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Sports: Turkey

Entry Author: Sertaç Sehlikoglu, Ph.D, MA, BA, BA. (University of Cambridge)

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Entry Abstract: Women’s sports have been considered as more than an individual act not only in Turkey, but also in the broader Middle East. This entry historicizes women’s involvement in professional and non-professional sports in Turkey. The entry starts with locating state investments in women’s sports during early republican Turkey within broader questions about women’s bodies and nation building. It then opens up multiple layers through which women’s sporting bodies have been subjectified in different ways by contrasting and opposing patriarchal ideologies and the ways in which sport has been perceived as a political tool for discursive and cultural formation of “the nation.”

Subject Words: Turkey: Republican Turkey; Sports: Women’s Sports; State; Women’s Sexuality; Embodiment; Eugenics; Nationalism; Feminism and Nationalism

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INTRODUCTION

This entry reviews Turkish women’s involvement in professional and non-professional sports through a historical lens. It demonstrates how sports have been perceived as more than a matter of developing physical fitness, health, and team spirit and have become part of certain political agendas of various public actors in the region. By doing so, it also reveals the operations that have objectified women’s bodies through sports, “thereby negating and distorting women’s own experience of their corporeality and subjectivity” (Mahmood 2005, 158). Once the meanings that nation-building projects attribute to women and their bodies are clearly identified, it is then easier to analyze the ways in which women negotiate the meanings, ideologies, and discourses in question. In order to identify these meanings, this entry will begin with an overview of the history of sports and women’s involvement in them, starting from the end of the nineteenth century in the Middle East, and particularly in Turkey.

SPORTS IN TRANSITION: FROM COLONIALISM TO NATIONALISM

It is curious how several branches of the modern sports, such as archery, wrestling, horseback riding, racing, and swimming, were for centuries part of the official military training of men in the Middle East and are still considered “traditional” sports in the region (Fişek 1985, Di-Capua 2006). They were mainly available to men, and were associated with “honor, bravery, and male group spirit” as virtues of masculinity (Di-Capua 2006, 440).

In the mid-1800s, several Western sports clubs were established for men in the major cities of the Middle East, such as Cairo, Alexandria, Istanbul, and Beirut. These sports clubs were established under the roof of European colonial organizations such as embassies and schools (Fişek 1985, Yurdadön 2004, Di-Capua 2006,). The clubs provided opportunities for their —

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predominantly male—members to play Western sports, including cricket, hockey, soccer, tennis, and basketball. In Iran, Western sports were first played by the teams established by the South Persia Rifles during the British occupation in 1916 (Guttmann 2004). With this particular colonial encounter, the idea of such physical activities as “sports,” an involvement for pleasure and health purposes, was introduced to the Middle East.

An important characteristic of Western sports clubs was their civilizing mission (Fişek 1985, Yurdadön 2004, Di-Capua 2006, Atalay 2007), which included promoting gender equality and increasing women’s visibility in the Middle East (Sfeir 1985, Yarar 2005, Di-Capua 2006, Talimciler 2006.). Women, whose close male relatives (i.e., fathers) were members of these sports clubs, also had access to the facilities, which made them the first women to start playing Western sports, at the end of 1800s (Yıldız 2002, Di-Capua 2004, Atalay 2007).

By the late nineteenth century, an anticolonial rhetoric started emerging in the Middle East against Western sports clubs. Western sports practiced under the auspices of Western powers became a matter of contestation in the period of anticolonial movements. Many started arguing that the British and American sports clubs were acting as venues to “damage” young minds, by allowing Western culture to infiltrate into local social life. With such nationalist sentiments, Ottoman governors prohibited the public from participating in these clubs and sports of the “imperial powers” (Fişek 1985). This anticolonial sentiment, however, did not ban the various branches of sports introduced to the Middle East. Rather, the activities, clubs, and various branches of sports were nationalized. Shortly after, starting in the early 1900s, Western sports clubs were gradually replaced by Arab (Palestinian, Lebanese, Egyptian, and North African), Turkish, and Iranian clubs promoting nationalism as part of the anticolonial movements in the region.

