranian elite sportswomen act and the possibilities for change that may emerge within those constraints.

8.3.3. Rethinking Subjectivity and Resistance in Elite Sport

A further contribution of this dissertation lies in advancing a non-binary conceptualization of subjectivity and resistance within sport studies. While existing scholarship has established that subjectivity is produced through relations of power rather than outside them, this study pushes that insight further by empirically demonstrating how athletes inhabit these relations through ongoing practices of negotiation, ambiguity, and strategic adjustment in everyday contexts (Begg & Devadas, 2014; Markula & Pringle, 2006). Rather than treating resistance as episodic or oppositional, the dissertation extends recent work on everyday resistance by showing how it operates as a dispersed and embedded mode of action within elite sport itself. Building on the insight that resistance often takes different forms, this research identifies practices such as selective visibility, strategic silence, and partial compliance as constitutive, not residual, forms of agency (Isard et al., 2023; O'Brien, 2026). In doing so, it contributes a more precise account of how athletes sustain participation within constraining environments without fully aligning with them, thereby complicating dominant analytical distinctions between compliance, resistance, and survival.

Butlerian approaches have emphasized how subjects become recognizable through conformity to the grid of cultural intelligibility constituted by dominant gendered and heteronormative expectations (Tredway, 2018). Building on this scholarship, the findings of this study demonstrate that Iranian elite sportswomen were required not only to conform to the disciplinary expectations of elite sport culture, such as sacrifice, constant self-regulation, and unwavering commitment to performance (Cosh et al., 2012; Sigvartsen & Tjørndal, 2026), but also to visibly embody the moral and institutional expectations shaped through the political logics of the Islamic Republic through adherence to Islamic dress codes, acceptable forms of femininity, public religiosity, and the presentation of an appropriate Islamic lifestyle (Afary & Anderson,

2023; Nashat, 2021). In many cases, these parallel demands existed in direct tension with one another, as the visibility, bodily display, competitiveness, and public presence required within elite sport frequently conflicted with the Islamic Republic's gendered expectations surrounding modesty, femininity, bodily regulation, and women's public conduct. These tensions were further intensified by competing expectations regarding sacrifice itself, as elite sport culture normalized total commitment, self-sacrifice, and prioritization of athletic performance for the team, while dominant gender norms within the Islamic Republic continued to position women's primary responsibilities within family life, marriage, and motherhood. Within this context, conformity often functioned less as an expression of genuine ideological belief than as a strategic mode of survival through which athletes sustained institutional legitimacy, recognizability, and continued participation within the field. However, these tensions should not be understood as producing uniform responses among elite sportswomen; rather, women may experience and negotiate the tensions between the demands of elite sport and the prescribed model of Islamic femininity in diverse ways.

Empirically, the dissertation extends existing research on Iranian women's sport by demonstrating that participation in elite sport is shaped by persistent tensions between visibility, institutional regulation, and gendered constraint. Prior research has documented the role of cultural norms, media representation, body politics, and institutional restrictions in shaping women's sporting experiences in Iran (Rahbari et al., 2019; Rahbari & Mahmudabadi, 2022; Sarabi et al., 2025). Building on this scholarship, the findings of this study further demonstrate how elite sportswomen negotiate these conditions through situated practices that enable continued participation under highly regulated circumstances. The analysis further demonstrates how national representation becomes a contested site of subject formation, where athletes actively

differentiate between identification with the Iranian nation and identification with the governing Islamic regime. International visibility, therefore, should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of ideological alignment, as public conformity and representation frequently functioned as strategic performances required for remaining within the field.

Finally, the findings point toward a more unstable and negotiated understanding of elite sport participation as a process of subject formation. While existing research has shown how disciplinary power normalizes conformity and shapes elite athlete and coach behaviour (Sigvartsen & Tjønndal, 2026), this study demonstrates that such normalization coexists with ongoing tensions between aspiration, selfhood, conformity, and institutional survival that athletes must continually manage. In this sense, the tension between selfhood, aspiration, and conformity appears not simply as an individual dilemma, but as a structural effect of power in which the conditions of intelligibility simultaneously enable participation while constraining the possibilities of ethical alignment. Taken together, these findings advance a relational understanding of agency in sport, in which participation is sustained through the simultaneous production and negotiation of intelligibility within constraining structures of power.

Before concluding, it is also important to acknowledge more explicitly how my positionality shaped this research and my interpretation of the elite sportswomen's accounts. I am an Iranian woman born in the first decade after the Islamic Revolution who grew up with a strong interest in sport. I participated in sport from childhood, later studied sport sciences at university, and then worked as both a researcher in sport management and a practitioner within Iranian sport organizations. Across these different positions, I experienced and observed sex segregation and gender inequalities in both recreational and elite sport. I always felt that we, as women, were included in Iranian sport only to the extent necessary to ensure that the image of Iranian sport was

not entirely male. I never felt that women were recognized as equally entitled to participate in sport and benefit from its opportunities and resources, not as athletes, not as sport spectators, and not as women working within sport organizations.

One experience that has stayed with me occurred during a board meeting of the National University Sports Federation while decisions were being made about sending Iranian student-athletes to the FISU World University Games. I argued that because we were using public funding allocated to university sport, female and male students should have an equal share of those resources and opportunities to participate. At the time, women also constituted a larger proportion of university students in Iran, which made the unequal allocation even more difficult for me to accept. In response, a senior male board member, himself a well-known university professor, turned to me and said in a dismissive tone: “*Madam, don’t get yourself so worked up. Women are there to adorn the occasion. We’ll send a few of them along this time.*” I did not answer him. I remained silent. I was the only woman on that board, and when I looked around at the other men in the room, I saw the same dismissiveness and indifference on their faces. After the meeting, I could feel my face burning with anger. That moment stayed with me because I felt that I could no longer tolerate this silence, or the fact that such views about women could be expressed so openly and met with such indifference. I wanted to break that silence and speak, loudly and without hesitation, about what I had experienced and witnessed over the years: the discrimination and unequal treatment of women in sport, but also their struggles, resistance, and successes within these unequal conditions. After leaving Iran, this became part of my motivation for undertaking this research and for making visible a side of Iranian women’s sport that I felt was still largely unknown.

These experiences also shaped how I approached this research. I certainly did not enter the study from a neutral position. My own experiences had made me particularly attentive to resistance and to the possibility that behaviours that might appear as docility, silence, submission, or compliance could have different meanings for women themselves. This influenced how I listened to participants and how I interpreted some of their accounts, particularly when women described remaining silent, accommodating institutional expectations, or complying with rules in order to remain in sport. At the same time, I needed to remain aware that my own experiences and interest in resistance could shape what I noticed and foregrounded in their narratives.

Importantly, nothing in the recruitment process asked women specifically to speak about docility or resistance. They were invited to speak about their experiences, struggles, challenges, barriers, and accomplishments as Iranian elite sportswomen. Resistance became prominent through the interaction between what participants told me, the questions guiding this dissertation, the Foucauldian framework, and my own interpretation of their accounts. Throughout the research process, I therefore tried to remain reflexive about my own assumptions and to return to what participants actually said. I paid attention to differences and contradictions across their accounts and tried not to assume that silence or compliance had the same meaning for every woman, or that every act of compliance represented resistance. Keeping participants' voices central meant allowing these differences and ambiguities to remain visible in the analysis.

Reflecting on my positionality also makes visible what this dissertation has not fully addressed. Although women were invited to discuss their accomplishments as well as their struggles and challenges, the research questions and analytical focus of this dissertation led me to foreground power, regulation, inequality, negotiation, and resistance. Participants also discussed other challenges in their sporting careers, including unequal financial support, limited access to

sport facilities, and inequalities in access to sport equipment and other resources. They also spoke about their successes, what they enjoyed about sport, their sense of accomplishment, and other positive experiences associated with being elite sportswomen. These dimensions of their experiences were not developed as a central part of the analysis presented here.

As an article-based dissertation, this thesis necessarily has a defined scope. While three articles are required within this format, I have included four, yet even these four articles could not address the full range and richness of what the women shared with me. I do not see the completion of this dissertation as the end of my engagement with these accounts. I consider it an ongoing responsibility to return to the experiences that remain less explored, particularly women's successes, enjoyment, accomplishments, and other dimensions of their sporting lives, and to work toward bringing these stories into future publications. Their relative absence from this dissertation should therefore not be understood as an absence of these experiences from the women's lives. Rather, they remain an important part of their stories that extends beyond the particular analytical boundaries of this dissertation. The findings presented here emerged through the interaction between participants' narratives, the Foucauldian framework, the particular questions pursued in this research, and my own situated interpretation.

