A Critical Study of State Control, Elite Female Athletes and Fans' Resistance in Post-Revolutionary Iran

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The situation of women in Iran has dramatically altered as a result of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and Ayatollah Khomeini's establishment of a theocratic state. Despite women's vast participation in the revolution, the newly established state imposed harsh measures on them and diminished their scant rights and the discretions that were gained under the former monarchy (Moghissi, 1994; M. Mohammadi, 2007; Sedghi, 2007).

Following Khomeini's order in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, sex segregation was enforced in almost all public spaces, including educational settings, beaches and buses (Sedghi, 2007). Even with Iranian women's immense public opposition and protest[1], veiling became obligatory for them as well as foreign women in public spaces regardless of their religion (Tohidi, 1991). As the result of the revocation of the Family Protection Law[2] of 1967 and 1973 by the Islamic regime, polygamy was restored (Moghadam, 2002), temporary concubinage (*sigheh*[3]) was encouraged and the age of marriage for girls was lowered to nine years (Esfandiari, 1997).

In the sporting sphere, as in other social domains, political Islamists[4] have redefined gender roles based on *shari'ah* (Islamic canonical law) and have enforced sex segregation as well as the veiling of women in sport activities. Sport competitions for women were denounced mainly due to the immodest forms of dressing by female athletes and the exposure of their bodies to the public gaze that presumed to stimulate male sexual desire (Chehabi, 2002; Hoodfar, 2015). The participation of Iranian women at an international level in sports such as gymnastics, swimming and water polo has been prohibited due to the lack of appropriate Islamic dress codes (Hoodfar, 2015; Pfister, 2003). In addition, female fans and spectators have been subjected to another misogynistic order: a ban from attending stadiums to watch men's sporting events.

Gender ideology and relations under the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) have drawn a considerable attention since the Islamic Revolution. There is a substantive body of scholarship on gender issues and their relation to the state's politics and policies in various domains (see e.g., (Kian, 1997; Moghadam, 1988; Paidar, 1995; Shahidian, 2002). This study does not aim to provide a historical analysis of the state gender policies that altered life experiences of Iranian women post-revolution; its purpose is rather to scrutinize the nexus between the state ideology and gendered policies in sporting domain.

1 For a discussion of women's spontaneous response to Islamization, see Paidar 1995, p. 234-256
2 For an elaboration of the Family Protection Law see Hinchcliffe, 1968
3 For an elaboration of polygamy and *sigheh* see Afshar, 1987, p. 78-82
4 For a discussion of political Islamism (also classified as Islamic fundamentalism) see Akbarzadeh, 2012

The paper contributes to the existing body of knowledge by critically reflecting on the condition of those Iranian women who are not content with the gender policies of their clerical regime and have been challenging and resisting social and political restrictions both within and outside of the sporting domain. These women are not few in number but their voices, images and opinions have been greatly repressed by the Islamic republic.

Ironically, in an attempt to avoid an Orientalist representation, some (sport) scholars in the West have also overlooked the experiences of these women (see e.g., Benn, Pfister, & Jawad, 2010; Ratna & Farooq Samie, 2018). Mahmoud Arghavan (2018) accurately criticizes some postcolonial scholars who in their attempt to construct an 'Other' to the 'Orientalist' account produce another 'Other' to the West, which is just as inaccurate. This notion, which is referred to 'Postcolonial Orientalism' (Lowe, 1991), has mislead many postcolonial/postmodern feminist intellectuals - especially those conducting research about the Middle East - away from criticism of local institutions and political forces (Abu-Lughod, 2001; Moghissi, 1999). It begs the question whether demanding to have control over one's own body and the choice of clothing - as advocated by (postcolonial) feminists in the West - as well as the right to enter stadiums is something extraneous to Iranian women living inside Iran.

1. State's Politics and Women's Sport

State control includes 'the ways in which the state apparatus regulates people's behavior in order to produce conformity with social and political norms, and thereby maintain social order' (Golkar, 2015, p.7). Every state utilizes a combination of different 'hard-line' and 'soft-line' modes to maintain socio-political control in their territories (Innes, 2003). However, hard-line techniques such as coercive methods are predominantly used by authoritarian regimes as they countervail any threat more effectively in the short term. In the long term, soft-line methods such as propaganda and surveillance are favored as they are more efficient and less costly (Golkar, 2015). I shall describe the regulatory mechanisms used by states in detail in the next part. Prior to that, within this section, the focus is on the interplay between sport, politics and gender discussed in literature.