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Both national and colonial sports initiatives perceived sports as a tool to shape and transform the nation, only with different ideological agendas. While colonialism aimed to civilize the colonized, the new nationalist projects aimed to modernize, improve, and advance the young bodies by creating a healthy nation through sports. According to Di-Capua, the *ahālī* spirit “promoted the European idea that a physically and mentally healthy individual is a precondition for the well-being of a robust nation, for the nation itself was the sum of these healthy individuals” (Di-Capua 2006, 440).

The first three decades of the Turkish Republic were characterized by the republican project, which would come to be referred to as Kemalism after Kemal Atatürk’s death, and it involved building a secular and proud European/Western nation state through a set of reforms. As a reflection of this nationalist movement against cultural colonialism, the first purely national sportsclub of Turkey, Guard Force (*Muhafız Gücü*), was founded in 1920. Guard Force was established by and for military people, training men in marathon, sprint, equestrian and, in later years, in non-military-related branches such as basketball, football, and volleyball. Another notable investment in sports by the State of Turkey was the formation of *Türkiye İdman Cemiyetleri İttifâkı* (The Alliance of Exercise Association of Turkey) in 1922, which became responsible for managing sports activities in Turkey. As will be discussed below, the republican project has invested in sports not only at the institutional level, but also at the discursive level.

TURKISH MODERNITY AND NATION BUILDING THROUGH WOMEN’S SPORTS

In Kemalist discourse, many modernist values, such as physical fitness (i.e., involvement in sports), gender equality, and progressive thinking, are suggested to be characteristics of “the Turks”—referring to pre-Islamic Turkic ethnicities—that were forgotten during Ottoman rule (see

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Atalay 2007, 26). According to this discourse, the republican ideology restores the original national characteristics of Turks back to the Turkish nation (see Navaro-Yashin 2002, 15). Among those national characteristics of Turks, sport is also defined as an important duty of all devout subjects of the nation, a perspective that persists in both popular and academic work from the 1990s on sports in the early republican period. The following quote from a graduate dissertation submitted to Marmara University is a good example of this perspective: “The word ‘Turk’ is associated with bravery, heroism, soldier and conquest in the entire world. The core part of these qualities are, assuredly, the discipline of body and sportsmanship” (Hergüner 1993, 35).

The nationalist overtone is a result not only of the anticolonialist nationalist rhetoric of the early 1900s, but also of the fact that the first managers of sports clubs were ex-military men who had fought during World War I and the Turkish War of Independence. Thus the strong patriotic reinterpretation of sports was partly inevitable because the founders of such clubs had formerly pursued similar physical activities as part of their military training.

The founder and first President of the Turkish Republic, Kemal Atatürk, is said to have been influenced by the eugenics discourse of his contemporaries in the early twentieth century, as well as by the mind/body dichotomy of Enlightenment philosophy (Alemdaroğlu 2005, 64). In his speech at the opening ceremony of the Alliance of Exercise Association of Turkey in 1938, Atatürk claimed that sports are crucial in the world because they “concern[s] the improvement and development of the race” and are “also a matter of civilization,” two good reasons why he considered it essential for the country he meant to build (Tuzcuoğulları, 2001, 55, 57–58). According to Atatürk, the bodies of Turkish people “remained in the East while their thoughts inclined towards the West” (Cantek 2003, 33). Hence the body had to be molded into better shape, in accordance with European standards, in order to complete the project of creating a modern

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nation. His claims also reflected the prevalent ideologies of the time in the region concerning sports and creating fit bodies through regular physical exercise.