8.3.4. Reframing Gender, Visibility, and Sexual Politics in Sport

The findings reframe concepts such as sex segregation, visibility, and representation within a broader framework of governance and power in Muslim women's sport. Rather than understanding sex segregation as a singular policy or cultural practice, the analysis conceptualizes it as a multi-layered technology of governance operating across institutional, spatial, and organizational levels, consistent with scholarship that conceptualizes gender segregation in Muslim contexts as a state-driven and system-wide regulatory framework rather than an isolated

practice (Tohidi, 2016). The dissertation further theorizes mandatory hijab and segregation as interconnected regulatory mechanisms that discipline women's bodies and structure the conditions of participation within elite sport, extending existing work that identifies women's sport in Muslim contexts as a key site where bodily regulation, ideological control, and political contestation intersect (Hoodfar, 2015). Inclusion, in this context, does not operate as straightforward access or empowerment. Instead, women's participation becomes organized through regimes of conditional visibility in which appearances, conduct, and bodily presentation must remain aligned with dominant moral and political norms. These findings further extend scholarship showing that Muslim women's participation in sport is shaped by broader religious, cultural, and institutional constraints (Benn et al., 2010). One of the central conceptual interventions developed here lies in the reconceptualization of visibility as an object of governance. Visibility is conceptualized as a politically regulated process through which women's bodies become intelligible within dominant ideological frameworks.

The distinction between erasure and conditional visibility demonstrates that inclusion in elite sport may reproduce, rather than resolve, gendered inequalities through tightly regulated forms of representation. Within this framework, the global visibility of Iranian sportswomen on international podiums emerges as a carefully regulated form of representation serving broader political Islam functions. Although these representations are frequently framed as evidence of inclusion, progress, or alignment with religious values, the findings suggest that they do not necessarily reflect the lived beliefs, identities, or commitments of the athletes themselves.

In this regard, the dissertation further cautions against treating veiled or hijab-wearing athletes as a homogeneous category of "Muslim women." Existing critical scholarship has demonstrated that the meanings attached to the hijab are multiple, historically contingent, and

shaped by diverse political, cultural, institutional, and personal conditions rather than reducible to a singular religious identity (Prouse, 2015). As Prouse (2015) argues, the hijab has frequently been codified through hegemonic colonial and racialized discourses that construct “The Muslim Woman” as a fixed and intelligible subject in need of regulation or protection. Consistent with this perspective, the findings of this dissertation demonstrate that the adoption of mandatory Islamic dress within Iranian elite sport does not necessarily indicate religious belief, ideological alignment, or self-identification as Muslim. Rather, for many participants, compliance with mandatory dress codes functioned primarily as a strategic and institutional condition for participation within elite sport. Within the institutional conditions examined in this study, women’s participation was more readily recognized as legitimate when bodily presentation and public visibility remained compatible with dominant regimes of power.

Rather than conceptualizing resistance as fixed opposition to the state, the findings demonstrate how elite Iranian sportswomen negotiate visibility, concealment, mobility, and self-presentation through situated, uneven, and carefully managed forms of agency. Women do not simply comply with or reject dominant regimes of power. Instead, they continuously navigate the conditions under which participation, visibility, and legitimacy become possible within and beyond Iranian elite sport. These dynamics extend beyond localized experiences of constraint and contribute to broader transnational discussions surrounding gendered surveillance, conditional inclusion, autonomy, and the politics of representation in women’s elite sport globally.

8.3.5. Challenging Policy and Safeguarding Paradigms in Sport

The findings raise broader questions concerning how sexual harassment and vulnerability are understood within safeguarding debates in sport. Existing safeguarding approaches have frequently framed sexual harassment primarily through the language of individual misconduct,

risk management, and reporting mechanisms (Bekker & Posbergh, 2022; Mountjoy et al., 2016). What becomes visible across the findings, however, is that vulnerability within highly regulated sporting contexts is not simply an individual condition, but is produced through broader political, moral, and institutional relations (McKinzie & Richards, 2022; Nashat, 2021). This shifts attention away from isolated acts of misconduct toward the wider conditions through which vulnerability, dependence, and unequal relations of power become organized within sport institutions.

A central tension emerging across the findings lies in the relationship between institutional legitimacy and organizational silence. Rather than operating merely as the absence of disclosure, silence becomes structured and reproduced through institutional practices that protect moral authority, minimize political risk, and preserve organizational legitimacy (Hershcovis et al., 2021; Patton, 1989). In this sense, silence functions not only at the individual level, but also as a broader mechanism of governance operating through everyday sporting interactions and organizational relations of power. What the findings further illuminate is how silence itself becomes normalized through institutional arrangements that constrain disclosure while simultaneously reproducing conditions of vulnerability.

The findings also draw attention to how safeguarding frameworks may unintentionally individualize responsibility while obscuring the broader structural conditions through which sexual exploitation becomes enabled (Pina et al., 2009; McKinzie & Richards, 2022). Within highly regulated sport systems shaped through the moral and institutional logics of political Islam (Saffari, 2025; Moghadam, 2004), athletes may encounter significant constraints in reporting sexual harassment due to fears surrounding exclusion, reputational consequences, moral judgment, and the loss of participation opportunities (Hart, 2019; Hershcovis et al., 2021). What emerges here is that disclosure cannot be understood solely as an individual decision, but must instead be

situated within the institutional and moral conditions through which participation, dependence, and vulnerability are structured.

Collectively, these findings challenge safeguarding approaches that rely primarily on technical procedures, reporting systems, or individualized models of protection (Bekker & Posbergh, 2022). Rather than approaching safeguarding solely as a matter of policy implementation, the analysis draws attention to the wider relations of power, governance, and moral regulation through which both sexual exploitation and the limits of institutional protection are produced (Foucault, 1978; Brewis, 2001). This raises broader questions concerning how safeguarding itself becomes shaped by the political, moral, and institutional conditions within which elite sport operates.

8.4. Future Directions and Research Recommendations

This dissertation opens a set of analytical directions that extend beyond its immediate empirical scope and invite a more expansive and transnational research agenda. While the study has demonstrated how elite sportswomen in Iran are constituted within regimes of power, surveillance, and moral regulation, its findings also point to processes that unfold across time, space, and shifting political conditions. Future research can build on this work by tracing how ethical subjectivities are not only formed within national sport systems shaped through distinct political projects, including the moral and institutional logics of political Islam, but also transformed, displaced, or reconfigured as individuals move across institutional, national, and political boundaries.

Empirically, future research could extend this analysis through comparative and transnational approaches. Examining elite sport in other state-governed contexts, as well as contrasting these findings with less centralized or differently regulated sport systems, would help

clarify both the specificity and variability of the configurations identified here. Iran should not be treated as unique in the political or ideological use of sport, as state intervention and the mobilization of elite sport for broader political, national, or religious purposes can take different forms across political systems. What distinguishes the Iranian context examined here is therefore not the existence of state involvement itself, but its particular configuration, intensity, and consequences within the moral and institutional logics of political Islam. Expanding the analytical focus beyond elite sportswomen to include sport officials, and male participants would further illuminate how relations of power, compliance, and negotiation are unevenly distributed and differently experienced across positions within the sporting field.

A particularly important avenue for future research concerns what happens to ethical subjectivity after exiting the severely constraining sport system. How are ethical dispositions shaped under conditions of surveillance, moral regulation, and constraint transformed following migration, exile, retirement, or disengagement from national sport structures? Future studies could examine whether such subjectivities are sustained, renegotiated, or actively unlearned beyond the territorial and institutional boundaries of the state. Addressing these questions would provide insight into the longer-term effects of religious governance and contribute to transnational understandings of sport, identity, and belonging.

While this dissertation has practical relevance for gender equity policy and safeguarding by demonstrating that inequalities, vulnerabilities, and harms experienced by athletes, including sex-based discrimination, sexual exploitation and abuse, and restrictions on autonomy, are structurally produced through broader political, institutional, and moral arrangements rather than individual actions or misconduct, future research should further examine how international sport governance frameworks shape these conditions. At a broader institutional level, research should

critically investigate how international sport organizations sustain, accommodate, or challenge systems that constrain athlete freedom and participation. The Iranian case provides an important context for this inquiry, particularly given the presence of Iranian athletes within the IOC Refugee Olympic Team, which highlights the complex circumstances that may lead elite athletes to seek alternative pathways for representation beyond their national sport systems. This raises important questions about the responsibilities of international sport organizations, including the International Olympic Committee and international federations, in addressing structural inequalities, safeguarding concerns, and athlete rights. Future research should also examine the role of relevant non-sport governing and institutional bodies in addressing the constraints and forms of oppression experienced by elite sportswomen. Particular attention should be given not only to the actions and responsibilities of these institutions, but also to their silence or limited engagement, and how these responses may reproduce or challenge existing relations of power and accountability. Examining these dynamics would advance debates on global sport governance, political legitimacy, human rights, and gender regulation by revealing how transnational sport structures may either challenge or reinforce national political projects and the inequalities experienced by athletes.

