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Women's (non)participation in sports: Gendered attitudes, biopolitics, and women's perceptions of body and sports in Iran

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Abstract
Women's lower participation in sports in Iran is perceived to be caused by broadly held patriarchal-cultural norms as well as the Iranian State's regulation of women's sports and visibility. This exploratory research uses feminist scholarship and qualitative methods to investigate the central factors forming women's perceptions of sports participation and gender. Based on interviews with twenty-six women participants, the study revealed that essentialist beliefs among the participants attributed muscularity, strength, and excessive size to men, and delicateness, beauty, and thinness to women. We draw on feminist perspectives on body politics to explore women's attitudes and explanations for (non)participation in sports. Discourses of appropriate femininity and gendered embodiment played important roles in these explanations. References to modesty, gender norms, and faith were peripheral in our findings on gendered aspects of physical activity and sports participation.

Keywords
Biopolitics, Body, Fatphobia, Femininity, Iran, Muscularity, Sports

Introduction

In many countries throughout history, women have played a specific but often marginal role in sports and organized physical activities (Hartmann-Tews and Pfister, 2003; Kay, 2003; Scraton et al., 1999). Despite the existence of such gendered stereotypes about sports, many women in sports history have bent mainstream definitions of gender by taking part in all types of sports, including masculinized ones (Hargreaves, 2000; Rahbari, 2019b). Participation in sports by girls and women in countries where Islamic law (i.e., *Sharia*) is encoded is influenced by interpretations and cultural perceptions of the relation between religion and female physicality on the one hand and the legally imposed restrictions on physical activity and female visibility on the other (Golkowska, 2021; Hoodfar, 2008). The study of the complex relationship between sports participation and State-imposed regulation often centers on cultural and religious issues, including Muslim women's clothing, which remains one of the main discussed issues regarding women's sports rights and participation in Muslim countries (Benn and Ahmed, 2006; Knez et al., 2012). While there does not seem to be any prohibition of physical activity and sports for women in Islam's tenets per se (Pfister, 2010), religious teachings have sometimes been interpreted to restrict women's physicality (Sfeir, 1985). For example, women who abide by interpretations of the Islamic faith that advocate no physical contact between men and women may not want to, or cannot engage in mixed-gender sports where there is a possibility of such physical contact occurring. The environment and dress code also require some considerations (Muslim Women's Sports Foundation, 2010), such as making the sports attire comfortable and non-restraining for performing physical activity and creating secluded spaces for ensuring privacy.

Different juristic interpretations of Islamic scriptures provide diverse approaches to practicing sports.[1] Because of these differences, women's perceptions of their own bodily possibilities are also partly dependent on the religious tradition they follow (Walseth and Fasting, 2003) or reject. Muslim women have also been shown to actively navigate the ever-present 'gaze' on their bodies and engage in creative practices that enable their participation in sports (Thorpe et al., 2022). Given that the existing studies on women's sports in Muslim contexts have primarily focused on Islamic influences on women's regimes of physicality, this study undertakes an exploratory inquiry to investigate women's self-perceptions of physical activity, sports participation, and gender. Therefore, instead of focusing on religious beliefs, sports regulations, or laws, this study investigates women's perceptions of gender and sports in contemporary urban Iran. It inquires about their prevalent forms of physicality, bodily activity, and sports participation as well as their perspectives on gender and sports.

This article focuses on young(er) Iranian women who have lived their adult life after the 1979 Revolution in Iran.[2] This is the era in which the regulations installed by the Iranian State limited women's access to sports disciplines, from the types of outfits athletes could wear – demanding that women, including professional athletes, cover their entire body except for the face, hands, and feet – to determining which sports they could freely partake in (Rahbari, 2017; Jahromi, 2011). By this focus, the study contributes to the scholarship of gender and sports participation in countries where Islamic law is encoded, specifically in Iran. It contributes to the existing literature in two ways. First, it rectifies the lack of qualitative literature since most research on gender and sports in Iran is conducted using quantitative methods (e.g., Azarnive and Tavakoli, 2016; Kashi, 2015; Allahyari et al., 2015;

[1] For instance, in the case of aerobics, Islamic authorities in Iran have interpreted it differently, ranging from conditionally acceptable to unacceptable and sinful (Setare, 2017).