Another important characteristic of this period was the gradual acceptance of the idea of women’s participation in sport—not only in Turkey, but also in several parts of the Middle East (and Europe). Countries such as Iran and Turkey, where the physical changes in women’s public visibility and bodies were considered indicators of the achievements of modernist nationalist projects, invested in women’s sports as a pillar of the project after the 1920s. In Iran, Reza Shah Pahlavi promoted sports for women both at amateur and professional levels, and this enabled Iranian sportswomen’s participation in games for the first time in 1939. In 1926, Turkey opened its first national course to educate professional sportswomen in Istanbul (Çapa Teacher’s School for Girls). The course lasted nine months and successful students were sent to Europe for further education.

THE FIRST TURKISH SPORTSWOMEN: ELİTE AND ENGINEERED

Sport was a crucial tool in Atatürk’s nation-building project, and women’s involvement was essential. As future mothers of the next generation, women were expected to have healthy and strong bodies. Moreover, women’s fit bodies were no longer hidden behind curtains and veils, and international competitions were the perfect venue to display the physical transformation of the Turkish nation into a Western, modern, and secular society, all pillars of the new republican ideology.

In the 1920s and 1930s, sport was predominantly seen as a masculine activity, not only in the Middle East, but also in the Western world. In Turkey, the normative culture of sexuality compelled women to control their physical activities in public, including running, jumping, swimming, and so forth (Sehlikoglu 2016). However, as discussed above, women’s participation

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in sports was significant in the republican project. This dilemma was resolved with the particular patriotic approach to sports in the early republican period, whereby the first sportswomen were perceived as heroic figures devoted to their nation. Their devotion was about stepping into a masculine zone to fulfill their duties of establishing a nation, and about overcoming their gendered barriers.

After the 1920s, a very limited number of women from elite families became involved in Western sports, both as professionals and as amateurs. The first sportswomen were the relatives of members and managers of those clubs and they became involved in sports with the personal encouragement of Kemal Atatürk himself. There are anecdotes about managers who sought to find female members through their male members to satisfy Atatürk’s request (Atalay 2007).

Women who were professionally involved in sports came from wealthy, educated, and prestigious families, and most of them had other professions as well. Suat Aşeni and Halet Çambel, for instance (Figure 1), who represented the Turkish Republic in Berlin in 1936, were the first Turkish women to participate in the Olympic Games in fencing. Suat Aşeni was the daughter of a wrestler and military man Ahmet Fetgeri Aşeni, who was also the founder of one of the largest national sports clubs of Turkey, Beşiktaş Gymnastics Club (BJK). Halet Çambel was born in Berlin, and her family was able to afford private courses in fencing for her. Later, she became the first and one of the most well-known professors in archeology in Turkey (Tuzcuoğulları, 2001, 10). Another leading sportswoman, Sabiha Rıfat, who became the first female volleyball player in 1929, was one of the very few female members of a national (and men’s) sports club, Fenerbahçe. Rıfat was an educated woman from an elite family and was part of the construction team for Anıtkabir, Atatürk’s mausoleum, as the first female engineer of Turkey.

Figure 1:

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Suat Fetgeri Aşeni (second left, circled) and Halet Çambel (right, circled) with other sportswomen participating in the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin (Source: Arıpınar et al. 2000, 44)

A special issue of the popular Turkish daily newspaper *Hürriyet*, published on the occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Republic in 1998, focused on sports and women in the early republican period in an article entitled “*Kafesten Pistlere*” (From the wooden cage to the track). The *mashrabiyya* or in the Turkish case, *kafes*, which can be translated as “wooden cage,” was previously used when gender segregation was being practiced. It ensured that women would not be seen by men while women could watch the men in such places as mosques, palaces, and certain houses. The transformation of women’s rural-looking, veiled, “unhealthy,” and therefore uncivilized bodies into civilized, disciplined, and liberated bodies was perceived not only as an indicator of the westernization and modernization of the country, but also as a way to create and define the new ideal Turkish woman (Kandiyoti 1989, Göle 1996, Alemdaroğlu 2005) (Figures