Finally, it is important to situate this research within conditions of political volatility and transformation. The empirical material for this study was collected in the summer of 2025, during a period of heightened geopolitical tension involving Iran and the broader Middle Eastern region. Since the completion of data collection, the political and social landscape has continued to evolve rapidly, raising questions about the durability and reconfiguration of the relations of power identified in this dissertation. Future research would benefit from longitudinal and real-time approaches capable of tracing how moments of political crisis, conflict, or systemic instability

reshape the governance of elite sport, the regulation of athletes, and the horizons of ethical action available to them.

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Appendix A: Ethics Approval Letter

28/05/2025

Université d'Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE | CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number

H-04-25-11346

Titre du projet / Project Title

Docile bodies or resistant
bodies? Tracing power dynamics
in elite Muslim sportswomen's
experiences

Type de projet / Project Type

Thèse de doctorat / Doctoral
thesis

Statut du projet / Project Status

Approuvé / Approved

Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

28/05/2025

Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

27/05/2026

Équipe de recherche / Research Team

Chercheur /
Researcher

Affiliation

Role

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Chercheur Principal / Principal
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Kinetics

Superviseur / Supervisor

Conditions spéciales ou commentaires / Special conditions or comments

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Université d'Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Le Comité d'éthique de la recherche (CÉR) de l'Université d'Ottawa, opérant conformément à l'*Énoncé de politique des Trois conseils* (2014) et toutes autres lois et tous règlements applicables, a examiné et approuvé la demande d'éthique du projet de recherche ci-nommé.

L'approbation est valide pour la durée indiquée plus haut et est sujette aux conditions énumérées dans la section intitulée "Conditions Spéciales ou Commentaires". Le formulaire « Renouvellement ou Fermeture de Projet » doit être complété quatre semaines avant la date d'échéance indiquée ci-haut afin de demander un renouvellement de cette approbation éthique ou afin de fermer le dossier.

Toutes modifications apportées au projet doivent être approuvées par le CÉR avant leur mise en place, sauf si le participant doit être retiré en raison d'un danger immédiat ou s'il s'agit d'un changement ayant trait à des éléments administratifs ou logistiques du projet. Les chercheurs doivent aviser le CÉR dans les plus brefs délais de tout changement pouvant augmenter le niveau de risque aux participants ou pouvant affecter considérablement le déroulement du projet, rapporter tout événement imprévu ou indésirable et soumettre toute nouvelle information pouvant nuire à la conduite du projet ou à la sécurité des participants.

The University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board, which operates in accordance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (2014) and other applicable laws and regulations, has examined and approved the ethics application for the above-named research project.

Ethics approval is valid for the period indicated above and is subject to the conditions listed in the section entitled "Special Conditions or Comments". The "Renewal/Project Closure" form must be completed four weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to request a renewal of this ethics approval or closure of the file.

Any changes made to the project must be approved by the REB before being implemented, except when necessary to remove participants from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) only pertain to administrative or logistical components of the project. Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes that increase the risk to participant(s), any changes that considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project or the safety of the participant(s).

Mathieu LAFLAMME

Responsable d'éthique en recherche / Protocol Officer

Pour/For Daniel LAGAREC Président(e) du/ Chair of the Comité d'éthique de la recherche en sciences de la santé et sciences / Health Sciences and Sciences Research Ethics Board

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Appendix B: English Recruitment Information Letter

Script – Information letter for recruitment of acquainted Iranian Elite Sportswomen

Initial communication:

Hello, as you know, I was previously a faculty member in Sport Management at Tarbiat Modares University. I am now a PhD candidate in Canada doing a study on the experiences of elite Muslim sportswomen. If you would like to know more about this study, let me know. I would love to interview you. If the sportswomen express interest, the PI will offer to share the following official information letter via password-protected email or to explain the study verbally in a private Zoom or Teams call, depending on the sportswoman preference and concern for privacy.

Why am I reaching out to you?

As an elite athlete/ coach/ referee, you have a unique story one that deserves to be heard. Through this research, I want to explore the challenges, barriers, and accomplishments that shape the journeys of Iranian elite sportswomen like you. My goal is to highlight your experiences, struggles, and successes so that your voice can contribute to a better understanding of women's participation in elite sports.

What does participation involve?

If you choose to participate, you will be invited to share your experiences in a confidential online interview on secure platforms—Zoom or Microsoft Teams—through the researcher's official uOttawa account. You can decide how much information you want to share, and you are free to withdraw at any time, without consequences. If you choose to withdraw, data will be destroyed (and not used in the study). The estimated time to complete the interview would be approximately one to two hours.

Your rights and confidentiality

- Participation is voluntary. There is absolutely no pressure. You may withdraw at any time, even during or after the interview, without any consequences.
- Strict confidentiality. Your identity (name, sport, competition details, etc.) will remain completely anonymized in all reports and publications.

- Ethical approval. This research follows the ethical guidelines of the University of Ottawa, ensuring privacy, respect, and transparency throughout the study.

If you are interested or have questions, please feel free to reach out. I would be honored to hear your story and include your valuable perspective in this study.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best regards,

Marjan Saffari

PhD Candidate, University of Ottawa

موضوع: دعوت به مشارکت در پژوهش درباره تجربیات زنان نخبه ورزش ایران

ارتباط اولیه:

سلام، همان‌طور که می‌دانید من پیش‌تر عضو هیئت علمی مدیریت ورزشی در دانشگاه تربیت مدرس بودم. اکنون دانشجوی دکتری کانادا هستم و پژوهشی در مورد تجربیات ورزشکاران نخبه مسلمان انجام می‌دهم. اگر تمایل دارید درباره این مطالعه بیشتر بدانید، خوشحال می‌شوم به شما توضیح بدهم. بسیار علاقه‌مندم که با شما مصاحبه‌ای داشته باشم.

در صورتی که ورزشکار علاقه‌مند باشد، پژوهشگر اصلی (PI) این امکان را فراهم می‌کند که نامه‌ی رسمی اطلاعات مطالعه را از طریق ایمیل رمزگذاری‌شده ارسال کند، یا در یک تماس خصوصی از طریق Zoom یا Teams به صورت شفاهی درباره مطالعه توضیح دهد؛ بسته به ترجیح و میزان نگرانی ورزشکار در خصوص حفظ حریم خصوصی.

چرا با شما تماس گرفته‌ام؟

به عنوان یک ورزشکار، مربی یا داور نخبه، شما داستانی منحصر به فرد دارید که شایسته شنیده شدن است. از طریق این پژوهش، قصد دارم چالش‌ها، موانع و موفقیت‌هایی را که مسیر حرفه‌ای ورزشکاران زن نخبه ایرانی را شکل می‌دهد، بررسی کنم. هدف من این است که تجربیات، تلاش‌ها و دستاوردهای شما را به تصویر بکشم تا صدای شما به درک بهتر از حضور زنان در ورزش‌های نخبه کمک کند.

مشارکت در این پژوهش شامل چه مواردی است؟

اگر تصمیم به مشارکت بگیرید، از شما دعوت خواهد شد تا تجربیات خود را در یک مصاحبه‌ی آنلاین محرمانه از طریق پلتفرم‌های امن مانند Zoom یا Microsoft Teams، و با استفاده از حساب رسمی پژوهشگر در دانشگاه اتاوا، به اشتراک بگذارید. شما می‌توانید میزان اطلاعاتی را که مایل به بیان آن هستید، خودتان تعیین کنید و در هر زمانی آزادانه و بدون هیچ پیامدی از ادامه‌ی همکاری انصراف دهید. در صورت انصراف، تمامی داده‌ها حذف شده و در پژوهش استفاده نخواهند شد. مدت زمان تقریبی برای انجام مصاحبه حدود یک تا دو ساعت خواهد بود.

حقوق شما و محرمانگی اطلاعات

- مشارکت کاملاً داوطلبانه است. هیچ اجباری برای شرکت در این پژوهش وجود ندارد و شما در هر زمان، حتی در حین یا پس از مصاحبه، می‌توانید انصراف دهید بدون اینکه پیامدی برای شما داشته باشد.
 - حفظ کامل محرمانگی؛ هویت شما (نام، رشته ورزشی، جزئیات مسابقات و غیره) کاملاً ناشناس باقی خواهد ماند و در هیچ گزارشی یا مقاله‌ای افشا نخواهد شد.
 - پایبندی به اصول اخلاقی؛ این پژوهش مطابق با راهنمای اخلاقی دانشگاه اتاوا انجام می‌شود و حریم خصوصی، احترام و شفافیت را در تمام مراحل پژوهش تضمین می‌کند.
- اگر علاقه‌مند به مشارکت هستید یا سؤالی دارید، لطفاً با من در تماس باشید. باعث افتخار من خواهد بود که داستان شما را بشنوم و دیدگاه ارزشمند شما را در این پژوهش بگنجانم.
- با سپاس از توجه و زمانی که اختصاص می‌دهید.