[2] Historical research on women's sportive participation in Iran before the Islamic Revolution has been carried out, but is beyond the capacity of this paper: Chehabi, H. E. (2002). The Juggernaut of Globalization: Sport and Modernization in Iran. *The International Journal of the History of Sport 19*: 275-294; Jahromi, M. K. (2011). Physical activities and sport for women in Iran. In Benn, T., Pfister, G. and Jawad, H. (Eds). *Muslim women and sport.* London and New York: Routledge, 109-124; Pfister, G. (2003b). Women and Sport in Iran. In Pfister, G. and Hartmann-Tews, I. (Eds.) *Sport and Women: Social Issues in International Perspective.* London and New York: Routledge, 207-223.

Tondnevis, 2002). Qualitative methods, by contrast, are suited to explore how the structural, cultural, and political impact and shape individuals' everyday lives and activities. Second, it provides overlooked in-depth and insider perspectives of women in Iran on gender and sports. The existing qualitative research on gender and sports relations connect micro self-perceptions of women with the political and social construction of these relations and offer some insights about women's activity routines but do not explore discourses of physical activity, nor do they inquire to what extent the women's complex perceptions on sex and gender differences affects their perception of gender and sports (e.g., Rahbari, 2017; Mirsafian et al., 2014). The analysis and discussion will position the findings on gender, body, and physicality within the broader Iranian political context and sports scene.

Contextualizing gender and sports in Iran

There are no homogeneous attitudes across and in Muslim-majority societies regarding women's sports. But in countries where Islamic law is encoded (e.g., Iran and Saudi Arabia), regulations on sports attire and sex segregation in sports facilities disproportionately impact women. For instance, women must wear the hijab in public spaces, including when participating in physical activities. In countries such as Oman and Egypt, where the hijab is not mandatory by law but part of a strong tradition, women might wear traditional clothing when physically active in mixed-gender environments (Pfister, 2010; Walseth and Fasting, 2003). Sex segregation and the rules concerning clothing are usually considered factors that can hinder or even preclude girls' ability or quality of participation in sports (Pfister, 2003). However, as Pfister (2003; 2010) and Miles and Benn (2016) argue, the spatial segregation allowing for single-sex spaces and creating spatial settings that respect women's religious values can also enable girls from traditional Muslim families to take up sports. In this view, gender segregation in traditionalist religious settings sometimes offers advantages because men's exclusion might make it easier for women whose beliefs require gender segregation to take up a sport and potentially loosens inhibitions in more traditionalist communities. This advantage is not only discussed within the Muslim majority contexts but also in countries with Muslim minorities. For example, Kay (2006) States that in the United Kingdom, gender-segregated sports spaces are of critical significance to Muslims, who need assurance that their participation in sports reflects religious or cultural requirements. Policymakers sometimes support similar segregated spaces in swimming pools and the allocation of single-sex shifts for sports facilities (see, e.g., in the Netherlands, Elling and Claringbould, 2005).

Studies on women's sports participation in Muslim-majority countries emphasize the effects of Islamic belief and its cultural, social, and legal implications in the sports arena. This is the case for studies on Iran too. And as Pfister (2003) has argued, politically enacted State laws and regulations hinder sports participation in Iran. In Iran's modern history, women's bodies and physicality have been central to changes in the relationship between religion and the State (Hargreaves, 2007; Rahbari et al., 2019). After the 1979 revolution in Iran, many women's sports activities were discontinued not only by the newly-instated government but also because Iran was thrust into an eight-year-long war with Iraq (1980-1988), after which some sports were re-established, albeit under new regulations (Small Media, 2013). Among the rights maintained from the pre-revolution era was the right of all women to practice physical activity in schools; in fact, Iran's constitution guarantees free education and physical training for everyone at all levels, and physical education courses are compulsory for both girls and boys (Pfister, 2003). However, physical education courses in schools have different contents and are carried out differently by educators of the same sex for female and male programs in Iran's single-sex schooling system by assigning lighter

physical activities to female students.[3] In addition, both primary and secondary schools prioritize basic physical skills over individual or group sports (Ramezaninejad et al., 2012).

Following the 1979 Revolution in Iran, the bodily inscription of cultural norms was intensely carried out in all spheres, including sports. The principle of 'gender segregation' was enacted, and a separate sports authority was set up for women. This meant that women and men were required to play sports in different facilities or during different shifts. This also affected sports training, coaching, and spectators, as athletes could be coached and observed only by trainers/coaches of the same sex. Women still had two ways of practicing sports: either in public, wearing the required clothing and the hijab, or in an attire of their choice in private spaces to which men have no access. This means that women can take part in skiing, hiking, and mountaineering in public or play badminton, table tennis, or volleyball in public parks (Pfister, 2003). International organizations such as the International Olympic Committee have recognized the hijab as an addition to the official sportswear (Shirazi, 2021), but even in international competitions, Iranian sportswomen have sometimes been banned from competing in women's sports due to the Iranian federations' inability to meet the standards, e.g., in Taekwondo and Canoeing in the 2004 Olympic Games (Hargreaves, 2007), in soccer in the 2011 Olympic (Erdbrink, 2011), and in Kata in the Islamic Games in 2013 (Radio Zamaneh, 2013).