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2a–c). A major resource on Turkish women’s involvement in the Olympic Games makes the following point, which has been cited by several researchers: “The Turkish Republic, which proceeded on the pathway of modernization with giant steps, had to show the world that the Turkish woman now was no longer under the *çarşaf* (black veil) or behind the *kafes* (wooden curtain)” (Arıpınar, Atabeyoğlu, and Cebecioğlu 2000, 7). Thus women’s participation in sports was perceived as a way to represent and demonstrate to the global (especially Western) gaze that the Turkish nation was succeeding in modernizing itself (Yarar 2005, Talimciler 2006, Atalay 2007).

Figure 2a: Physical Education Classes



1926 in city of Izmir, Turkey: Teachers’ School for Girls, Second Grades during Physical Education (Terbiye-i Bedeniyye) Class. Source: Personal Archive, Sertaç Sehlikoglu.

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Figures 2b & 2c: Physical Education Classes



1926 in city of Izmir, Turkey: Teachers’ School for Girls, Third Grades during Physical Education (Terbiye-i Bedeniyye) Class. Source: Personal Archive, Sertaç Sehlikoglu.



1926 in city of Izmir, Turkey: Teachers’ School for Girls, Fourth and Fifth Grades during Physical Education (Terbiye-i Bedeniyye) Class. Source: Personal Archive, Sertaç Sehlikoglu. (The note at the bottom states Third grades as well, for the photo on 2c)

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The fruits of the Turkish modernization project were presented to the widest international interest at the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin. Nationalism was at its peak during this pre-World War II period, and the 1936 Summer Olympics were crucial in the history of Turkish sportswomen. As previously mentioned, Alemdaroğlu suggests that Atatürk was highly influenced by Hitler’s ideology about eugenized bodies (2005, 64). The 1936 Summer Olympic Games are particularly interesting for Turkish sports because they were where the first fruits of “eugenics a-la-Turca” were presented to an international gaze. This happened on eugenics’ home turf, Germany, where Hitler transformed eugenic theory into a nationalist project, according to Alemdaroğlu. It is important, however, to distinguish between this “eugenics a-la-Turca”—a secular republican “body-building” project focused on the outer shape and appearance of bodies—and conventional eugenics, which seeks to meddle in a population’s genetic composition, as suggested by the term itself.

When it comes to male bodies, it is possible to claim that transformation through sports was largely concerned with creating strong bodies fit for different kinds of “service” to the country. However, in the case of women, their healthy, fit, urban-looking bodies were discursively portrayed as the physical representation and manifestation of the new country, which had cut its ties from the Ottomans and “turned its face to the West.” The sportswomen of the early republican period were also the mothers of a fit and “pure” next generation of the nation, with their bolstered reproductive capability and mothering skills. Reproducing a pure nation, according to eugenics discourse, which, as already suggested, had some influence on Kemal Atatürk’s thinking, is “an honor and privilege, if not a duty” (Kevles 1995, 184) for any woman who has the capacity to give birth. In short, the Republican state turned women’s bodies into both the arena and the subject of Turkish identity formation.

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WOMEN’S SPORTS AS SEXUAL ACTS: RESISTANCE AND COUNTER RESISTANCE

Although the state elite emphasized the importance of women participating in sports, the number of Turkish women involved in sports remained fairly low until the mid 1990s (Fişek 1985, Harani 2001, Baydar 2002, Amman 2005). However, due to the lack of statistics about the number of women involved in professional or amateur sports, it is hard to provide an exact number or percentage. Still, it is possible to draw some conclusions from the news published in sports magazines during that time. In 1930 in Turkey, for instance, only two of the thirty-five athletes who participated in the series of athletic contests organized by Galatasaray Club were women (Yarar 2005). These contests were for amateurs who participated in sports as a hobby, yet female participation was still very low.