Appendix D: English Snowball Recruitment Letter

Snowball recruitment letter/email of Iranian Elite Sportswomen

Dear [Participant's Name],

My name is Marjan Saffari, and I am a PhD candidate at the University of Ottawa, Canada. Previously, I was a faculty member in Sport Management at Tarbiat Modares University, Iran. I am conducting research on the experiences of elite Muslim sportswomen. If you have represented Iran in an international sport event such as the Olympic Games, World Cups, FISU World University Games, Asian Games or other international competition as an athlete, coach or referee, I would love to invite you to participate in this important study.

Why am I reaching out to you?

As an elite athlete/ coach/ referee, you have a unique story one that deserves to be heard. Through this research, I want to explore the challenges, barriers, and accomplishments that shape the journeys of Iranian elite sportswomen like you. My goal is to highlight your experiences, struggles, and successes so that your voice can contribute to a better understanding of women's participation in elite sports.

What does participation involve?

If you choose to participate, you will be invited to share your experiences in a confidential online interview on secure platforms—Zoom or Microsoft Teams—through the researcher's official uOttawa account. You can decide how much information you want to share, and you are free to withdraw at any time, without consequences. If you choose to withdraw, data will be destroyed (and not used in the study). The estimated time to complete the interview would be approximately one to two hours.

Your rights and confidentiality

- Participation is voluntary. There is absolutely no pressure. You may withdraw at any time, even during or after the interview, without any consequences.
- Strict confidentiality. Your identity (name, sport, competition details, etc.) will remain completely anonymized in all reports and publications.

- Ethical approval. This research follows the ethical guidelines of the University of Ottawa, ensuring privacy, respect, and transparency throughout the study.

If you are interested or have questions, please feel free to reach out either by email at --- or on WhatsApp at ---.

I would be honored to hear your story and include your valuable perspective in this study.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best regards,

Marjan Saffari

PhD Candidate, University of Ottawa

موضوع: دعوت به مشارکت در پژوهش درباره تجربیات زنان نخبه ورزش ایران

[نام شرکت کننده] عزیز،

نام من مرجان صفاری است و دانشجوی دکتری در دانشگاه اتاوا، کانادا هستم. پیش از این، عضو هیئت علمی در دانشگاه تربیت مدرس، ایران در حوزه مدیریت ورزشی بوده‌ام. در حال حاضر، پژوهشی را درباره تجربیات ورزشکاران زن مسلمان نخبه انجام می‌دهم. اگر شما ایران را در یک رویداد ورزشی بین‌المللی مانند بازی‌های المپیک، جام‌های جهانی، یونیورسیاد (بازی‌های جهانی دانشجویان)، بازی‌های آسیایی یا سایر مسابقات بین‌المللی به عنوان ورزشکار، مربی یا داور نمایندگی کرده‌اید، بسیار خوشحال خواهم شد که شما را به شرکت در این پژوهش مهم دعوت کنم.

چرا با شما تماس گرفته‌ام؟

به عنوان یک ورزشکار، مربی یا داور نخبه، شما داستانی منحصر به فرد دارید که شایسته شنیده شدن است. از طریق این پژوهش، قصد دارم چالش‌ها، موانع و موفقیت‌هایی را که مسیر حرفه‌ای ورزشکاران زن نخبه ایرانی را شکل می‌دهد، بررسی کنم. هدف من این است که تجربیات، تلاش‌ها و دستاوردهای شما را به تصویر یکشم تا صدای شما به درک بهتر از حضور زنان در ورزش‌های نخبه کمک کند.

مشارکت در این پژوهش شامل چه مواردی است؟

اگر تصمیم به مشارکت بگیرید، از شما دعوت خواهد شد تا تجربیات خود را در یک مصاحبه آنلاین محرمانه از طریق پلتفرم‌های امن مانند Zoom یا Microsoft Teams، و با استفاده از حساب رسمی پژوهشگر در دانشگاه اتاوا، به اشتراک بگذارید. شما می‌توانید میزان اطلاعاتی را که مایل به بیان آن هستید، خودتان تعیین کنید و در هر زمانی آزادانه و بدون هیچ پیامدی از ادامه همکاری انصراف دهید. در صورت انصراف، تمامی داده‌ها حذف شده و در پژوهش استفاده نخواهند شد. مدت زمان تقریبی برای انجام مصاحبه حدود یک تا دو ساعت خواهد بود.

حقوق شما و محرمانگی اطلاعات

- مشارکت کاملاً داوطلبانه است. هیچ اجباری برای شرکت در این پژوهش وجود ندارد و شما در هر زمان، حتی در حین یا پس از مصاحبه، می‌توانید انصراف دهید بدون اینکه پیامدی برای شما داشته باشد.
 - حفظ کامل محرمانگی. هویت شما (نام، رشته ورزشی، جزئیات مسابقات و غیره) کاملاً ناشناس باقی خواهد ماند و در هیچ گزارشی یا مقاله‌ای افشا نخواهد شد.
 - پایداری به اصول اخلاقی. این پژوهش مطابق با راهنمای اخلاقی دانشگاه اتاوا انجام می‌شود و حریم خصوصی، احترام و شفافیت را در تمام مراحل پژوهش تضمین می‌کند.
- اگر علاقه‌مند به مشارکت هستید یا سؤالی دارید، لطفاً از طریق ایمیل به marjan@uwaterloo.ca یا واتساپ با شماره [14162912222](tel:14162912222) با من در تماس باشید.
- باعث افتخار من خواهد بود که داستان شما را بشنوم و دیدگاه ارزشمند شما را در این پژوهش بگنجانم.
- با سپاس از توجه و زمانی که اختصاص می‌دهید.

با احترام،

مرجان صفاری

دانشجوی دکتری، دانشگاه اتاوا



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de la santé

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Consent Form
Iranian elite sportswomen

Title of the study: Docile bodies or resistant bodies? Tracing power dynamics in elite Muslim sportswomen's experiences

Researchers:

- Marjan Saffari, PhD candidate, School of Human Kinetics, University of Ottawa, Canada,
- Christine Dallaire, Professor, School of Human Kinetics, University of Ottawa, Canada,

Invitation to Participate: Marjan Saffari invited me to participate in her doctoral study, conducted under the supervision of Christine Dallaire, at the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa.

Purpose of the Study: This research aims to critically analyze the experiences of elite Iranian Muslim sportswomen, focusing on the interplay between governmental policies, religious frameworks, and international athletic expectations. By investigating how structural and cultural constraints influence their participation in sports, this study seeks to uncover the strategies these athletes employ to navigate and/or resist such impediments to their sport practices.

Participation: My participation will involve an audio-recorded virtual interview lasting approximately 60 to 120 minutes, conducted via secure platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams using the researcher's official uOttawa account. The interview will focus on my experiences and perspectives as an elite female athlete, coach, or referee in Iranian elite sports and international sporting events. To help build rapport and facilitate a more natural conversation, the interview will be conducted with the camera on. However, only the audio component will be retained for research purposes. Immediately following the interview, any video recording will be permanently deleted, and only the audio file will be securely stored and used for analysis. If a participant chooses to withdraw, their data will be destroyed (and not used in the study).

Risks: Participation in this study entails that I share my experiences as an elite Iranian sportswoman, some of which may be negative and may elicit emotional responses such as discomfort, frustration or regret. I have received assurance from the researchers that every effort will be made to minimize these emotions by treating me with respect and empathy, allowing me to decide the level of detail I wish to share, allowing me to refuse to answer any questions and to withdraw at any time. I have also received assurance that every measure will be taken to protect my privacy and security and thus to ensure that my identity will never be revealed, if I so wish. For instance, my name will not be associated to my data which will strictly be identified with a

pseudonym. In addition, my sport or any detail related to my experiences that could identify me will not be included in the thesis or any academic conference or publication. Furthermore, only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the audio-recording and transcript of my interview. Participants who choose to refer other elite sportswomen will not disclose their own participation in the study and will not pressure the other person to respond. Referrals will occur only among women who already know and trust one another. Instead, they will simply share general information about the research and offer to forward the researcher's contact information or the study letter of invitation. No one other than the participant and the researcher will know who has taken part. No written material will be shared without consent, and individuals who are uninterested will not be contacted further. The researcher will not collect or access the contact information of potential participants unless they independently choose to reach out.

Benefits: Participating in this research provides elite female athletes, coaches, and referees in Iran with a platform to share their experiences, challenges, and achievements, raising awareness of gender inequalities in elite sports and contributing to discussions on social justice, sports policies, and cultural barriers.

Confidentiality: Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the information shared during the interview. The data will be used solely for the thesis, academic conferences or publications. Confidentiality will be strictly maintained, ensuring that only researchers have access to the interview content and transcript. In order to minimize the risk of security breaches and to help ensure my confidentiality, it is recommended that I use standard safety measures, such as signing out of my account, closing my browser, and locking my device when I am no longer using it/when I have completed the interview.