In the context of sport, Houlihan (1994, p.12) identifies three overlapping aspects of the relationship between sport and political ideology: sport as an element in a repressive ideology, sport as a reflection of the prevailing ideology, and sport as a source of counter-ideology. Although sport and sporting events are claimed to provide easily accessible loci for the state's ideological manipulations (Houlihan, 1994, 2000; Cantelon & Gruneau 1982; Hargreaves, 1985), they might also become potential sources of tension and opposition within a state (Houlihan, 1994). In the Iranian context, Fozooni (2004) investigates how football became a site of social contestation where "mullah-bourgeoisie's inability to control and discipline crowds is indicative of a more general loss of authority throughout Iranian society" (see also Bromberger, 2010).

Focusing on women and sport, Birrell and Theberge (1994a) analyze the way through which sport serves to promote traditional gender roles that privilege men over women and result in women's subordination. In various socio-cultural and political contexts, the control of women's bodies has been one of the principal mechanisms of domination. Historically, sport has been a site to exert

control over women through control of their bodies (Birrell & Theberge, 1994b; Hargreaves, 1994, 2000; Messner, 1988; Theberge, 1991). In *Physical culture, power, and the body*, Jennifer Hargreaves (2007, p. 74) investigates the interrelationship between Islam, politics, patriarchy, and Muslim women's bodies in the Middle East:

> The bodies of Muslim women in sport are experienced and mediated through different ideological interpretation of Islam, within the particular political arrangements of specific countries, and in ways that are penetrated to various extents by patriarchal relations of power and control.

By focusing on the case of Iran, Hargreaves (2000, p. 61) identifies that despite the restrictions facing women in Iran, "Iranian women have been freeing themselves *for* sport" (see also Afzali, 2015).

Given a short description of the relevant literature, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How has the Iranian state's control and domination been exerted over elite female athletes and fans?
2. How have gender policies of the Iranian regime such as compulsory veiling and the misogynistic conducts been challenged and resisted in sporting spheres?

2. Theoretical Framework: Feminist Cultural Studies

Critical perspectives, including feminist cultural studies (Cole, 1993) provide a basis to identify the ways through which gendered power relations are produced, reproduced and challenged within society (Birrell, 2000). These relations of power are not stable and steady but rather constantly contested. From this perspective, sport is a cultural practice that is 'embedded in and constituent of socio-political forces of culture' (Birrell & Theberge, 1994c, 326). Sport is not only a site for the reproduction of relations of dominance and subordination, but it may serve as a site for resistance and transformation of those relations (Birrell & Theberge, 1994a).

Feminist cultural studies was generated at the intersection of British cultural studies, socialist-feminist theory and the work of Michel Foucault (Cole, 1993). The field of cultural studies is influenced, among others, by Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Gramsci theorizes that the power of the ruling class in society is exercised by a combination of coercion and more importantly by ideology (Gramsci, 1971). In the domain of 'political society', the state's apparatuses such as the armed forces, police, law, courts and prisons function dominantly by violence and repression and secondarily by ideology. Contrarily, ideological apparatuses including the media, the educational system and the religious institutions function within the domain of 'civil society' to reproduce cultural hegemony through producing consent (Gramsci, 1971). Hegemony, as Buttigieg (1995, p. 7) notes, 'depends on consent (as opposed to coercion), but consent is not the spontaneous outcome of 'free choice', consent is manufactured, albeit through extremely complex mediums, diverse institutions, and constantly changing processes'.

Feminist scholars have been critical of the marginalization of the patriarchal structure of culture from the theories of cultural studies and have suggested that a combination of feminism and cultural

studies is required (Hargreaves & MacDonald, 2000). As (Hall, 1996), p. 34) states, 'increasingly, and primarily in the United States, it is suggested that the theoretical underpinnings of a truly radical, gendered (and non-radicalized) theory of sport lie in the combination of feminism and cultural studies'.

Let me now draw on Foucault's notion of 'disciplinary power' as 'one of the great inventions of bourgeois society' (Foucault, 1991, p. 105) and its influences on the body for the purpose of this study. In *Discipline and Punish* (1991), Foucault explains how the implementation of physical punishments was reduced by the beginning of the nineteenth century and transformed to a subtle form of disciplinary power that focused on the control and regulation of bodies by means of surveillance to produce 'docile' bodies. The disciplinary techniques as described by Foucault objectify bodies and make them targets of power. The body is 'directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it; mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs' (Foucault, 1991, p. 25).