Public opinion shaped by gendered cultural norms was undoubtedly at play regarding the resistance towards women’s involvement in sports in Turkey until only two decades ago. From the 1930s to the late 1970s, the majority of parents did not allow their daughters to join sports teams or compulsory physical education classes in public schools (Pfister and Fasting 1999, Amman 2005). This was partly linked to the popular belief that young women who were involved in sports would lose their womanhood (Hergüner 1993, 10) and become masculinized. Di-Capua (2006) also documents the public rumors that physical exercise could damage the hymen and result in the loss of virginity (2006, 440). Also, with reference to the cultural context, the bodily movements of women are coded as sexual; therefore, these codes limit women’s public behavior and movements. Because scholars insist that it is the families (mainly fathers) who prevent their daughters participating in sports, it is difficult to find out whether girls wanted to participate in any form of sports themselves, but we do know that there was a public resistance in general in the Middle East (Hergüner 1993, Pfister and Fasting 1999, Amman 2005). The compulsory physical education

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classes were often opted out. Hoşer tells how, as recent as “[i]n 1970, in one of the most prestigious schools of Istanbul, a total of 3 out of 25 girls are doing sports in the gymnastics class; two German and a Turkish girl, the rest have fake medical reports that allow them not to attend. The boys of the same class are fully attending” (Hoşer 2000, 3, translated by Sehlikoglu). Teenage girls attending compulsory physical education classes in high school still faced sexual harassment from their male classmates as late as 1980 (Hoşer 2000, 42). The social pressures were influencing professional sportswomen as well, taking forms of sexual harassment. Many women’s volleyball teams were violently harassed by male spectators (Hoşer 2000, 43–45).

CONTESTED EXERCISE: SELECTED RECENT DEBATES AND FATWAS ON MUSLIM WOMEN AND PHYSICAL EXERCISE

Although fewer myths and misconceptions about women’s involvement in sports circulate today, it still is perceived as a sexually charged act and is subjected to clerical scrutiny in Islamic contexts. Heteronormative sexual norms continue to exercise power over women’s physical activity in public and in private spheres. Since the 1990s, this general social resistance to women’s involvement in sports has been reinforced by an emerging neo-Islamist ideology.

By the 1930s, the religious social circles in Turkey assumed the role of preserving tradition and started to build the cornerstones of Islamist ideology early during the republican era. According to this ideology, the transformation of Turkish women during the early republican era represented a process of degeneration and distancing from their traditional roles. The word *fitne* or *fitnah* (secession/chaos) thus came to embody the process of women’s emancipation from domestic life. It also became synonymous with unveiling and gaining access to public realms. Women’s participation in sports was not acceptable, because sports took women outside of these

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normative boundaries. As republican ideology tried to transform Turkish women by imposing unveiling and new dress codes upon them in order to make them “modern,” Islamic ideology emphasized the “protection” of women through their veiling and the preservation of their traditional roles in the household. This ideological struggle turned women’s bodies into an arena where opposing lifestyles and values were contested: the one represented by republican, secular, modernist ideals, the other embedded within Islamic, traditionalist discourses. However, as social resistance has faded in recent years, new spaces (gender-segregated or mixed-gender) and possibilities have opened up to accommodate and welcome women into the world of physical education, exercise, fitness, and sports (Sehlikoglu 2016a).

AN INTERESTING CASE: EXERCISE FEST

AS A STAGE OF THE CHANGING IDEOLOGIES IN TURKEY

In discussions about the nationalist project of Turkey and sports, *Idman Bayramı* (Exercise Fest) is an interesting example that embodies the changing ideologies and approaches concerning sports dating back to the late Ottoman period. The Fest had begun to be celebrated as *Idman Bayramı* (Exercise Fest) in the last years of the Ottoman Empire, in 1916 and 1917, on 12 May. In these first two Fests, only men were allowed to participate. The purpose was to celebrate and welcome spring with the spirit of youth (Armağan 1998, 2012).