There are reports showing that Iranian sportswomen resist and repeatedly defy the regulations (Enderle, 2021; Specia, 2020). Some athletes have expressed that they find moving in heavy, loose clothes mandated by the sports federations difficult. Following sportswear regulations is stressful as women must ensure their hair or skin does not unexpectedly show while competing. Such 'mistakes' in the heat of competition can result in heavy prices paid by women athletes, including suspension from sports activities (Najibullah, 2008). The usage of proper attire is also only accepted for certain sports disciplines, and Iranian women are still unable to take part in other sports such as gymnastics, water polo, and bodybuilding (Jahromi, 2011; Iran Online News, 2017) because of the forms of physicality involved. State organizations have also targeted Iranian sportswomen for 'wearing make-up,' coloring their hair and having body tattoos[4] (Fozooni, 2008). In 2013, a televised broadcast of a women's martial arts competition raised the ire of religious authorities (Tehran Bureau, 2015). In 2017, Zumba –a sport consisting of aerobic activities usually performed rhythmically and accompanied by music – was officially banned in Iran for being 'unIslamic' (Iranian Students' New Agency, 2017). These incidents demonstrate that Iran's political environment is still harsh to women's sportive activities, emphasizing women's modesty as a core value.[5] Additionally, school programs pay insufficient attention to women's sports (Shohreh et al., 2018). A gradual positive change has occurred with more governmental budgets spent on women's sports programs despite all the limitations. Public attention is also rising, and some newspapers now have a specific page dedicated to women's sports (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007). Iranian women have become increasingly active and participate in traditionally male-oriented sports such as soccer (Kamali, 2010; Steel and Richter-Devroe, 2003). This is an important step since women's soccer is perceived at best as controversial and blasphemous at worst (Dorsey, 2011).

Besides the gap in qualitative literature on gender and sports in Iran, as the literature review shows, the scholarship on Iranian women's sports has focused on institutional frameworks and the State enactment of *Sharia* that governs women's sports. The implications of this have been the lack of knowledge about the role sport plays in Iranian women's

[3] This is not the case only in Iran, but in other contexts in Asian, African and Middle Eastern countries as well (UNESCO, 2013).

[4] Public swimming pools are also legally required not to give access to people who have body tattoos (Masgregh News, 2014).

[5] Men athletes are also required to cover their bodies from the navel to the knees and conceal tattoos. Thus, wearing conventional sports outfits is, for all intents and purposes, taboo for men too; but they are especially constraining for girls and women (Pfister, 2003).

everyday lives. Instead, this study adopts a subject-centric approach to offer a more in-depth analysis of women's self-perceptions. We thus aim to provide deeper insights into women's experiences, voices, and self-perceptions. We used semi-structured interviews to explore the physical activity routines of young(er) Iranian women living in urban areas and their perceptions of gender differences in different forms of physicality, bodily activity, and sports.

Methods

The paper uses qualitative empirical data collected between 2014 and 2018. The study population was sampled over the period of four years through the lead researcher's personal network and then expanded through snowballing. The research process took multiple years because of the lead researcher's relocation over the period of the research. The participant population consisted of Iranian women living in urban areas in cities such as Tehran, Shiraz, Urmia, and Babolsar in different northern, north-western, central, and southern regions of Iran. Twenty-six participants took part in the study. Twenty-three of them were interviewed either in public and private spaces selected by the participants, such as residences and parks, or by using virtual audio-video services such as Skype and WhatsApp. Three participants preferred to respond to structured open-ended interview questions by writing their answers on paper. The face-to-face interviews were semi-structured, and the interview questions were derived from existing research and focused on personal sports routines, objectives for physical activity, and perceptions of gender differences in sports.

Most participants were highly educated, as twenty-three out of twenty-six had a university education or were university students at the time of the interview. Enabled by access to higher education, online and offline spaces of discursive argumentation about gender issues, and knowledge of languages other than their mother tongue, most participants had access to different repertoires and discourses of body and physicality. Fourteen participants were married, and twelve participants were single. The age range was between nineteen and forty-seven years, and the average age was thirty-one years old. The participants were either employed outside the home (full or part-time), were graduate and post-graduate students, or engaged in unpaid labor as stay-at-home mothers. Interviews were conducted in Farsi by both authors (both native Farsi speakers) and translated to English by the lead researcher.