It should be noted that to conceptualize power in this study, the author predominantly draw on Gramsci's theory and have only sparingly used the Foucauldian notion of disciplinary power. Sharing the same perspective with Babak Fozooni[5] (2006), she identifies the limitations of Foucault's analysis in engaging sufficiently with the socio-political context in the Middle East. Those limitations possibly derive from the fact that his theories developed out of European historical and socio-political norms (see e.g., Afary & Anderson, 2005).

Both Gramsci and Foucault, however, reject the view that power is fixed and remains unchanged in the hands of dominant groups; instead, they conceive it as an evolving process constantly challenged, resisted and sometimes transformed.

Resistance is the process whereby subordinated groups refuse to submit fully to their subordination by using different overt and/or covert strategies such as protest, opposition, rebellion, resilience, subversion etc. Clearly not every act of resistance is successful and/or transformative. In this regard, Birell and Theberge (1994a, p. 365) suggest that in order for us to fully understand the dialectical nature of the struggle for power, 'we must include terms that signal the power of dominant forces to "resist resistance" and recapture, recuperate, co-opt, buy out and incorporate the forces of rebellion and opposition'.

3. Reflecting the Role of the Researcher

The author is an Iranian sport sociologist who was born almost a decade after the Islamic revolution. She grew up in the post-revolutionary era in Iran in a gender-segregated and socially and legally discriminatory environment. Since her childhood, sport has been an inseparable element of her life.

5 Babak Fozooni in his book "*What is Critical Social Research?*" uses Marxist and Bakhtian theories combined sparingly with the Foucault's notion of *biopower* as a means of having a more nuanced socio-political analysis of Iranian social movements that take into account not just power relation in a normative, Foucauldian sense, but also classist challenges that are profoundly oppressive in the "fascist oriented" Islamic regime (Fozooni's personal communication as stated in Malamiry 2014)

She competed in numerous local, regional and national sports competitions before she became a member of the Iranian national fencing team partaking in an Asian and a World Cup Championship. Her engagement in sport has not been limited to participating in sports competitions as an athlete, but also being a fan. Hiding her female identity by cross-dressing to be able to accompany her male family members to enter stadiums and watch matches of her favorite football team is something she recalls from her teenage years. She identifies herself as a secular feminist who is critical of the gender policies of the Iranian state and strives for the advancement of women's rights.

Holding an insider position in this study has had the following advantages: 1) relatively easy access to a hard to reach and perilous field, 2) attending a training session of the national futsal team for an observation, 3) finding narrators through networking and conducting the interviews in an unmonitored environment (off the pitch and in training camps). This is particularly evident in the following statement of Sonia, who is one of the narrators in the following study:

> Once some foreigners came to our training to interview us, they [football officials] gathered us together - I'll never forget - and told us: "Pay attention. You won't talk about the barriers and restrictions; you won't tell them about your financial difficulties". They admonished us. We had to lie. No one was allowed to talk about the difficulties or we would be in trouble.

Additionally, sharing multiple commonalities with the narrators led to the formation of a trusting environment during the interviews. It was particularly surprising to see the extent of information given by the narrators about some precarious socio-political and cultural topics. It signified their trust.

4. Methods

In this study, the critically oriented and transdisciplinary approach of cultural studies is applied. The qualitative data analysis is characterized by the theoretical and empirical examination of the relationship between experiences, practices and cultural texts in the context under investigation (Winter, 2013).

To reveal the dominant ideology and the state's gender policies, the legislations that directly or indirectly hinder either elite female athletes or fans in Iran were scrutinized. Additionally, two political statements[6] of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei (taken from his official website) were analyzed.

Texts and images on two selected billboards installed by municipalities throughout the cities in Iran exemplify the ways through which the state practices hegemony. Although the content of the billboards was not particularly sport-related, based on the theoretical framework (manufacturing consent in civil society), it was assumed that they were critical sources to illustrate the gender ideology of the state. The aforementioned set of data was analyzed by employing a critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1993) and a propaganda analysis (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012).

6 The statements were translated from Persian to English by the author

Life history interviews with three national female athletes as well as the observation of a training session of the Iranian national female futsal team serve as additional sources. The interviews were originally conducted for a broader study exploring the case of Iranian female football and futsal players. They focus on the ways through which the players become involved in a traditionally male sport in a patriarchal society and their opportunities and barriers in an Islamic country. The life history method (Bertaux, 1981) provided opportunities for the athletes to talk about their lived experiences over time.