Anonymity: I may choose to preserve anonymity. If so, the information collected during my interview will be completely anonymized. My name will not be associated with the recording of the interview, nor with the transcript I will be identified only by a pseudonym of my choice. Any details that could reveal my identity, including name, specific sports events, disciplines, or years of participation, will not be disclosed in the thesis or academic conferences and publications. However, I may choose to give consent to be directly or indirectly identified. If so, I will personally decide which specific details may be shared among possible identifiers such as my name, sport, any awards I have received, specific events or competitions I took part in, my results or performance at specific competitions or personal opinions. I understand that revealing my identity may involve certain risks, and I am fully informed of these risks. I will make this decision during the interview, and will be invited to confirm at the end of the interview which identifiers can be included in the research publication and which cannot, based on my personal choice.

Safe Interview Location: Before scheduling the interview, the researcher will inform participants that they should select a private and secure location where they feel comfortable speaking freely. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher will ask, “Are you currently in a safe and private place to proceed with this interview?” This question has been incorporated into the interview guide to confirm the participant’s safety in real time.

Secure Communication Platforms: Following consultation with uOttawa’s IT department and in accordance with university policies on digital security, all interviews will be conducted using secure platforms—Zoom or Microsoft Teams—through the researcher’s official uOttawa account. Participants will be informed of this and may choose between Zoom and Teams based on their preferences and accessibility.

Data Protection: All electronic data will be stored in accordance with uOttawa’s approved storage solutions. Interview recordings and transcripts will be securely stored in encrypted, password-protected folders on OneDrive. Access will be limited to the supervisor and researcher.

There will be no hard copies of the documents.

Funding: This research has received no external funding.

It is recommended that I save a copy of this consent form for my records.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or their supervisor. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity via email (----) or telephone (----).

Voluntary Participation: Participation in the interview is completely voluntary. I may stop the interview at any time, whether at the beginning, middle, or end, and all collected data will be immediately deleted. Additionally, I have the right to skip any question without providing a reason and without facing any negative consequences.

Acceptance (verbally for the audio recording): I agree to participate in the research study and for the interview to be audio-recorded.



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فرم رضایت‌نامه

زنان نخبه ورزش ایران

عنوان مطالعه

بدن‌های مطیع یا مقاوم؟ بررسی پویایی‌های قدرت در تجربیات زنان مسلمان نخبه در ورزش

پژوهشگران

- مرجان صفاری، دانشجوی دکتری، دانشکده علوم ورزشی، دانشگاه اتاوا، کانادا.
- کریستین دالر، استاد، دانشکده علوم ورزشی، دانشگاه اتاوا، کانادا.

دعوت به شرکت در پژوهش

مرجان صفاری از من دعوت کرده است که در مطالعه دکترای وی، که تحت نظارت کریستین دالر در دانشکده علوم ورزشی دانشگاه اتاوا انجام می‌شود، شرکت کنم.

هدف مطالعه

این پژوهش قصد دارد تجربیات زن مسلمان نخبه ورزش ایران را به‌طور انتقادی تحلیل کند و به بررسی تعامل میان سیاست‌های دولتی، چارچوب‌های مذهبی و انتظارات ورزش‌های بین‌المللی بپردازد. این تحقیق با بررسی چگونگی تأثیر محدودیت‌های ساختاری و فرهنگی بر مشارکت آن‌ها در ورزش، تلاش دارد استراتژی‌هایی که این ورزشکاران برای عبور از این موانع و/یا مقاومت در برابر آن‌ها اتخاذ می‌کنند، شناسایی کند.

مشارکت در پژوهش

مشارکت من شامل یک مصاحبه مجازی صوتی ضبط شده خواهد بود که حدود ۶۰ تا ۱۲۰ دقیقه به طول می‌انجامد و از طریق پلتفرم‌های امنی مانند Zoom یا Microsoft Teams و با استفاده از حساب رسمی دانشگاه اتاوا پژوهشگر انجام خواهد شد. این مصاحبه بر تجربیات و دیدگاه‌های من به‌عنوان یک زن ورزشکار نخبه، مربی یا داور در ورزش‌های نخبه‌ی ایران و رویدادهای بین‌المللی ورزشی تمرکز خواهد داشت. برای ایجاد فضای صمیمانه‌تر و تسهیل گفت‌وگوی طبیعی‌تر، مصاحبه با دوربین روشن انجام خواهد شد. با این حال، فقط بخش صوتی برای اهداف پژوهشی ذخیره خواهد شد. بلافاصله پس از پایان مصاحبه، هرگونه فایل تصویری (ویدیو) به‌طور دائم حذف خواهد شد و تنها فایل صوتی به‌صورت ایمن ذخیره و برای تحلیل استفاده خواهد شد. در صورت انصراف شرکت‌کننده، تمامی داده‌های مربوط به او حذف شده و در مطالعه استفاده نخواهد شد.

مخاطرات

شرکت در این مطالعه به معنای به‌اشتراک‌گذاری تجربیات من به‌عنوان یک زن ورزشکار نخبه ایرانی است؛ برخی از این تجربیات ممکن است منفی باشند و واکنش‌های احساسی مانند ناراحتی، ناامیدی یا پشیمانی را برانگیزند. پژوهشگر به من اطمینان داده است که تمام تلاش خود را برای کاهش این احساسات به کار خواهد گرفت، از جمله با برخورد محترمانه و همدلانه، دادن حق انتخاب به من درباره میزان جزئیاتی که مایل به بیان آن هستم، فراهم کردن امکان امتناع از پاسخ‌دادن به هر سؤال، و همچنین اجازه‌ی انصراف از شرکت در مطالعه در هر زمانی. همچنین به من اطمینان داده شده که تمام تدابیر لازم برای حفظ حریم خصوصی و امنیت من اتخاذ خواهد شد تا در صورت تمایل، هویت من فاش نشود. به‌عنوان نمونه، نام من به داده‌هایم پیوند نخواهد خورد و تمام اطلاعات با یک نام مستعار شناسایی خواهد شد. علاوه بر این، رشته ورزشی‌ام یا هر جزئیات دیگری از تجربیاتم که ممکن است هویت مرا آشکار کند، در پایان‌نامه یا هرگونه کنفرانس علمی یا انتشار دانشگاهی گنجانده نخواهد شد. تنها پژوهشگر و استاد راهنمای او به فایل صوتی و نسخه مکتوب مصاحبه‌ام دسترسی خواهند داشت. شرکت‌کنندگانی که تصمیم می‌گیرند زنان ورزشکار نخبه دیگر را معرفی کنند، نباید مشارکت خود در این مطالعه را افشا کنند و نباید فرد دیگر را برای شرکت تحت فشار قرار دهند. معرفی‌ها تنها در میان زنانی صورت خواهد گرفت که یکدیگر را از قبل می‌شناسند و به هم اعتماد دارند. در این حالت، تنها اطلاعات کلی درباره پژوهش به اشتراک گذاشته می‌شود و در صورت تمایل، اطلاعات تماس پژوهشگر یا نامه دعوت به مطالعه به فرد معرفی‌شده داده خواهد شد. هیچ‌کس جز شرکت‌کننده و پژوهشگر از مشارکت افراد در این مطالعه مطلع نخواهد شد. هیچ سند یا محتوای نوشتاری بدون رضایت فرد به اشتراک گذاشته نمی‌شود، و با افرادی که علاقه‌ای به شرکت ندارند، هیچ‌گونه پیگیری یا تماس بیشتری انجام نخواهد شد. پژوهشگر اطلاعات تماس افراد معرفی‌شده را جمع‌آوری یا ذخیره نخواهد کرد، مگر اینکه آن فرد شخصاً تصمیم به برقراری ارتباط با پژوهشگر بگیرد.

شرکت در این پژوهش بستری برای ورزشکاران زن نخبه، مربیان و داوران در ایران فراهم می‌کند تا تجربیات، چالش‌ها و موفقیت‌های خود را به اشتراک بگذارند. این مطالعه به افزایش آگاهی درباره نابرابری‌های جنسیتی در ورزش‌های نخبه کمک کرده و به بحث‌های مربوط به عدالت اجتماعی، سیاست‌های ورزشی و موانع فرهنگی می‌افزاید.

محرمانگی

تنها پژوهشگر و استاد راهنمای وی به اطلاعات ارائه شده در مصاحبه دسترسی خواهند داشت. داده‌ها منحصراً برای پایان‌نامه، کنفرانس‌های علمی و مقالات استفاده خواهند شد. محرمانگی به طور کامل حفظ خواهد شد و تنها پژوهشگران به محتوای مصاحبه و متن پیاده‌سازی شده آن دسترسی خواهند داشت. به منظور کاهش خطرات احتمالی نقض امنیت و حفظ محرمانگی، توصیه می‌شود که از اقدامات استاندارد ایمنی مانند خروج از حساب کاربری، بستن مرورگر، و قفل کردن دستگاه پس از اتمام مصاحبه استفاده کنم.