The question guide was explained to all the respondents before the interviews to increase trust between the researcher and participants and give them more time to think about their contributions. The question guide consisted of two main parts, including questions about (i) personal attitudes and experiences with sports and (ii) sports and gender, including queries about how the interplay of gender and sports is perceived and further expanding on convictions about the relation between the physical aspects of femininity/masculinity in relation to sports and physicality. After conducting the semi-structured interviews, the interviews were transcribed. We used manual and open coding strategies to code the data, and an initial content analysis was used to analyze the interviews. Considering the exploratory nature of the research, we then used inductive coding to find themes and patterns from the interviews without projecting existing theoretical assumptions on the dataset.

All interviewees were informed about the project's goals and the research topic and their right to interrupt the conversation and decline participation at any point. The participants were assured of the interview audio files' confidentiality, the anonymity of the content of their interview, and their identities. All original recordings were disposed of, and transcriptions and notes were kept anonymous. Anonymity was important for our participants since gender remains a rather sensitive topic in Iran. Pseudonyms were given to the participants either by the participants themselves or by the authors. The lead researcher selected several quotations for this manuscript to illustrate the main themes presented in the following sections.

Physical activity and inactivity

The participants were enquired about their physical activity routines and motivations for doing sports. The physical activity routines were diverse among the study participants and varied from inactivity and light physical activities to regular sports. The participants explained that they performed physical activities for one or a combination of reasons. While levels of physical activities varied, the motivations behind them were quite similar. Walking was mentioned as a common physical activity for health reasons and to 'lose weight.' 'Thinness' and 'fitness' were referred to as physical goals. More specific descriptions of body parts such as 'flat belly,' 'thin thighs,' a 'thin,' and 'hard body' as ideal physical appearance goals were also mentioned. Terms such as 'fitness,' 'losing weight,' 'maintaining current weight,' and 'good health' were often used to describe physical activity goals. A few participants also mentioned they did sports because they found the activities such as walking alone or with friends entertaining and leisurely. In general, participants reported very similar motivations to engage in physical activities.

Weight loss was one of the most recurring themes, and most participants were not satisfied with their body type, size, and weight and wished to lose weight to become 'healthier' and 'slimmer' by engaging in more physical activity or doing sports. Some women told throwback stories of their younger ages when they did more sports because they had more time and fewer responsibilities. The participants also mentioned 'laziness' and 'lack of time' as reasons for not having the desired amount of physical activity. Physical activity preferences did not vary greatly across age groups, and since the participants were all from middle- or upper-class backgrounds, it was not possible to assess preferences based on socioeconomic backgrounds.

Interestingly, regarding the concept of laziness, many of the interviewed women had active lives in daily engagement with housework, education, and outside-of-home careers, sometimes combining some or all these activities. The notion of laziness was thus not referring to their daily life or even their physical activity; in fact, quite the opposite, most participants seemed to live active lives. Laziness was rather used to refer to the internalized idea that they failed to be 'thin,' and since they failed to maintain their bodies in expected shape and appearance, they had let themselves down in some ways (Porteous, 2013). Women's failure is historically associated with their laziness as Bartky (1982) notes that the idea that 'there are no ugly women, only lazy ones'[6] reveals the maintenance and transformation of the female body as a task and a responsibility.

Some interviewees mentioned being encouraged by family and friends to do more physical activity and pursue sports professionally. Their family members motivated them for various reasons, including beauty, fitness, and health. The encouragement and expectations, if not fulfilled, would contribute to perceptions of laziness. Although fitness and health were often cited as standalone motivations offered by women to engage in sports, they were sometimes featured as an instrument in differently focused discourses. One interviewee mentioned that her father encouraged her to do sports to learn how to physically defend herself against sexual harassment. Similarly, the lack of physical activity was framed as a result of structural reasons that shaped personal motivations. In this line, a participant mentioned the hijab's hindering effect as a reason why she did not do sports more often:

> 'Because of the hijab and full-body covering... no one cares about their body because it is covering everything. I personally don't [care about my body] because of this. Because no one sees it, so we don't pay attention to it.' (Susan, 21 years old)

Susan discussed the dress code regulations enacted by the State as the reason for her abstinence from doing sports, implying that there would be no motivation for her to do sports

[6] The statement is famously used by Helena Rubinstein (1872-1965) one of the female founders of a successful cosmetic corporation in the United States, that later joined the company L'Oréal.

since her body was not publicly visible. She also mentioned that she was fond of swimming but noted that 'women can't achieve anything in [this particular sport],' referring to Iranian women's inability to professionally pursue swimming at an international level because of dress-code limitations barring athletes from competing in international contests. Like Susan, many participants connected visibility, appearance, attractiveness, and beauty to different forms of physical activity. They distinguished between the role of the informal environments they were situated in, in their attitudes towards sports, and the role of formal regulations in shaping their engagement with physical activity. Both categories appeared to impact their perceptions of gendered differences in sports, elaborated on in the following section.