After a break of ten years, the young republican country decided to continue the Fest in 1928, on 10 May, with a more Western name, *Jimnastik Bayramı* (Gymnastics Fest) (Figure 3). Changing the name from an Arabic to a French (*gymnastique*) word was also meant to symbolically reflect Turkey’s westernization.

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Figure 3: Atatürk’s Day



The first celebration of Gymnastics Fest, name of which is now “Atatürk’s Day” after the date was pushed to 19th of May, 1938. Source: Personal Archive, Sertaç Şhlikoglu.

In 1938, Atatürk decided that the Fest should be celebrated on 19 May, which marks the beginning of the Turkish War of Independence. Therefore, the Fest transformed from a celebration of the coming of spring into a remembrance of the War of Independence. As it turned out, 19 May 1938 marked Atatürk’s last public appearance. The celebrations continued throughout the next decades of the Republic. After the third military coup in 1980, the name of the Fest was switched to “Remembrance of Atatürk, Youth and Sports Fest.” Once again, the event and its name were convenient tools to create and manage a collective memory (Figure 4).

Figure 4: The changes in the names of a Fest in Turkey. Credit: Sehlikoglu

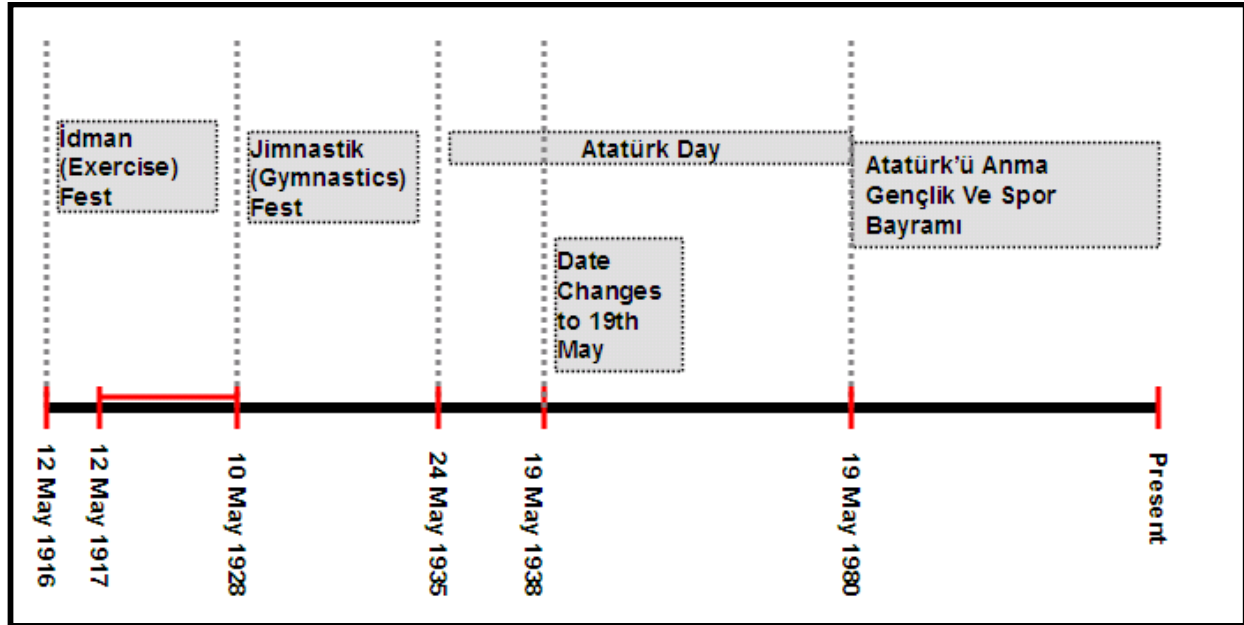


Table showing the changes in the name and dates of the fest that is known today as “Remembrance of Atatürk, Youth and Sports Fest” (Atatürk’ü Anma, Gençlik ve Spor Bayramı) since 1980. (Sehlikoglu)