ناشناس ماندن

ممکن است تصمیم بگیرم که ناشناس باقی بمانم. در این صورت، اطلاعات جمع‌آوری شده در طول مصاحبه‌ام به طور کامل ناشناس‌سازی خواهد شد. نام من با فایل صوتی مصاحبه یا نسخه مکتوب آن مرتبط نخواهد بود و تنها با یک نام مستعار که خودم انتخاب می‌کنم شناسایی خواهم شد. هرگونه جزئیاتی که ممکن است هویت من را فاش کند—از جمله نام، رویدادهای ورزشی خاص، رشته‌های ورزشی یا سال‌های فعالیت—در پایان‌نامه، کنفرانس‌های علمی، یا انتشارات دانشگاهی ذکر نخواهد شد.

با این حال، ممکن است تصمیم بگیرم که رضایت خود را برای شناسایی مستقیم یا غیرمستقیم اعلام کنم. در این صورت، شخصاً تصمیم خواهم گرفت که کدام جزئیات مشخص می‌تواند منتشر شوند؛ از جمله نام من، رشته ورزشی‌ام، جوایزی که دریافت کرده‌ام، رویدادها یا رقابت‌هایی که در آن‌ها شرکت کرده‌ام، نتایج یا عملکردم در مسابقات خاص، یا دیدگاه‌های شخصی‌ام. من آگاه هستم که افشای هویتم ممکن است با برخی خطرات همراه باشد و به طور کامل از این خطرات مطلع شده‌ام. این تصمیم را در طول مصاحبه خواهم گرفت و در پایان مصاحبه، براساس انتخاب شخصی خود، برای تأیید نهایی مشخص خواهم کرد که کدام شناسه‌ها می‌توانند در انتشار تحقیق گنجانده شوند و کدام یک نباید گنجانده شوند.

محل امن برای مصاحبه

پیش از برنامه‌ریزی برای مصاحبه، پژوهشگر به شرکت کنندگان اطلاع خواهد داد که باید مکانی خصوصی و امن را برای مصاحبه انتخاب کنند؛ مکانی که در آن احساس راحتی داشته باشند و بتوانند آزادانه صحبت کنند. در آغاز هر مصاحبه، پژوهشگر خواهد پرسید: «آیا در حال حاضر در مکانی امن و خصوصی قرار دارید که بتوانیم این مصاحبه را ادامه دهیم؟» این سؤال در راهنمای مصاحبه گنجانده شده تا ایمنی شرکت‌کننده در زمان واقعی تأیید شود.

پلتفرم‌های ارتباطی امن

با مشورت دپارتمان فناوری اطلاعات دانشگاه اتاوا و مطابق با سیاست‌های دانشگاه در مورد امنیت دیجیتال، تمامی مصاحبه‌ها از طریق پلتفرم‌های امن، یعنی Zoom یا Microsoft Teams، و با استفاده از حساب رسمی دانشگاهی پژوهشگر انجام خواهند شد. شرکت کنندگان در جریان این موضوع قرار خواهند گرفت و می‌توانند براساس ترجیحات و دسترسی خود، یکی از دو پلتفرم را انتخاب کنند.

حفاظت از داده‌ها

تمام داده‌های الکترونیکی مطابق با راه‌حل‌های تأییدشده دانشگاه اتاوا برای ذخیره‌سازی نگهداری خواهند شد. فایل‌های صوتی مصاحبه‌ها و نسخه‌های مکتوب آن‌ها در پوشه‌هایی رمزگذاری شده و دارای رمز عبور در OneDrive ذخیره می‌شوند. دسترسی به این فایل‌ها فقط برای پژوهشگر و استاد راهنما امکان‌پذیر خواهد بود. هیچ نسخه فیزیکی (چاپی) از این اسناد وجود نخواهد داشت.

تأمین مالی

این پژوهش هیچ‌گونه بودجه‌ای از منابع خارجی دریافت نکرده است.

نگهداری نسخه‌ای از فرم رضایت

توصیه می‌شود که نسخه‌ای از این فرم رضایت را برای سوابق خود ذخیره کنم.

سوالات و نگرانی‌ها

در صورتی که سؤالی درباره این پژوهش داشته باشم، می‌توانم با پژوهشگر یا استاد راهنمای وی تماس بگیرم. همچنین، اگر سؤالی درباره رعایت اصول اخلاقی این پژوهش داشته باشم، می‌توانم با دفتر اخلاق پژوهشی دانشگاه اتاوا از طریق ایمیل (---) یا تلفن (---) تماس بگیرم.

مشارکت داوطلبانه

شرکت در مصاحبه کاملاً داوطلبانه است. در هر زمان، چه در ابتدای مصاحبه، چه در حین آن یا در انتها، می‌توانم مصاحبه را متوقف کرده و تمامی داده‌های جمع‌آوری شده بلافاصله حذف خواهند شد. همچنین، این حق را دارم که از پاسخ به هر سؤالی بدون ارائه دلیل خودداری کنم و این امر هیچ‌گونه پیامد منفی برای من نخواهد داشت.

رضایت (به صورت شفاهی برای ضبط صوتی)

من موافقم که در این پژوهش شرکت کنم و مصاحبه من به صورت صوتی ضبط شود.

Appendix H: English Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Iranian Elite Sportswomen

Are you currently in a safe and private place to proceed with this interview?

The interview will take approximately 60 to 120 minutes.

Before we begin, I'd like to share some important details about this study:

- Go over the content of the consent form
- To ensure accuracy, I would like to request your permission to audio-record this interview. These recordings will help capture details that may not be fully reflected in written notes. These recordings will be securely stored in encrypted folders on OneDrive, in accordance with uOttawa's approved data storage solutions., and if you choose to withdraw, they will be permanently deleted.
- Please indicate your preferred level of anonymity in any publications resulting from this research—whether you wish to
 - remain completely anonymous,
 - or allow disclosure of certain contextual details such as specific sports events or competitions, your awards or sport results, your discipline, or years of participation,
 - or be directly identified, that is that your name can be included in the research.

We will confirm your choice again at the end of the interview.

- Before we start, I will ask for your oral consent for participation in this study.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Introduction: General questions

What inspired you to pursue sports in the first place?
How old are you?
And how many years have you been active as an elite athlete/ coach/ referee?
What is the most important sporting event you participated in as a representative of Iran?

- Have you represented Iran in other sport events? If so, which ones and when? What did you enjoy the most of these sporting experiences (for each international sporting event)? What would you wish you could change (for each international sporting event)?
- Have you represented Iran in other international sport events in a different role (for instance, as an athlete first, then as a coach or referee)? If so, which ones and when? What did you enjoy the most of these sporting experiences (for each international sporting event and role)? What would you wish you could change (for each international sporting event)?

Interview questions

Research question A

1 Can you describe what it feels like to be an elite female athlete / coach/ referee in Iran?

- What are your best memories?
- What do you enjoy the most of being an elite sportswoman in Iran?
- What motivates or what motivated you to continue as an elite sportswoman in Iran?
- Can you share any situations where you felt particularly happy or proud? Provide the context of these moments: who, how, when? Are there other similar examples?

	- Are their rules or expectations you think are specific to women in sports in Iran? How have these affected your experiences? Has this changed over time (from when you started your athletic career to now)? - Can you share any situations where you felt particularly restricted or monitored? Provide the context of these restrictions: who, how, when? How did you react to these restrictions? Are there other similar examples? Are there different examples where you reacted differently? How? Why?
2	In your experience, how do officials of the ministry of sport, National Federation or NOC influence your training, performance, or even everyday life as an elite athlete/ coach/ referee? - How do you perceive these influences—are they supportive, limiting, or both? Can you provide examples? Has this changed over time in your athletic career? How? - How does this affect your confidence or freedom in your sport career? Has this changed over time in your athletic career? How? - Have you noticed differences in how male and female athletes/ coach/ referee are treated by officials? Has this changed over time in your athletic career? How?
3	How have decisions about your sports career been typically made over time? - Are you able to have a say in these decisions? Has this changed over time in your athletic career? How? - What happens if you disagree with a decision? Has this changed over time in your athletic career? How?
Research question B	
4	What are some unique advantages or benefits you've experienced in your role as a woman in sports in Iran? Has this changed over time in your athletic career? How? How did you react? - How do these compare to what men in similar roles face? How did you react? - How do these compare to other elite Muslim females from other Islamic countries? How did you react? Can you provide examples of specific moments where these benefits or advantages stood out the most? How? Why? Has this changed over time in your athletic career? How? How did you react? What are some unique challenges you've experienced in your role as a woman in sports in Iran? Has this changed over time in your athletic career? How? How did you react? - How do these compare to what men in similar roles face? How did you react? - How do these compare to other elite Muslim females from other Islamic countries? How did you react? - Can you provide examples of specific moments where these challenges stood out the most? How? Why? Has this changed over time in your athletic career? How? How did you react?
6	Are there resources or support systems available to help women athletes/ coach/referee? - Can you describe any specific resources or support systems you've used? How effective were they? Has this changed over time in your athletic career? How? How did you react? - Are these resources accessible to all elite women in Iranian sports, or are there barriers to accessing them? Has this changed over time in your athletic career? How? How did you react? - Is there a need for more resources or support systems to help women athletes/coach/referees? - In Iran? - In international sport? - If so, what type of resources or support systems are needed?
7	Have you experienced any situations where you felt excluded or treated unfairly in sports? Who was excluding you? How? Why? How did you react? - Have you ever been denied something important for your sport career because of being a woman? Who? How? Why? How did you react? - Can you share specific instances where you felt the level of support or opportunities for women differed from men? How? Why? How did you react? - What do you think would need to change to prevent this from happening? How? Why? - What changes would make the biggest impact for women in your field? How? Why?
Research question C	
8	How do you express yourself or make your voice heard as an elite woman in sports, despite the challenges? When? Why? Has this changed over time in your athletic career?