Perceptions of gendered differences

The participants were asked explicitly about their perception of the relation between gender and sports. When asked about this, they deemed most sports, such as volleyball, basketball, and running, appropriate for both women and men but considered other sports gender-specific, distinguishing between 'mixed' and 'men-only' sports. The participants expressed that some gender differences in the disciplines and the types of physical activity were 'natural' results of the differences between men and women. They brought up perceived physical and psychological differences between men and women to explain the conviction that women cannot partake in all sports men could. Such essentialist beliefs on sports activity relied on notions of sex-based difference:

> 'In terms of physical strength, there is a difference, [men] have much more power… women have less powerful muscles and [so] less strength. No matter how hard women try and do sports and work with their muscles, they will never have the amount of energy that men have.' (Sanam, 22 years old)

Similarly,

> 'There are women who do dangerous sports, such as rock climbing and motorsports. But embracing danger is not the same as doing sports that need muscles. A sport like boxing needs psychological and physical conditions that women usually do not have.' (Parastoo, 32 years old)

While bodily capacities and physical power were often mentioned to explain such differentiation, other respondents associated gender differences in sports not with natural physical bodily differences between the sexes but, using gender essentialist arguments, ascribed them to personality traits and gendered psycho-social characteristics. They argued that some women's characteristics made them unfit for doing certain types of sports such as *bodybuilding*, *wrestling,* or *boxing* because '[they] don't fit women's attitudes and personality' (Negar, 23 years old). Or as Pouran puts it:

> 'I would do volleyball, basketball, and running, and gymnastics is also not too bad. It is soft, somehow. I will just never do sports like boxing and wrestling… it is better if women do not play aggressive sports because women's bodies are more sensitive.' (Pouran, 23 years old)

Similarly,

> 'Yes, women's sports like gymnastics have a more feminine nature, and sports like boxing have a more masculine and aggressive nature. If a woman does boxing, she enhances the masculine side of her psyche.' (Shohre, 35 years old)

Sports were thus categorized into gender categories based on their compatibility with perceived differences between feminine and masculine bodies and psychological attributes, here referred to as 'psyche.' The participants who used the argument that certain sports were 'aggressive' and thus not fit for women named *weight lifting*, *martial arts*, *bodybuilding*, *wrestling* or *boxing* as examples of aggressive sports more appropriate for men. They named sports such as *ballet*, *ice-skating*, *gymnastics*, and *dancing* as 'appropriate' sports for women.

Not all participants fostered essentialist and binary attitudes towards sports participation. And even among the participants who believed that sports should be gendered, there were positive perceptions regarding women's sportive activities insofar as they were in 'appropriate' sports. One participant explained, 'A small number of sports are better only for women … and a small number only for men; but [the rest] can be for women and men' (Negar, 37 years old). Some participants mentioned common cultural beliefs regarding modesty and convictions that doing sports is not good/healthy for women. These beliefs showed the existence of binary conceptions of gender manifest in unfounded biopolitical assumptions about sports' risks. One participant explained that she was told not to jump as a child and made to believe that it would potentially 'damage her virginity' (Samane, 33 years old). The sports that were named as harmful to women's modesty were *horseback riding*, *biking*, and activities involving *jumping high*. 'I have heard that jumping from high places can damage virginity; not sure how true it is,' said Parastoo, 32 years old. Elnaz (23 years old) said, '…it is said that riding bikes and horses are not good for women.' Zahra (35 years old) also confirmed that 'They say sports can harm women or harm their virginity, but these are baseless and unscientific claims.'

Although the participants knew these myths about female physicality, none of them actively believed in the harm. Some participants expressed that they did not know whether such claims were correct, while others called the claims 'false', 'unscientific,' and 'superstitious.' Even though most respondents believed that sports must be gendered, a few participants did not adhere to essentialist ideas on gender and sex. Among them, one participant believed that sports should never be gendered, no matter what type of physicality they entailed:

> 'No, I don't think [there should be gender differences in sports]. [Sports like boxing] are considered masculine, and most men are interested in them, but we can't kill women's interest in them. It is possible that only one in a hundred women is interested in them, but [that] still [counts].' (Nahal, 22 years old)

This emphasis on individual liberty and choice to do sports contrasts commonplace essentialist convictions about the appropriateness of certain sports for women. The transformation of skinny bodies that might get 'bashed about' into fit, powerful bodies that can take care of themselves is often perceived as masculine (Woodward, 2007; Rahbari, 2019b) and was not considered desirable by most women in this study. The distinction between 'masculine' and 'feminine' sports is not unique to the Iranian context and is widespread across various contexts.