Moreover, three interviews with three national female football and futsal players over an extended period of two years in Iran (2013 and 2014) were conducted. The players were recruited through networking. Those who have had an experience of playing on the national team were recruited based on availability and their willingness to participate in this study. The interviews were conducted in Persian, recorded by using a voice recorder, transcribed and translated to English. Due to the shortage of time and the busy schedules of the players, they were limited to one session per interviewee and each one lasted 120-150 minutes. The interviews were thematically analyzed within the constructionist paradigm. Since the analysis was intended to go beyond the semantic content of the data and identify the underlying ideas and socio-cultural context that enabled the interviewees' narratives, a latent form of thematic analysis was adopted (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In accordance with the ethical principles, anonymity was promised prior to each interview and pseudonyms were employed. The highly critical and sensitive nature of the study requires the author to be extremely cautious in dealing with the narratives and in reporting the findings. In order to protect the safety of the narrators and minimize the risk of revealing identities, the author had to decide how much of their stories can be delineated. This issue limits the final reporting and the presentation of the findings in some parts.

As mentioned, the author was permitted to attend a training session of the national women's futsal team in Tehran after almost four weeks of constant communication and a few meetings with authorities in the Football Federation Islamic Republic of Iran (F.F.I.R.I.). The real nature of the study was not communicated, knowing that this would deny the author's access to the training. Despite the researcher's familiarity with the socio-cultural and political characteristics of the context under investigation, the direct observation of the training session of the national team - even for a few hours - verified some parts of the players' accounts.

During the training, it was not possible to take a photo nor record a video since that would have required an official permission from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Moreover, it was not allowed to ask the players any questions. The coaches and trainers were informed about the presence of the researcher. However, the moral guard (known as *herasat*), wearing a black *chador* (open cloak), sitting very close to the researcher and surveilling every single move, was obviously not. To avoid potential trouble, the field notes were written in English. The head coach was asked only one question: why are the players wearing Islamic sportswear despite the absence of men in the sport hall. She answered that they have to play with it to get used to it.

To scrutinize the nature of contestation and resistance, virtual social spaces such as Instagram and Twitter were analyzed. As a growing body of scholarship indicates, social networking sites have

provided democratic spaces for an expression of diverse opinions of ordinary Iranian citizens - particularly women - and tools for Iranian feminist activists to communicate and disseminate information about various social, cultural and legal issues (Ghytanchi & Moghadam, 2014; Shirazi, 2013; Tahmasebi-Birgani, 2017). Data were mainly gathered from the following two online campaigns: 'My Stealthy Freedom' on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as well as 'Open Stadiums' on Twitter. 'My Stealthy Freedom', with over two million Instagram followers at the time of this study, is one of the most popular Iranian campaigns on social media. It aims to mobilize public opinions about diverse social and political issues such as women's rights, hijab, the female body as well as the rights and barriers of minorities in Iran. 'Open Stadiums' is another campaign that advocates the right of Iranian women to enter stadiums. It is worth mentioning that both Facebook and Twitter have been filtered by the IRI, requiring users to use illegal anti-filter software to circumvent the country's firewall.

The analysis of the virtual social spaces was conducted between January 2018 and February 2021.

5. Findings and Discussion

Drawing on the theoretical framework of the study, in the following section the coercive and ideological means of control used by the IRI over women and the ways in which women have contested the IRI discriminatory policies and commands in the sporting domain are elucidated.

5.1 Coercive Control and Resistance

Discriminatory laws and policies

Various inegalitarian edicts curtail the legal and social position of female athletes and fans. Within this section, two misogynistic regulations that have made headlines in the sphere of women's sport in the last decades in Iran will be scrutinized. Section Three of Article 18 of the Passport Law, which requires married women to obtain their husband's permission to be able to apply for a passport and travel abroad, restrained the captain of the Iranian women's futsal team, Niloufar Ardalan, from joining the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Futsal Championship that was held in Malaysia in 2015. In an interview with Nasim Online News Agency, Ardalan said:

> This is the first time such Asian Championships have been held and I had participated in all training camps of the national team. But I will miss the tournament because my husband is opposed to me traveling abroad (quoted in Kamali Dehghan, 2015b).

The Iranian team went on to win the Championship without her. The same year, her husband prevented her for the second time from accompanying the national team – this time in the Futsal World Cup in Guatemala.

