



Logo of ©MWIS Blog

Using Web 2.0 for Research and Networking on Muslim Women in Sports:

The Case of ‘Muslim Women in Sports’ Blog

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As stated on its description page, the blog *Muslim Women in Sports*¹ (MWIS) consists of a collection of news and articles on Muslim women and sports around the world. I decided to create the blog due to a lacuna of a central repository of collected materials about Muslim women's involvement in physical activities. Since I was asked to share the background story of the blog for this book, I need to go back to May 2008, two months after the exciting yet innovative symposium on Sports and Muslim women, which took place at Concordia University in Montreal. Although the blog isn't a by-product of the symposium, the idea was triggered after chains of events following the symposium.

Background Story

As an ambitious undergraduate student at the time, I assisted Professor Homa Hoodfar of the Anthropology/Sociology department at Concordia University in coordinating and hosting the

¹<http://muslimwomeninsports.blogspot.ca/>

symposium. Professor Hoodfar, acting as a mentor, suggested I document the conference in a report.² While accumulating and sifting through the information available online about Muslim women's participation in sports, I realized that while there was a wealth of data available, it was scattered amongst a diversity of sources, and many of the articles were only accessible for a limited time. My initial thought was to save as much of the available data as I could in my own archive. In order to use the data for any future academic work, it was necessary to store all the pertinent links and retrieval dates, as part of proper academic citation guidelines. Once I started forming the archive, honestly, it turned into a somewhat tedious task. I was piling up all this written data, most of which it seemed would not likely be used by anyone else in the future. Plus, I, along with Professor Hoodfar and maybe a couple of other colleagues, would be the only ones with access to the archive. I then decided it would be a more worthwhile endeavor to publish all of this information on a blog, so anybody interested in the subject would be able to access easily, once they searched for the keywords.

In time, step-by-step, I realized that to widen the possible audience and interaction with the information, it would be beneficial to establish a broader range of social media platforms. This resulted in developing a contact email address for any possible queries on the blog, an appropriate URL, a Facebook fanpage, a Twitter account (@Mslmwomensports), a blog logo and finally business cards. In 2009, I designed a logo for the blog, composed of the colors purple and black – often associated with feminism – a footballer icon, and a crescent – a symbol of Is-

² The full report is available on the Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) website:

<http://www.wluml.org/sites/wluml.org/files/WLUML%20Sport%20&%20Muslim%20Women%20symposium%20report.pdf>

lam. I re-designed the original blog according to this color scheme as well.

Beginning in 2012, two authors joined the MWIS blog as regular contributors: Dr. Samaya Farooq from the University of Derby (UK), and Shireen Ahmed from Toronto. Dr. Farooq's current research interests extend to sport and its potential to operate as an agent for social, cultural, political, and ideological change(s). As an expert in sports sociology, Dr. Farooq specialized in British Muslim women's involvement in sports and is one of the co-founders of the research network *Sports, Islam and Muslim Communities*.³ Her work draws attention to important academic and theoretical discussions on the topic. Ms. Ahmed on the other hand, as a sportswoman based in Toronto, nourishes the blog with her articles based in experiential perspectives, through an innovative, encouraging and positive lens.

When it was first launched, the MWIS blog almost exclusively re-published news, articles, videos and photos that had already been published elsewhere, providing the links to the original sources. Today, as part of a broader network focusing on women, sports and Muslim identity, the MWIS blog receives around 2000 visitors per week, and many more via a sister website, Women Talk Sports (<http://www.womentalksports.com>), where each and every entry to the MWIS blog is automatically uploaded and reaches a wider audience. From our feedback, we see that MWIS mainly attracts the attention of Muslim women who are seeking positive stories that encourage participation in sports, as well as of researchers, academics and journalists interested in the topics covered.

As a feminist initiative, MWIS gives voice to secular and pious Muslim women equally, providing a platform geared to those

³ <http://sportislammuslimcommunities.blogspot.co.uk>

facing barriers to participation in sport because of bans on wearing hijab on the field (e.g., rulings by FIFA and other sports organizations), as well as those whose participation is limited due to the regulations of their own country (e.g., in Iran). MWIS brings forward the less heard stories of Muslim women living both in Muslim and in non-Muslim contexts.

Blog Power and Becoming an Independent Actor

With its balanced, continuous and diverse entries, MWIS received recognition by various international networks. *Ms Magazine* for example, invites MWIS to contribute to their well-known Feminisphere under the sports section.⁴ According to research conducted by an independent media research company,⁵ MWIS also appeared as one of the most reputable and relevant resources discussing Muslim women and sports during the 2012 London Olympics, and was also listed as the 7th most listened to resource discussing the 2012 Olympics in general, beating several prominent daily newspapers.