None of the participants referred to the issues of accessibility of sports facilities for women, nor did they directly refer to religious beliefs to explain gender differences in sports. However, they did point to normative cultural understandings of feminine and masculine bodies and physicality that could be influenced by religious beliefs. These cultural understandings and their relation to religious beliefs – which are, in this case, sometimes State-mandated – shape women's willingness to use these public sports facilities in the first place. These findings also highlight the centrality of the material body in perceptions of gendered differences in physical activity. The significance of bodily shape, size, form, and density was further emphasized and is discussed in the next section.

Muscularity and femininity

As explained previously, some participants held essentialist ideas about gender and sports. One recurring theme linked to these essentialist convictions was bodily appearance and muscularity. According to some, women needed to engage in physical activities that maintained their bodies in a feminine state because 'having a muscular body is not attractive for women' (Fariba, 39 years old). Women's bodies were largely characterized by 'feminine delicateness':

> '[Muscles] are not pretty [on women]. They destroy the feminine delicateness, and that is not pretty.' (Negar, 37 years old)

Some participants discussed that they were against compulsory physical training for women precisely because it ruined their delicateness and changed women's bodies for the worse by creating undesirable muscles:

> 'I have thick thighs because of sports activities [we were made to do] at school … if we had practiced ballet, this would have never happened.' (Parastoo, 32 years old)

While some participants felt women are attractive if they have full bodies in 'certain places' (mostly referring to the breasts and the buttocks), muscularity was not considered desirable. 'Thin' was viewed as the ideal form of body for women, or sometimes the emphasis was put on not being 'fat.'[7] Fatphobia was very present in the interviews as fatness was universally and openly bashed. A dominant majority of the participants considered muscularity desirable in men but did not approve of sports that caused pronounced muscularity in women's bodies, except when muscularity entailed thinness. This tendency to fatphobia and glorifying delicate 'feminine' bodies is not exclusive to this study's context and reflects the thin global ideal (Pike and Dunne, 2015; Yamamiya et al., 2008; Rahbari et al., 2018; Rahbari, 2019b), but contrasts some Western norms that glamorize trained, muscular female bodies that are firm and well-defined (Choi, 2003; Choi, 2005), toned and athletic looking, but not too muscular (Grogan et al., 2004). Literature on gender and sports reveals that many female athletes in sports that require or entail muscularity feel pressured to choose between normatively feminine, sexually attractive bodies and muscular bodies shamed for excessive size and strength (Boyle, 2005). Our participants also found some sports masculine not only because they altered women's 'delicate'[8] body type and size but also because they were incompatible with women's equally 'delicate' personalities:

> 'Women are created to be elegant and delicate, and this fineness comes with the personality type compatible to it, which many men do not have.' (Negar, 37 years old)

Sports' 'harmfulness' commonly articulated to damaging the hymen, came back in other forms during the interviews. Muscularising the body was perceived as a form of harm – albeit not physical but as harming femininity as an ideal embodied mental and psychological state – changing the size, shape, and density of muscles leading to masculinization. The harm can also take the form of damage to other tissues and features:

[7] The utilization of the Persian term for the adjective 'fat' (i.e., *Chaagh*) is not problematised in the Iranian pop-culture while it usually contains a negative connotative meaning; but other terms such as *Topol* (similar in meaning to 'curvy'), and *Khepel* (similar in meaning to 'chubby') are also used with positive connotations.

[8] The adjective *Zarif* and the noun *Zerafat* were used in Persian by all participants. Both terms are commonly used in Persian to refer to a combination of mental and physical states that reflect femininity and are related to thinness, elegance, and fineness.