Following the news, to show solidarity with Ardalan and oppose the sexist legislation, the hashtag #WeAreAllNiloufarArdalan was shared on social media so many times that it attracted wide publicity until the Attorney General was required to take charge of the case after appealed. Ardalan finally received a single exit permit from judiciary to join and travel with the national team to the Futsal

World Cup. However, to date, this discriminatory rule has remained unchanged, restricting other women in sporting domain like Samira Zargari, the coach of Iranian women's Alpine skiing team who was barred recently by her husband from traveling to Italy for the world skiing championships (Giuffrida, 2021).

Barring Iranian women from attending stadiums to watch men's sporting competitions is probably the most striking example of the state's male chauvinistic proclamations. Since 1979, female fans have been banned from football stadiums. Following the international recognition of the Iranian volleyball team, women's presence at volleyball stadiums has also been prohibited. Here it should be mentioned that this prohibition only applies to Iranian women; foreign women are allowed to enter stadiums in Iran. Even though there is no legal prohibition for Iranian female spectators to attend stadiums, they have been barred from doing so by the state's authorities and authorized Islamic clergymen on the grounds that there is a high risk of violence or verbal abuse against women. For example, Grand Ayatollah Makarem-Shirazi - a *Shia marja'*[7] and a religious leader - stated that 'everyone can easily watch live sporting events on television at home. Why is it necessary for women and families to go to the unsafe environment of the stadiums? Why even propound such a minor issue to distress the society?' (*"The* Islamic *clerics' opposition"*, 2006).

Despite the best efforts of the regime in the last four decades since the Islamic revolution, Iranian female spectators and women's right activists have constantly resisted the ban. They have implemented different strategies ranging from individual acts of resistance such as disguising as men to sneak into stadiums and publicly sharing their success or failure stories on social media (see Mohammadi, 2020) to more collective and public oppositions including organizing online campaigns like Open Stadiums (see also Afzali, 2015), holding peaceful protests in front of the stadiums during the major matches of the national teams or before derbies in Tehran, launching petitions and urging international sporting bodies such as the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the Fédération Internationale de Volleyball (FIVB) to adhere to their anti-discrimination policies and put pressure on the IRI to end gender discrimination and lift the ban on women (Mohammadi, 2020).

This unabating endeavor of female fans and women's rights campaigners has finally paid off in 2018, when some women were permitted to enter the Azadi (lit. freedom) Stadium, the country's largest stadium in Tehran with a capacity of 100.000. For the Asian Champions League final football match between Perspolis and Japan's Kashima Antlers, roughly 500 women - mostly the family members of the players and authorities as well as some journalists - joined the crowd of 80.000 in Azadi and watched the game from inside the stadium while many others still remained behind closed doors. This was repeated another time for the friendly match between Iran and Bolivia in October 2018. Around 100 women watched the game live in Azadi in the presence of the FIFA president, Gianni Infantino. Alas, this partial allocation of the stadium's seats to Iranian women turned out to be only temporary, as the ban was never lifted ever since[8].

7 The highest level Shia authority to make legal decisions within the confines of Islamic law in the Islamic Republic
8 For a comprehensive discussion of state control and the contestation of Iranian women spectators see Mohammadi, 2020

Debarment and detention

When softer (ideological) modes of control are not successful, detention and debarment are the alternatives for suppressing non-conformist women. In the sporting context, this can be exemplified by the temporary detention of female fans who disguise as men to sneak into stadiums or the case of Ghoncheh Ghavami, a young British-Iranian woman who was arrested outside Azadi stadium in Tehran in summer 2014 while participating in a protest against the stadiums' ban and attempting to watch Iran's volleyball match in the stadium alongside men. She spent five months in prison and was finally released on bail (Kamali Dehghan, 2015a). Although she was initially accused of rejecting the customary ban on women's presence in stadiums, Mohseni-Ejei, a spokesman for the judiciary, later stated that her detention had nothing to do with volleyball and that she was being charged with 'propaganda against the regime' and her relationship with a seditionist group. Faezeh Rafsanjani, the daughter of former president Hashemi Rafsanjani, an Islamic feminist and the main figure in advancing women's sport after the Islamic revolution in Iran, explained that "the word sedition is now a pretext for repression of all those who reject the rule of the conservatives in Iran" (quoted in Alexander & Vahdat, 2014).