The MWIS blog's feminist tone is appreciated and perceived as 'objective' by many sports activists, researchers, feminists and journalists. For a couple of months before the 2012 Olympics, MWIS posted dozens of articles about FIFA's hijab ban and about Saudi Arabia's resistance to sending a female Olympian to the 2012 games; both were discussions central to reflecting upon important barriers towards Muslim women's participation at the Olympics. Once the FIFA ban was lifted in July 2012, and Saudi agreed to send women to the Games, MWIS took on an initiative to support Iranian feminists who had been demanding that Iranian female Olympians not to veil if they so choose

⁴ <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2012/08/31/femisphere-sports-bloggers-with-a-gender-lens/>

⁵ Traackr.com

by launching the Right to Unveil Campaign.⁶ The campaign was calling on the Iranian government to allow their players to unveil, if they want to, insisting that female players should not face with any charges if they play without a headscarf during 2012 Olympics. While the campaign spread and gained support amongst both Iranian and Turkish feminists, it did not result in any changes to regulations on the part of the Iranian government. Still, it was an important moment and initiative for building international solidarity for Muslim women's access to sport.

With the growth of MWIS and its supporting networks, it became clear that simply re-publishing the news from other sources was rather limiting our scope. A unique strength of the platform became providing a forum for original pieces. The Iranian campaign was a strong example of the ways in which the MWIS blog was becoming a prominent social actor. Especially during the Olympics, there were times where sports journalists or students authored articles inspired by the entries of the MWIS blog. I receive emails from students on a weekly basis who were seeking guidance for their research about Muslim women in sports, as inspired by the blog. Although many researchers and journalists interested in subject inevitably refer to MWIS, there are of course occasions where they do not do so, since it is only in academia where we make a point of referring to every little resource we draw from. Interestingly though, I discovered that on many such occasions, it is often readers who remind the author to refer to MWIS blog when

⁶ This is where I announced it:
<http://www.muslimwomeninsports.blogspot.co.uk/2012/07/iranian-female-players-right-to-unveil.html>

This is the twitter campaign:

<https://twitter.com/search?q=%23IranianFemaleOlympiansRighttoUnveil&src=hash>

And, if your friends know Turkish, these are the news agents announced my campaign: <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/planet/21011758.asp>

<http://bianet.org/biamag/dunya/139987-londra-olimpiyatlarinda-neler-oluyor>

they comment under the news articles. By tracing the referring URLs on MWIS, I realized that a very important source of unique visitors on the blog come via comments sections of news and articles – some of whom then become regular followers of MWIS.

Statistics

Keeping track of website traffic is a very important tool for both assessing who your audience is, as well as discovering avenues to engage new followers. I use three different types of resources for gathering internet statistics, partial results of which will be shared here. As of September 2012, the MWIS blog had received over 230,000 unique visitors since May 2008, of which 137,000 had visited during the last 12 months. Most of the visitors are from the US (65,000), followed by the UK (29,000), Germany (15,000), India (13,000) and Canada (12,000). The ranking list then continues with Australia, Pakistan, Turkey, Malaysia and France. Although many of the visitors do not seem to come from Muslim-majority countries, the comments and emails I receive indicate that there are an important number of the followers from Western countries are especially younger Muslim women.

Overwhelmingly, unique visitors find the MWIS blog through Google, when they search for particular keywords. The most common search keywords that direct visitors to the blog include generic words like “Muslim women”, “Muslim Women Sport” or “hijab football”; names of particular people such as “Nawal el Moutawakel” or “Hayat Lambarki”; and keywords related to heated debates such as “Aliya Mustafina Muslim”, “Burkini”, or “Dinara Safina Muslim”.

We note that it is very rare for our readers to leave controversial comments on the blog, simply because many of the entries are

originally published by another resource and do not belong to MWIS. What the followers commonly appreciate is related to the fact that all of this diverse information is available together in a single source. The most popular post of all time on the MWIS blog is about Indian schoolgirls' practice of Chinese martial arts. The visitors for this article came largely from Western countries, as well as Malaysia, India and Pakistan. The article includes several photos of young girls who are wearing white scarves, white pants and long grey (knee-level) robes during their practice. Thus, they were embodying the possibility of empowerment with Islamic clothing, which is not generally tight sports suits combined with a headscarf, but rather very loose clothes overall. The readers' appreciation of the girls' stories in the article on Chinese martial arts is a symbol of the overall appreciation of the blog space; it is very much related to what I refer to as *Islamic pride*, inspired by young Muslim girls and women empowering themselves through sports. According to one of the comments on the article, the schoolgirls "prove one can exercise in decent Islamic clothing", all the while challenging stereotypes and carving out a space to affirm and express their unique identities. They are *proud* to see such inspirations for "Muslimah".