> '... if we are realistic, boxing destroys the face, and if you have seen, wrestlers have broken ears. [this] may not be important for men, but the reality is, it is very important for women.' (Parastoo, 32 years old)

The delicateness of the body was sometimes associated with what was perceived as a typically female role. As one participant argued, women's bodies should not be physically trained as much as men's bodies since women's activities were mostly restricted to the domestic sphere where heavy physical activity was not required:

> 'A woman, of course, doesn't need that kind of a strong body. Of course, she should also work out so that she can take care of the simple works of the house such as taking care of the children, carrying them, washing the dishes, and other kinds of daily work, but there is no need for her to enter the industrial sector and so, she does not need [to have a very strong body].' (Elnaz, 23 years old)

Elnaz was the only participant who drew on her perception of Islamic beliefs. When asked about her own preferred physical activities, she cited religious sources and examples from Shi'a Muslim figures' lives to explain why women's physicality should be compatible with their domestic roles. She explained that men needed to do more sports since:

> 'God has finely created women with a fine personality and men with strong bodies and for harder jobs and public life… a man must be bigger and must have a bigger body so that he can take care of all those works that he must do.' (Elnaz, 23 years old)

Another respondent mentioned a similar viewpoint in regard to masculinity without citing religious sources. Instead, she suggested that men need physical training to give the feeling of support to their female partners. She clarified that men's physical prowess is not only due to a need for physical labor but due to their position as supporters and guardians. This support, according to her, could both be on a physical level – that she associated with work and family economy – but also on a personal and emotional level:

> 'The feeling that you live with a strong person is important… the feeling, but also that the man is [strong and] into working.' (Pouran, 23 years old)

The two quotations above hint at a parallel set of physical and psychological expectations directed at men. There seems to be a strong continuity between the 'material' and 'immaterial' aspects of masculinity. Just like women are expected to embody a specific form of physicality suitable to their assumed feminine and domestic roles, men's requirement to be muscular cannot be dislodged from their presumed role as protective guardians. While the discourses associated muscularity with masculinity were dominant, here too, a group of respondents rejected traditional binary approaches to gender norms and sports/athleticism. A few participants believed that muscularity was not gendered. This was either in the form of considering muscularity beautiful for all genders, as in:

> 'I think it is beautiful to have strong muscles … in general, muscle strength is beautiful for both women and men.' (Peyvand, 37 years old)

Or, in the form of considering muscularity unattractive for all genders:

> 'A muscular body for women, I personally do not like that, but I do not like it for men either.' (Fariba, 39 years old)

To conclude this section, body size and type were considered gender markers, as women's muscularity has been seen as a threat and a source of anxiety due to its capacity to transgress gendered attributes (Holmlund, 1997). It is difficult to locate the influences of different cross-cutting discourses in predicting the general attitude against women's muscularity. Pfister (2003a) has argued that in the development of gender duality in traditional contexts such as Iran, patterns of traditional social relationships, Western influences, and religious orientations are closely interwoven. Hence, discourses of ideal beauty, hegemonic femininity, and moral reasoning co-exist.

Discussion and conclusion

This exploratory study investigated Iranian women's personal sports routines and gendered attitudes towards physical activity and sports. It addressed prevalent forms of physicality, bodily activity, and sports participation and the perceptions of the relationship between gender and different forms of active physicality and sports. The findings reveal the importance of the body in its material form – shape, size, and density – as a central predictor of perceived compliance to gender ideals. There are widely held essentialist beliefs in gendered sports based on a fundamental difference between men's and women's physicality and psychological states.

In terms of the central exploratory question of this research, as opposed to broader debates and studies pertaining to Iranian women's attitude towards sports, it found references to cultural and moralizing discourses, beauty ideals, appropriate feminine and masculine behavior, body, personality, and social roles. Women also experienced support in their social environments to engage in physical activity and sports, but their environments emphasized individualized notions like health, thinness, fitness, and physical beauty. By articulating sports as a means to an end (e.g., in our data, maintaining/enhancing their attractiveness and staying/becoming thin), sports were disconnected from their potential as a space wherein other ambitions such as engaging in friendly competitions or the pursuit of a professional sports careers could be manifested.

Participants distinguished between sports as competitive and recreational activities and suggested that officially mandated dress codes dissuade women from considering athletic activities as a competitive or even professional option. However, dress codes and sex segregation regulations seemed to play a modest role in women's attitudes towards physicality. Instead, hegemonic meanings of femininity encompassing beauty ideals, roles, and local perceptions of the ideal female body – such as the notion of delicateness – were dominant subjects. The notion of 'delicateness' that the participants referred to was unapologetically fatphobic and glorified a thin body as desirable and moral. The moral aspect of thinness was highlighted by the notion of 'laziness' that categorized subjects with undesirables bodies as unwilling to make necessary sacrifices to embody proper femininity. Delicateness transcended physicality and had psychological connotations that attributed certain forms of behavior to feminine bodies. 'Ideal femininity' thus merges physical and psychological preferences. The ideal of delicateness interlinks with other widely shared expectations women face, such as expectations to maintain a 'beautiful' and 'natural' appearance. The significance of beauty ideals and body management in the Iranian context has already been documented (Rahbari, 2020; Rahbari et al., 2018; Rahbari, 2019a), and its impact on patterns of physicality is thus not a surprising finding.