The case of Shiva Amini, a former national futsal player who was disqualified from the national team and any further activity governed by F.F.I.R.I., provides a vivid example of the obsession of the regime to exert control over female (athlete) bodies. She published photos on her private Instagram account of her playing a friendly match outside Iran with a group of boys in shorts and without the compulsory veil. In an interview with Masih Alinejad, the founder and director of 'My Stealthy Freedom' campaign, Shiva says:

> … we have tolerated many difficulties and restrictions just because we love sport and want to be successful and bring national pride. But, for the sport authorities, veil carries greater importance than sporting achievements and championships. They control even our private life.[9]

5.2 Ideological Control and Resistance

Propaganda

One way to promote an ideology and maintain sovereignty is through propaganda. Propaganda is associated with the control of public discourse and information flow (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012). The IRI has implemented a variety of methods to shape people's perceptions and manipulate their minds to promote its ideology and impose conformity.

In women's sport, as in other social spheres, the IRI has frequently censored, marginalized and excluded opposing voices and perspectives in the media and in public. The unequal opportunities to access public discourse and communication (Van Dijk, 1993) can be illustrated by Nahid's account when she talks about the absence of space for antithetical voices and viewpoints in the state's media: 'Officials have never reflected the reality of women's football, and we don't dare say anything. They have always been threatening us with exclusion from the team if anyone would speak up'.

9 Masih, Alinejad (@Masih.alinejad). 2017. Instagram Post. https://goo.gl/wczuwt

The periodical mobilization of the radical groups of Ansar-e Hezbollah and Basij[10] is another strategy of the state to demonstrate its popularity and propagate its ideology. In the sporting realm, this can be illustrated by the public protests of the hardliners of Ansar-e Hezbollah as a reaction to the probable presence of female spectators in the stadium during the volleyball matches of the national men's team in Tehran in 2015. Due to pressure from FIVB to lift the ban on women's presence in stadiums, as well as the attempts of many feminist activists, Iranian female spectators have been promised that they will be allowed to watch volleyball matches from the stands; a decision that gave rise to a harsh response from hardliners. Ansar-e Hezbollah distributed leaflets and text messages calling for their supporters to prevent women from entering the stadium: "We are taking a stand against legalizing the presence of prostitutes ... in the stadiums" (Rahimpour, 2015).

With the control and censorship of the broadcast, print and outdoor media of the country, social media has increasingly been used for the relatively free exchange of information, mainly by the younger population. Campaigns like 'My Stealthy Freedom' and 'Open Stadiums' have become spaces for dissent for Iranian women in which "unspoken riposte, stifled anger and bitten tongues created by relations of domination find a vehement, full-throated expression" (Scott, 1990, p. 120).

Among hundreds of posted photos and videos on the pages of those campaigns - mostly from inside the country - some address and criticize the discrimination and restrictions in a sporting context. In the comment section of each post, one can find the resistance of Iranian women (and men) in a collective form. These virtual public spaces are of utmost importance because they reveal the move from 'the individual resisting subject - an abstract fiction - to the socialization of resistance practices and discourses (Scott, 1990, p. 118). In her study of *Social Media as a Site of Transformative Politics: Iranian Women's Online Contestations* Tahmasebi-Birgani (2017, p. 189) explains how women's images without veil, their posts and comments on the media outlets of *My Stealthy Freedom* speak of 'alternative Iranian subjectivities' by contesting "the unitary notion of femininity that has been the hegemonic representation of Iranian women in postrevolutionary Iran".

As far as resistance in the sporting domain, by virtue of these online public spaces, Iranian fans have been able to convey their messages to international sporting bodies like FIFA and FIVB, calling them for support and requiring them to take action on the issue (Mohammadi, 2020). Furthermore, the effort of the regime to control and shut down these online social spaces with the establishment of the Iran's Cyber Police (FATA) testifies to their magnitude.

Billboards and banners installed by the municipalities throughout the cities in Iran have been extensively used as propaganda tools of the regime. To promote veiling, women have been implicitly portrayed on billboards as objects such as chocolate or nuts that are protected as long as they have a cover or shell around them. Presenting an image of an unwrapped chocolate attacked by flies and pairing it with the slogan 'veiling is security' or a shell with a pearl in its heart and the slogan "my daughter, this is a fact: the most precious things in the world have the firmest cover around them" are examples of the endeavor of the state to shape perceptions of girls and women and control their bodies, minds and actions.