In the gymnastics fests of the early republican period, the appearance of girls used to have symbolic meaning as a representation of liberated female bodies. Today, the length of girls’ shorts and skirts becomes a disputed subject every 19 May. Longer skirts are criticized as a symbol of “Islamization” in Turkey. Comparisons of the length of the skirts of today with the length of those of the 1950s are made in the mass media after every 19 May Fest. Another question the media poses every year is whether the governing neo-Islamist party (AKP) members are watching the Fest or closing their eyes when the girls are performing their shows.

Over the last decade, Turkish women have become increasingly interested and involved in exercise, as observed in middle-aged women walking fast on the streets and public parks with their

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robes and sneakers; images of older women on daytime TV programs exercising with the hosts of women’s shows; a proliferation of healthy lifestyle, fitness, exercise, and weight-loss products on the market; and exercise and beauty tips on the national news channels. The number of women-only gyms, pools, sports centers, and exercise sessions increased twenty-fold between 2005 and 2012 in Istanbul. The demands of women of ages from fifteen to late fifties and from different socioeconomic classes in Turkey to exercise in segregated spaces have opened up a whole new market. “What is at stake is not women’s desire to lose weight or become fit. The core aspect of women’s desire is to feel (*italic*) healthier, slimmer, and even stronger which is, in their mind, is already associated with a better, a more advanced self” (Sehlikoglu 2014, 2016b).

CONCLUSION:

SPORTS EDUCATION AND WOMEN’S BODIES AS ENCOUNTERS WITH PATRIARCHAL IDEOLOGIES

In Turkey, both secular modern and Islamist ideologies lay claim to women’s bodies through sports. In this counting, women’s bodies have long been the target of multiple patriarchy—including both Islamic traditionalism and secular nationalism. On the one hand, Islamic ideology enforces ethical standards of modest dress, confinement to domestic spaces, and gender segregation. On the other hand, Turkish secular nationalism enforces modern Western outfits and mingling with the opposite sex. Although veiled women have been caught between these patriarchies, they have been able to act as agents of a neo-Islamist movement that seeks to integrate religious and modern identities as a hallmark of Turkish Islam. Since the establishment of the Republic in 1923, the construction, formation, and representation of women’s bodies have been

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politicized by both the secularists and the traditional Islamists, and have revealed a wide range of cultural meanings, mores, and power dynamics at play.

Women's sports have been considered as more than an individual act not only in the context of Turkey, but also elsewhere in the Muslim world. The debates surrounding women's sports and physical activity are very much related to broader discussions including, but not limited to, modernity, nationalism, and nativeness, because physical exercise is based on defining, shaping, and reshaping women's appearances and bodies and on using the body as the stage for representations of the nation at large. Focusing on the discursive and cultural productions of the nation-state, Sirman argues that "women were made part of the nation through the control of their bodies and, through cultural elaborations of femininity, the definition and control of the cultural boundaries of the nation" (Sirman 2005, 149).

The state seeks to build the bodies of its citizens through its myriad institutional and discursive apparatuses. As Das and Poole have pointed out, "sovereign power exercised by the state is not only about territories, it is also about bodies" (2004, 10). Putting women's bodies at the center of nationalist debates, in effect makes them embodied representational subjects of certain national identities. This investigation will be helped by calling to mind Giorgio Agamben's use of a Foucauldian framework in looking at "the individual as a simple living body become what is at stake in society's political strategies" (1998, 3), because it allows us to think about the role of the sovereign as formulator of subjects. In a parallel vein, Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989) problematize the role of the nation-state in a way that is fruitful for this discussion, because it exposes the ways in which it treats women as second-class citizens while simultaneously locating them at the center of nationalist projects.

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