There were also mentions of physical activity and its potential harms. The harm in sports was traditionally associated with the effects of physical activity on female reproduction or on virginity in connection to notions of honor and shame. Honor is based on patriarchal cultural ideas that put the responsibility of maintaining the family's social status on its female members. Losing virginity outside of marital bonds can seriously harm the status and honor of the family. The belief that extreme forms of physicality might damage the hymen has been reported in contexts other than Iran, such as Turkey and Egypt (Jalalzai, 2006; Yoav, 2006). In the Iranian case, Pfister (2003a) has discussed the fear that the hymen might be damaged

while practicing sport and that a girl's whole future could be at risk because of it. The importance of the intactness of the hymen is because women's chances of marriage depend on them being 'unsullied.' Even though participants were mostly aware of the rumored risks posed by physical activity in this regard, they tended to doubt the veracity of these claims.

A considerably more pressing threat to the female body was perceived to reside in sports' capacity to change its shape to muscular, masculine forms, transgressing bodily markers of gender difference such as size and shape (Holmlund, 1997). We argue, in accordance with Haber (1996), that since both 'muscular' and 'female' bodies have a politically and socially assigned meaning, the integration of the two is considered subversive. Participants' perspectives on femininity and masculinity indicated strong normative and moralizing attitudes. By constructing conceptions of normality and deviance, the norms appear moral or 'right,' and the desire is conformed to these norms (Pylypa, 1998). The data showed the strength and ubiquity of these norms as constructions of the feminine body were more or less uniform among the participants; however, a minority group rejected traditional associations of feminine bodies with lower physicality and muscularity. But even so, women continue to be restricted in their physical aspirations as the tyranny of physical appearance over physical activity choices persists (Vertinsky, 1998). Their physical activities are not only being regulated by discourses on sports and physicality but also by discourses on 'proper' femininity too.

We argue that similar to the Western contexts in which the pronounced muscular body is regarded as masculine and associated with the male sex (Felkar, 2012), muscularity and masculinity were perceived as interlinked in this research. As Pfister (2003) has explained in their study in Iran, women do not take up sports for the fear that they might become physically or mentally 'masculinized.' The centrality of bodily muscularity– and its relation to physical and symbolic power – was perceived by participants as an integral part of embodied masculinity and an undesirable attribute for femininity. One participant (Elnaz, quoted above) directly referred to her religious beliefs to explain gender roles and their implication for feminine and masculine bodies. However, dominant discourses of beauty/ugliness and gender differences in social roles were used to explain the incompatibility of muscularity and femininity.

Although most participants believed bodily differences between men and women undergird different physical abilities and associated sports participation trends, some believed there were no essential bodily attributes that affected women's sports participation. As the study of patterns, modes, and reasons for resisting these regimes was beyond the scope of this research, a greater understanding of the variety of ways women reject self-governing bodily practices, including sports, requires a more in-depth investigation. This study's findings cannot be generalized to the broader Iranian women or female population since the participants were mostly urban, highly educated, and middle- or upper-class women. Socioeconomic background and the level of urbanization of places of residence can impact how women access sports and how gender and sports are perceived and experienced.

To conclude, this study contributed to gender and sports research in the Iranian context by exploring competing and co-existing discourses on gendered sports. We argue that there has been a disproportionally large body of literature on religion, whereas beauty, cultural-regional discourses on the body, embodiment, desirability, and social attitudes towards health have been overlooked. As our study shows, beauty and muscularity play a significant role in shaping women's gendered attitudes towards sports. Several discourses, including those on appropriate femininity, moral gendered behavior, attractiveness/beauty, and embodiment, intersect and influence women's (non)participation in sports and patterns of physical activity. The influences of religious beliefs and prescriptions, as both direct citation of religious teachings and making references to modesty and notions that imply gendered religious norms, remained present but peripheral in explanations of gendered aspects of physical activity and sports participation. It is not possible to entirely rule out the role of religion in shaping cultural attitudes. Even though these attitudes are not necessarily

constructed on religious grounds at the individual level, they are shaped by a context wherein religion is an inextricable part of public life. It is also impossible to define the realms of non-religious and religious cultural influences, and the very notions of femininity and masculinity could be drawn upon religious, biopolitical, and cultural frameworks. Indeed, our findings indicate that it is not one single form of discourse that defines women's physicality but intersecting regimes of gendered knowledge/power which cross-cut and/or challenge each other.

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Conflict of interest
The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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