10 For a discussion of Basij and Ansar-e Hezbollah groups see Golkar, 2015 and Rubin, 2001

In the official discourse of the state, women are represented as guardians of Islamic virtue and the moral health of society, as seen in the statement of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei from the meeting with the sport administrators and executives of the country:

> In the realm of women's sport, Islamic boundaries [*hudud*] must be precisely observed. The Islamic boundaries are not personalized. Everything must be according to the legislation and the juridical ideas of the leader. Flaunting is prohibited in women's sport because if a society becomes a place for women to flaunt, serious social issues such as those related to family, moral health, modesty and the chastity of the youth will be damaged (The meeting with the sport administrators, 1996).

Additionally, the political Islamists have frequently accentuated the reproductive role of women, their duties to the family as mothers and wives, and have sought to limit the mobility of women and to exclude them from society. For example, following the victories of some female athletes at the 2014 Asian Games, Grand Ayatollah Javadi-e Amoli - a *marja'* and a conservative politician as well as an Islamic scholar - made innuendos about the karate medal winner Hamideh Abassali:

> We incorrectly assume that the integrity of a woman is signified by stretching a leg, hitting someone and gaining a medal for us! The integrity of a woman is signified by her becoming a mother and nurturing her child (BK, 2014).

While the political Islamists foreground the modesty and piety of women and their reproductive role in the society, there is also a dual approach of the state towards women's sport at an elite level. Due to the high level of media attention, the state is well aware of the significance of international sporting events. Such high-profile events have become ideal platforms for the expression and promotion of the state's ideology and principles. The IRI takes advantage of the participation of female athletes at international sporting events and their potential victories to propagate the Islamic hijab, not only domestically but also internationally. Another statement by Ayatollah Khamenei from a meeting with Iranian Olympic and Paralympic champions as an example:

> … a champion publicizes with her morality and adherence to religion [Islam]. It is really important and fantastic that our female athletes participate in sport with the hijab. I do not know if the executives have a genuine evaluation of this fact or not. In one European country, a woman was stabbed to death in a court and in front of the judge just because of her hijab! They are shameless. At universities, stadiums, parks and in the streets, they harass women with a hijab with the support of a fabricated law. Under such conditions, in such countries, a woman with a hijab has become a champion and has required everyone to honor her. Is it insignificant? Is it pointless? It is superb. We must truly admire our female athletes who take part in international sporting events with the hijab and dignity (Statements in the meeting with Olympic and Paralympic champions 2013).

However, the narratives of the players reveal their discontent with the compulsory Islamic dress code and their desire to compete without it. Nahid says:

> It's really hard to play with a hijab. You might get used to it but your body can't function properly. You are limited. We have to wear leggings and loose trousers on top of them with a long-sleeved loose jersey plus a head cover. Sometimes though, in the trainings, some players make their jerseys tighter and roll up their sleeves - only in the trainings. It's not possible to do so in the competitions.

Neda claims a similar point as Shiva Amini concerning the authorities' view on female football and futsal players' dress code: "they don't really care about our performances; they told us several times 'the most important thing for us is your hijab. If you're not okay with it, don't join the national team"'.

The examples of overt and public opposition of female elite athletes in the sporting domain are rare mainly due to the peril of retribution and exclusion from the national teams that is associated with such dissents. The rebellious actions of the former national chess players, Dorsa Derakhshani and Mitra Hejazipour and the first female Iranian boxer after the Islamic Revolution, Sadaf Khadem, who defied the customary Islamic dress-code laws and competed in the international sporting events, are the boldest of such oppositions of the Iranian female elite athletes in the public realm. Following their resistance, Derakhshani and Hejazipour were debarred from the national team (Payne, 2017) and Khadem canceled her return to Iran after an arrest warrant was issued by the IRI ("Boxer Sadaf Khadem cancels return to Iran," 2019). Mitra Hejazipour in an Instagram post denounced the compulsory hijab stating that: it is "a clear symbol of an ideology in which women are the second sex. It creates numerous restrictions for women and deprive them from their basic rights. Is this protection? I say certainly not! It is purely and solely a limitation[11]."

Similar to Mitra, Iran's only female Olympic medalist, Kimiya Alizadeh, who recently sought asylum to Germany also used social media to share her perspective on mandatory hijab and gender-based restrictions. She explained why she had to leave Iran. In an Instagram post, she described herself as following:

> I'm one of millions of oppressed women in Iran…I wore what they [authorities] told me to wear. I repeated what they ordered me to say. They used my medals to propagate the Islamic hijab. I wasn't important for them. None of us are! We are only their instruments…[12]

Despite the gender discrimination, restrictions and trivialization imposed by the Islamic regime on Iranian female athletes, their persistence, participation and success at continental and international level as well as Olympic Games are indeed the manifestation of resistance to an ideology that has relentlessly tried to restrict and instrumentalize women and deprive them from their fundamental rights.