	Have you ever had to take a stand on something that was important to you in your sport career? How? Why? What was that like?
9	What strategies have helped you to continue your career or pursue your goals despite the obstacles you face? How? Why? - Can you share a specific story where you overcame a challenge? How? When? Why? - How do you cope with cultural or organizational pressures in your career? Why? Has this changed over time in your athletic career? - Do you at times push back against cultural or organizational pressures in your career? How? Why? Has this changed over time in your athletic career?
Research question D	
10	How do you balance your personal beliefs, professional goals, and the expectations placed on you as a national athlete/ coach/ referee? What are some examples where you felt conflicted between these expectations? How did you manage them? Has this changed over time in your athletic career?
11	How do you feel when competing internationally in environments with different beliefs or norms? How do you prepare yourself to meet both Iran's and international sports expectations?
Closing questions	
	What message would you like to convey to the world about your experiences as a female athlete/coach/referee in Iran? If there is one thing you want to underline about your experience as an elite sportswoman in Iran, what would it be? Why? Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences that we haven't covered? To finish, I'd like to reconfirm your preference regarding anonymity in any publications. - Would you like to remain completely anonymous? - If not, would you allow certain contextual details to be shared such as: - specific sports events or competitions, - your awards or sport results/performance at specific competitions - your discipline, - years of participation - or personal opinions - Or would you wish to be directly identified with your name?

Appendix I: Persian Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Iranian Elite Sportswomen

راهنمای مصاحبه

آیا در حال حاضر در مکانی امن و خصوصی قرار دارید که بتوانیم این مصاحبه را انجام دهیم؟
مدت زمان مصاحبه تقریباً ۶۰ تا ۱۲۰ دقیقه خواهد بود.

قبل از شروع، مایلیم برخی جزئیات مهم در مورد این مطالعه را با شما به اشتراک بگذارم:

- بررسی محتوای فرم رضایت‌نامه

- برای اطمینان از دقت، مایلیم اجازه شما را برای ضبط صوتی این مصاحبه درخواست کنیم. این ضبط‌ها به ثبت جزئیاتی کمک می‌کنند که ممکن است در یادداشت‌برداری‌ها به‌طور کامل بازتاب نیابند. این فایل‌ها به‌صورت امن در پوشه‌های رمزگذاری‌شده در OneDrive، مطابق با راه‌حل‌های تأییدشده‌ی دانشگاه اتاوا برای ذخیره‌سازی داده‌ها، نگهداری می‌شوند. در صورت انصراف شما از شرکت در مطالعه، تمامی این فایل‌ها به‌طور دائم حذف خواهند شد.
- لطفاً سطح دلخواه خود را برای ناشناس ماندن در هر گونه انتشار ناشی از این تحقیق مشخص کنید. شما می‌توانید یکی از گزینه‌های زیر را انتخاب کنید:
O کاملاً ناشناس باقی بمانید؛

O اجازه دهید برخی اطلاعات زمینه‌ای مانند رویدادها یا مسابقات ورزشی خاص، جوایز یا نتایج ورزشی، رشته ورزشی، یا سال‌های فعالیت شما ذکر شود؛
O یا مستقیماً قابل شناسایی باشید، یعنی نام شما در این تحقیق آورده شود.

در پایان مصاحبه، انتخاب شما را دوباره تأیید خواهیم کرد.

- قبل از شروع، از شما اجازه شفاهی برای مشارکت در این مطالعه خواهیم گرفت. آیا پیش از آغاز مصاحبه، سؤالی دارید؟

مقدمه: سوال‌های اولیه
چه چیزی شما را به دنبال کردن ورزش ترغیب کرد؟ چند سال دارید؟ چند سال است که به‌عنوان ورزشکار نخبه/ مربی/ داور فعالیت می‌کنید؟ مهم‌ترین رویداد ورزشی که در آن به‌عنوان نماینده ایران شرکت کرده‌اید، کدام بوده است؟ آیا در رویدادهای ورزشی دیگری نیز نماینده ایران بوده‌اید؟ اگر بله، کدام رویدادها و در چه سالی؟ از این تجربیات ورزشی، چه چیزی بیشتر از همه برای شما لذت‌بخش بوده است (برای هر رویداد ورزشی بین‌المللی)؟ اگر می‌توانستید چیزی را در این رویدادها تغییر دهید، چه چیزی را تغییر می‌دادید (برای هر رویداد ورزشی بین‌المللی)؟ آیا در رویدادهای بین‌المللی دیگری، در نقش متفاوتی نماینده ایران بوده‌اید؟ (مثلاً ابتدا به‌عنوان ورزشکار و سپس به‌عنوان مربی یا داور)؟ اگر بله، کدام رویدادها و در چه سالی؟ از این تجربیات ورزشی در نقش‌های مختلف، چه چیزی بیشتر از همه برای شما لذت‌بخش بوده است (برای هر رویداد ورزشی بین‌المللی و هر نقش)؟ اگر می‌توانستید چیزی را در این رویدادها تغییر دهید، چه چیزی را تغییر می‌دادید (برای هر رویداد ورزشی بین‌المللی)؟
سوال‌های مصاحبه
سوال تحقیق (الف)
می‌توانید توصیف کنید که تجربه‌ی ورزشکار/ مربی/ داور زن نخبه بودن در ایران چگونه است؟ بهترین خاطرات شما کدام‌اند؟ بیشترین لذتی که از ورزشکار نخبه بودن در ایران برده‌اید، چیست؟ چه عواملی شما را به ادامه فعالیت به‌عنوان یک ورزشکار زن نخبه در ایران ترغیب کرده یا می‌کند؟ آیا می‌توانید موقعیت‌هایی را به اشتراک بگذارید که در آن احساس خوشحالی یا افتخار خاصی داشته‌اید؟ لطفاً جزئیات این لحظات را بیان کنید: چه کسی، چگونه، چه زمانی؟ آیا مثال‌های مشابهی وجود دارند؟ آیا قوانین یا انتظاراتی وجود دارند که به‌طور خاص برای زنان در ورزش ایران تعیین شده‌اند؟ این قوانین چگونه بر تجربیات شما تأثیر گذاشته‌اند؟ آیا این قوانین در طول زمان (از آغاز دوران حرفه‌ای شما تا کنون) تغییر کرده‌اند؟

