

Desiring Muslim Women, or, a Feminist Study of Istanbulite Women’s Exercise

Sertaç Sehlikoglu



Dr Sertaç Sehlikoglu is Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah Research Fellow in social anthropology and specialises in gender and subjectivity in the Middle East. Before completing her PhD in social anthropology at the University of Cambridge, she studied sociology (Boğaziçi University, Istanbul), anthropology (Concordia University, Montréal and University of Toronto) and Women and Gender Studies. Currently working on various book projects, Sehlikoglu is the recipient of a number of awards and grants, has published several articles, and has edited journal special issues.

On one of my flights between Istanbul and London, I came across a gripping artwork entitled *Impossible Dream* by the Gaza-born Palestinian artist Laila Shawa in the in-flight magazine of Turkish Airlines. The picture depicts ten women in colourful burqas, leaving uncovered only their closed oriental eyes, outlined in dark kohl. Holding ice cream, they are unable to eat it because of their face veils. By the time I saw this artwork I had been presenting parts of my research in several conferences, and, despite the detailed ethnographic description of my chosen subject I kept receiving at least one awkward question, a question that suggests a mental barrier combined with an academic etiquette working against bluntness. The picture gave me one of those ‘eureka’ moments a researcher experiences in her life, since this marvellous artwork was summarising the major obstacle standing in front of me.



Impossible Dream by Laila Shawa

My latest work is about ordinary Istanbulite women’s involvement in the exercise trend, or, as women often refer to it, their *spor merakı* (interest/curiosity in sport). According to unofficial numbers, one and a half million Istanbulite women were involved in this trend during 2012, including those exercising at various gyms and public parks, attending free sessions run by the municipality, and so forth. The way women follow and create this trend has been extraordinary and against many odds – including religious, familial, and even secular ones. It’s also true, that middle-to lower-class women’s exercise has been seen as a trivial matter by the young and educated Istanbulites. In my eyes, the extraordinariness combined with the perceived banality deserved 12 months of ethnographic research.

Sports have been used by the Turkish Republic as a tool for transformation from the 1920s onwards. Highly influenced by eugenics discourses of the time, unfit Eastern bodies of Turks were to be moulded into a shape fit for the nation through a series of initiatives, such as physical education classes and annual Youth and Sport Fest celebrations.

Coming from elite backgrounds, the first sportswomen of Turkey were role models to those who embraced the Westernizing values of the nation. Even after Turkey’s decades-long investment in biopolitics, exercise, gymnastics, sports, and women’s and girls’ physical education, the idea of female engagement in sports was felt to be somewhat incongruent, if not outrageous or repugnant in the minds of the non-elite majority. The compulsory physical education classes in high schools had famously been opted out of by girls with medical reports (it was always thought that the parents, most likely the fathers, were responsible for that) and the gymnastics performances of the annual Youth and Sport Fest celebrations have always been a matter of public anxiety when mixed-sex youth are seen parading in shorts.

However, by the time I started my research in 2008 the middle-aged Istanbulite women who went walking in the



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Women using outdoor gym equipment in Cumhuriyet Park. To respect the women’s requested anonymity their faces are not shown.

parks had already become city legends known as ‘*Sporcu Teyzeler*’ (Sporty Aunties). While the outdoor gyms replacing playgrounds were strange to the majority of Istanbulites, they were nevertheless swiftly discovered by the middle-aged women (often wearing long robes and large headscarves) – a discovery that made the equipment even less appealing to the youth. The contrasts between the unfit, joyful, ordinary, and often covered bodies of Istanbul’s sporty aunties and the fit, disciplined, serious, less covered, and elite bodies of early Republican sportswomen, are at the heart of my research. These contrasts present one of the few occasions where the veil drawn over women’s desires becomes relatively transparent. Taking a feminist approach, I refuse simply to see Istanbulite women as mindless followers of a neoliberal trend. Rather, I have developed a multilayered analysis of how women use *spor merakı* to manifest a desiring self, that takes them out of the domestic zone, physically, emotionally, and also imaginatively.

Coming back to the thought-provoking painting by Shawa, desire and Muslim women are simply incompatible in some people’s minds – *impossible*, as the artist herself put it. Desire, in this mind-set, is decaying and temporary, like the ice-cream cones the women are holding in the painting. Because of the very barriers Islam poses for women’s lives in particular, it is difficult to reach the objects of desire. Shawa’s artwork was very vocal, even without its title. In this mental framework, Islam is a regulatory, non-liberating religion and it therefore denies women’s desires.

My interlocutors are simultaneously Muslims, women, citizens of Turkey (that is now in a sad state of tension between the ‘developing’ and ‘developed’, the traditional and modern, the religious and secular), and residents of Istanbul (a metropolitan city with a population of over 15 million). Istanbulite women’s ever-increasing interest in exercise is the very product of their ability to act against multiple norms and to cope with changing habits and embodiments, as well as the lifestyles of their city and the world. It is this capacity of desiring selves which enables women to transform the meanings and categories that limit their bodies physically, temporally, and spatially towards the formation of a collective trend. In contrast to overtly oppositional resistance, this capacity is purposefully unthreatening and so often remains veiled and understated, which is why it hasn’t previously received the anthropological attention it deserves.