Surveillance

State surveillance is exercised by appointing at least one Islamic morality patrol, known as a *harasat* guard, who always accompany men and women's national sports teams. *Harasat* guards, as agents of disciplinary power of the state, are recruited and assigned to preserve political order in each institution. 'Hierarchical observation' is defined by Foucault (1991, p. 170) as an instrument which helps to transform people into the 'object of knowledge' so that they can be more efficiently controlled and shaped. Since surveillance is hard to be implemented with a single pair of disciplinary eyes to gaze on the actions of everyone, there is a need for a series of supporting eyes to contribute to the process (Markula & Pringle, 2006).

11 Hejazipour, Mitra (Mitrahejazipour). 2020. Instagram Post. https://bit.ly/3qMt9AO
12 Allizadeh, Kimiya (Kimiya.Alizadeh). 2020. Instagram Post. https://bit.ly/3dIF3Gm

In sporting sphere, female *harasat* guards are the surveillance agents of the 'Harasat Office' of the Ministry of Sport and Youth and have the responsibility of monitoring the behaviors of female athletes and coaches, controlling their bodies and protecting their chastity. They might penalize anything that is viewed - religiously and legally - as non-compliant. Indecent dress code, loose hijab, 'immodest' behavior as well as physical contact with the opposite sex - including shaking hands with referees at international competitions - are prohibited and condemned by female *harasat* guards. The presence of a *harasat* guard during the training of the national futsal team, which was briefly pointed out above, is attested by Neda's statement:

> They always accompany us on our trips. They are even present at our national tournaments. Even at our training camps, at our dormitory. They watch us and tell us what we may and may not do. We wear headbands and put on a hijab, even a single strand of our hair must not be obvious. I don't know how to explain, it's like slavery. We are both physically and mentally under pressure.

In the process of manufacturing consent and ideological control, propaganda and surveillance are complementary. Propaganda imparts dominant beliefs, surveillance polices them (Yeo, 2010). However, different forms of resistance of Iranian fans and athletes in the sporting domain are indicators of what Cole and Birrell (1986, p. 24) called a 'leaky hegemony' or the impotence of the state to exercise total control over women.

6. Conclusion

This study is an attempt to critically reflect and address the situation of Iranian women who are vastly under-represented in the official discourses of their clerical regime, in both sporting context and elsewhere.

By drawing on feminist cultural studies, the paper examines the interrelationship between state ideology and gender policies in the sporting domain. It investigates the ways in which sport operates as a favorable area for the Iranian state to enforce its gender ideology, while also providing agents of resistance, a site whereby female fans, elite athletes and women's rights activists contest the oppressive gender relations and practices.

The findings suggest that the Islamic regime perpetuates social control, exerting its power over women by using a series of coercive and ideological means to fulfil its objectives. Discriminatory edicts against women, the debarment of elite female athletes and detainment of female fans are all powerful examples of the regime's coercive tactics. Propaganda, monopoly of the media and communication sources as well as disciplinary surveillance are additional means through which the state seeks to manufacture consent, distort information, manipulate cognition and tries to reproduce hegemony. Mobilizing radical groups and imposing further restrictions on female nonconformists facilitate the state's ability to falsify a sense of popularity of its principles.

The study indicates that sport has also become a site of contestation for Iranian women to oppose and resist the regime's patriarchal relations of domination, demand gender equity and strive for reform both individually and collectively.

While there are only a few examples of public opposition of elite female Iranian athletes mainly due to the risk of exclusion from the national team, female fans have been active agents for change for many years. In the absence of free and democratic public spaces for negotiation of their rights, Iranian women - and men - have increasingly used social media and online campaigns as enabling platforms to partake in a communication discourse, raise awareness, practice democracy, mobilize masses and to protest against social injustice.

Photos, videos and personal testimonies on the social media pages of campaigns like 'Open Stadiums' and 'My Stealthy Freedom' of women sneaking into stadiums disguised as men, organizing peaceful protests in front of the stadiums, launching petitions and delivering them to the international sporting bodies like FIFA and FIVB are striking examples of a lengthy struggle against the misogynistic ideology of the Islamic regime in the sporting domain.

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