آیا می‌توانید موقعیت‌هایی را به اشتراک بگذارید که در آن احساس محدودیت یا نظارت خاصی داشته‌اید؟ لطفاً زمینه‌ی این محدودیت‌ها را توضیح دهید: چه کسی، چگونه، چه زمانی؟ چگونه به این محدودیت‌ها واکنش نشان دادید؟ آیا نمونه‌های مشابه دیگری وجود دارند؟ آیا موقعیت‌های متفاوتی وجود دارند که در آن‌ها واکنش متفاوتی نشان داده‌اید؟ چگونه؟ چرا؟ براساس تجربه شما، مقامات وزارت ورزش، فدراسیون ملی یا کمیته ملی المپیک (NOC) چگونه بر تمرینات، عملکرد یا حتی زندگی روزمره شما به عنوان یک ورزشکار/ مربی/ داور نخبه تأثیر می‌گذارند؟ این تأثیرات را چگونه ارزیابی می‌کنید؟ آیا حمایت‌کننده هستند، محدودکننده، یا هر دو؟ آیا می‌توانید مثال‌هایی ارائه دهید؟ آیا این موضوع در طول دوران حرفه‌ای شما تغییر کرده است؟ چگونه؟ این تأثیرات چگونه بر اعتماد به نفس یا آزادی شما در مسیر ورزشی‌تان اثر گذاشته‌اند؟ آیا این موضوع در طول دوران حرفه‌ای شما تغییر کرده است؟ چگونه؟ آیا تفاوتی در نحوه برخورد مقامات با ورزشکاران/ مربیان/ داوران زن و مرد مشاهده کرده‌اید؟ آیا این تفاوت‌ها در طول دوران حرفه‌ای شما تغییر کرده است؟ چگونه؟ تصمیمات مربوط به مسیر ورزشی شما معمولاً چگونه در طول زمان اتخاذ شده‌اند؟ آیا شما توانسته‌اید در این تصمیم‌گیری‌ها نقش داشته باشید؟ آیا این موضوع در طول دوران حرفه‌ای شما تغییر کرده است؟ چگونه؟ اگر با یک تصمیم مخالفت کنید، چه اتفاقی می‌افتد؟ آیا این روند در طول دوران حرفه‌ای شما تغییر کرده است؟ چگونه؟
سوال تحقیق (ب)
چه مزایا یا فرصت‌های منحصربه‌فردی را در نقش خود به عنوان یک زن در ورزش ایران تجربه کرده‌اید؟ آیا این موارد در طول دوران حرفه‌ای شما تغییر کرده‌اند؟ چگونه؟ شما چه واکنشی نشان دادید؟ این مزایا در مقایسه با آنچه مردان در نقش‌های مشابه تجربه می‌کنند، چگونه است؟ شما چه واکنشی نشان دادید؟ این مزایا در مقایسه با آنچه زنان ورزشکار نخبه مسلمان در سایر کشورهای اسلامی تجربه می‌کنند، چگونه است؟ شما چه واکنشی نشان دادید؟ آیا می‌توانید نمونه‌هایی از لحظات خاصی ارائه دهید که در آن‌ها این مزایا یا فرصت‌ها برجسته‌تر از همیشه بوده‌اند؟ چگونه؟ چرا؟ آیا این موارد در طول دوران حرفه‌ای شما تغییر کرده‌اند؟ چگونه؟ شما چه واکنشی نشان دادید؟ چه چالش‌های منحصربه‌فردی را در نقش خود به عنوان یک زن در ورزش ایران تجربه کرده‌اید؟ آیا این موارد در طول دوران حرفه‌ای شما تغییر کرده‌اند؟ چگونه؟ شما چه واکنشی نشان دادید؟ این چالش‌ها در مقایسه با آنچه مردان در نقش‌های مشابه تجربه می‌کنند، چگونه است؟ شما چه واکنشی نشان دادید؟ این چالش‌ها در مقایسه با آنچه زنان ورزشکار نخبه مسلمان در سایر کشورهای اسلامی تجربه می‌کنند، چگونه است؟ شما چه واکنشی نشان دادید؟ آیا می‌توانید نمونه‌هایی از لحظات خاصی ارائه دهید که در آن‌ها این چالش‌ها برجسته‌تر از همیشه بوده‌اند؟ چگونه؟ چرا؟ آیا این موارد در طول دوران حرفه‌ای شما تغییر کرده‌اند؟ چگونه؟ شما چه واکنشی نشان دادید؟
آیا منابع یا سیستم‌های حمایتی برای کمک به ورزشکاران زن، مربیان یا داوران وجود دارد؟ آیا می‌توانید منابع یا سیستم‌های حمایتی خاصی را که استفاده کرده‌اید، توصیف کنید؟ این منابع تا چه حد مؤثر بوده‌اند؟ آیا این موضوع در طول دوران حرفه‌ای شما تغییر کرده است؟ چگونه؟ شما چه واکنشی نشان دادید؟ آیا این منابع برای تمامی زنان نخبه در ورزش ایران در دسترس هستند، یا موانعی برای دسترسی به آن‌ها وجود دارد؟ آیا این موضوع در طول دوران حرفه‌ای شما تغییر کرده است؟ چگونه؟ شما چه واکنشی نشان دادید؟ آیا نیاز به منابع یا سیستم‌های حمایتی بیشتری برای کمک به ورزشکاران زن، مربیان یا داوران وجود دارد؟ در ایران؟ در ورزش بین‌المللی؟ در صورت نیاز، چه نوع منابع یا سیستم‌های حمایتی مورد نیاز است؟
آیا تا به حال در موقعیت‌هایی قرار گرفته‌اید که احساس کنید در ورزش کنار گذاشته شده‌اید یا ناعادلانه با شما رفتار شده است؟ چه کسی شما را کنار گذاشته است؟ چگونه؟ چرا؟ شما چه واکنشی نشان دادید؟ آیا تا به حال به دلیل زن بودن، از دریافت چیزی مهم برای مسیر ورزشی‌تان محروم شده‌اید؟ چه کسی؟ چگونه؟ چرا؟ شما چه واکنشی نشان دادید؟ آیا می‌توانید نمونه‌های مشخصی را به اشتراک بگذارید که در آن‌ها احساس کرده‌اید سطح حمایت یا فرصت‌های ارائه شده به زنان نسبت به مردان متفاوت بوده است؟ چگونه؟ چرا؟ شما چه واکنشی نشان دادید؟ به نظر شما چه تغییراتی لازم است تا از وقوع چنین شرایطی جلوگیری شود؟ چگونه؟ چرا؟ چه تغییراتی می‌تواند بیشترین تأثیر را بر بهبود شرایط زنان در حوزه ورزشی شما بگذارد؟ چگونه؟ چرا؟

سوال تحقیق (ج)

چگونه به عنوان یک زن نخبه در ورزش، باوجود چالش‌ها، خود را ابراز می‌کنید یا صدای خود را به گوش دیگران می‌رسانید؟ چه زمانی؟ چرا؟ آیا این موضوع در طول دوران حرفه‌ای شما تغییر کرده است؟

آیا تا به حال مجبور شده‌اید در مورد مسئله‌ای که برای مسیر ورزشی شما مهم بوده، موضع‌گیری کنید؟ چگونه؟ چرا؟ این تجربه برای شما چگونه بود؟

چه استراتژی‌هایی به شما کمک کرده‌اند تا باوجود موانعی که با آن‌ها روبه‌رو هستید، مسیر ورزشی خود را ادامه دهید یا به اهداف خود برسید؟ چگونه؟ چرا؟

آیا می‌توانید یک تجربه خاص را به اشتراک بگذارید که در آن بر یک چالش غلبه کرده‌اید؟ چگونه؟ چه زمانی؟ چرا؟

چگونه با فشارهای فرهنگی یا سازمانی در مسیر حرفه‌ای خود کنار می‌آیید؟ چرا؟ آیا این موضوع در طول دوران حرفه‌ای شما تغییر کرده است؟

آیا تاکنون در برابر فشارهای فرهنگی یا سازمانی در حرفه ورزشی خود مقاومت کرده‌اید؟ چگونه؟ چرا؟ آیا این موضوع در طول دوران حرفه‌ای شما تغییر کرده است؟

سوال تحقیق (د)

چگونه بین باورهای شخصی، اهداف حرفه‌ای و انتظاراتی که به عنوان یک ورزشکار/ مربی/ داور ملی از شما وجود دارد، تعادل برقرار می‌کنید؟

آیا می‌توانید نمونه‌هایی را بیان کنید که در آن‌ها بین این انتظارات دچار تعارض شده‌اید؟ چگونه این موقعیت‌ها را مدیریت کردید؟ آیا این موضوع در طول دوران حرفه‌ای شما تغییر کرده است؟

هنگام رقابت در مسابقات بین‌المللی و حضور در محیط‌هایی با باورها یا هنجارهای متفاوت، چه احساسی دارید؟ چگونه خود را برای برآورده کردن هم‌زمان انتظارات ورزشی ایران و ورزش بین‌المللی آماده می‌کنید؟

سوال های پایانی

چه پیامی را می‌خواهید درباره تجربیات خود به عنوان یک ورزشکار/ مربی/ داور زن در ایران به جهان منتقل کنید؟

اگر بخواهید یک نکته را درباره تجربه خود به عنوان یک ورزشکار نخبه در ایران برجسته کنید، آن نکته چه خواهد بود؟ چرا؟

آیا موضوع دیگری در مورد تجربیات خود دارید که بخواهید با ما به اشتراک بگذارید و در این گفتگو به آن پرداخته نشده است؟

در پایان، مایلم ترجیح‌نهایی شما را در مورد میزان ناشناس ماندن در هر گونه انتشار مرتبط با این تحقیق دوباره بپرسم:

• آیا مایل هستید کاملاً ناشناس باقی بمانید؟

• اگر نه، آیا اجازه می‌دهید برخی جزئیات زمینه‌ای به اشتراک گذاشته شوند، مانند:

o رویدادها یا مسابقات ورزشی خاص،

o جوایز یا نتایج/ عملکرد ورزشی شما در مسابقات مشخص،

o رشته ورزشی شما،

o سال‌های فعالیت شما،

o یا نظرات شخصی شما؟

• یا ترجیح می‌دهید که با نام خودتان به طور مستقیم شناسایی شوید؟