

## Choosing Islam and football

Choice as “the central moral category” among Swedish female Muslim football players

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While many studies on Islam have examined highly committed Muslims that *consciously and consistently* strive for perfection in their religious, ethical, and moral practices, this paper focuses female Muslim football players who *consciously and consistently* strive for perfection as football players. They share a recognition of the authority of religion but do not practice it as an over-arching teleological project of ethical self-improvement in terms of faith and ritual. Instead, they point to the role of Islam in their lives as comfort and rest when the rigors and demands of elite football feels pressing. But their stories also show that Islam also brings about negative experiences, where they encounter Islamophobia but also comments from puritan Muslims who claim that Islam does not permit women to dress or act as football players. Here these football players point to the societal lack of respect of their life choices, not only in relation to football but also Islam. In viewing their Muslim identity as involving personal choice rather than heredity, they affirm both the power of the individual and the freedom to choose, which are so much a part of the modern project.

Sport has (and still is) an arena for subordination and marginalization of women, but also an arena for fellowship and liberation (Tolvhed 2015). Sweat, heavy breathing muscles and competition were for long perceived as the very opposite of femininity. Women's sport was also seen as an unwelcome competition for financial resources.

In most sports, women have been forced to fight against prejudices and norms in order to gain recognition, but in a comparative perspective, the opposition to women's football appears to have been particularly compact. One explanation for this seems to be that football, more than many other sports, was/is associated with the edification of masculinity (Lundberg 2018).

### Swedish football

The breakthrough of women's sports in Sweden came during the 1920s, when women also fought for the right to behave and dress more freely. Handball was launched as a suitable ball sport for women and quickly became popular, but the opposition to women's football was strong. The total male dominance in football continued for yet another couple of decades.

1966 is often considered the starting point for Swedish women's football. This is the year when some women interested in football formed the team Öxabäcks IF (Olofsson).<sup>1</sup> In the beginning the team only played "old-men-teams" but the teams reputation spread and in 1968 the number of Swedish female football players were around 500. Interest in football among women increased rapidly and in 1972 there were almost 10,000 female football players. The rise of women's football in Sweden is in parallel to women entering the labour market on a new level and women who played football in the 1960s and 70s claimed that their social status was positively affected (Hjelm & Olofsson 2003).

When Sweden in 2003 won silver in the women's football world cup the match was viewed on live TV by about 3.8 million viewers in Sweden (out of 8.958 million inhabitants this year).

Since then, the popularity has increased massively. Today the Swedish women's national team is one of the best national teams in the world, according to Fifa's ranking.

One could assume that football in Sweden would reflect the Swedish society, a society that today can be described as both one of the most secular and the most multi-religious in Europe. This is thus not the case if one compare to other countries in Europe. The Swedish population stands at about 10 million inhabitants out of nearly 8% can be called Muslim. Within men's football there is of course Rami Shaban who has played for Arsenal, Fredrikstad, Hammarby and Zamalek and several other teams, but in terms of women's football there is so far no star such as for example Nadia Nadim.<sup>2</sup> (Denmark's response to Zlatan Ibrahimovic, see Berglund 2021).

There is thus hope for the future. 21-year-old Rosa Kafaji is a rising star, in January 2022 she transferred from her mother club AIK to BK Häcken, and in august 2024 she signed a contract with Arsenal. The transfer is described as "pioneering" since the amount paid for the transferred might be the highest ever in Swedish women's football.<sup>3</sup> She is thus not only one of Sweden's best football players but also outspoken about being a practicing Muslim where she in an interview to a sports journalist says: "My faith is an important part of my personality. I feel like I could not have done anything without God. I feel that I

am protected, that I get hope. For example, I have many friends who do not know who to talk to if something is difficult. I just talk to God.”

This study’s empirical material consists of 7 semi-structured interviews with young female Muslim football players. All but one are born in Sweden, with parents arriving from a diversity of Muslim majority countries such as Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

The empirical material is, of course, too small to make any general statements but could be understood as a window into the life worlds of young Muslim football players in Sweden. Football players who do not only struggle to win for their teams but sometimes also have to struggle against negative comments from neighbours, relatives, fellow players parents.

In the following I will highlight these experiences by bringing forward Sanaa and Samar. Two football players with very different experiences but who have in common that they have supportive parents (specially fathers) and that they come back to the fact that playing football AND being practising Muslims is their own choice.

**Sana** is 16 years old and plays for a team in southern Sweden. She has played football as long as she can remember, but in a team since she was seven. In the first years her father was one of two couches. Now he is the one driving her and her team mates to various games and he is always there to watch the games. Her father used to play football in an Iraqi team before he moved to Sweden and “loves football more than anything”. She says her uncles and some of the cousins are also real “football freaks”. Sana tells me that some of her friends are jealous of the supports she gets from her family in terms of playing football and that some friends are not allowed since their families do not consider football acceptable for girls. Sana tells me that her mother is very devout but it is her own choice to practice Islam. She tries to pray regularly, fast during Ramadan and used to take lessons in reading the Quran when she was younger. When asked about challenges she says that “salafi guys” in the neighbourhood has commented negatively on her playing football, but that she does not care that much. In school she says that classmates are proud of her, also the boys. In the team her Muslimness has never been a problem, there are other Muslim players although they do not pray. One thing that made her upset though is comments from fellow players parents, for example when she missed a penalty during Ramadan. She heard someone saying it was because she was fasting, but Sana says it was not. Sana of course follows both Nadia Nadim and Rosa Kafaji on social media and is also friends with Rosa. She says it is incredibly inspiring to have them as role models.

**Samar** is 17 years old, lives on the west coast of Sweden. She has played football since she was a kid when she played with her brothers, in a team since she was eight. She says laughing that she is a more perfect football player than Muslim, she says “one has to live” and “I cannot practice everything”. She talks to God when she is sad and sometimes before entering the pitch. Her family, but specially her dad has always been very supportive. She says that her family is pretty secular, “like most Swedes and many kurds”. She has an uncle in Kurdistan who says handball is better for girls and always ask why she does not play handball. She finds this annoying. Samar sees herself as a role-model for younger girls that play football, but not specially for Muslim girls, but for all. None of the women in her family wears a headscarf so she has never considered it. She has a friend who plays football in headscarf, something that she considers “very cool”.

Sana and Samar’s stories echo arguments from the early days of women’s football in Sweden, the difference being that they are directed at them as *Muslim* women, not “only” women, but they have role models.

The interviewed football players all refer to playing football as a very personal choice, where other activities that are popular among young women, such as hanging out with friends or going to the gym are not prioritized. Their stories point to one of modernity’s central features: the prominent place of the individual over and above the group. In our modern societies, it is the individual, rather than the group or the family, that is expected to make decisions about matters large and small. Tordis Borchgrevink argues that the ability to choose is a “fundamental moral category” in Western societies (Borchgrevink 1997: 31). Moreover, several scholars have noted that the way in which young Western Muslims independently construct their approach to being Muslim tends to reflect modern Western civilization’s dominant beliefs about the self (Berglund 2013b; Jacobsen 2010). In viewing their Muslim identity as involving personal choice rather than heredity, young Muslims affirm both the power of the individual and the freedom to choose, which are so much a part of the modern project. Families are thus of importance, specially fathers... fathers who have themselves played football, fathers who drive them around Sweden to take part of watch their games, fathers who argue for football against uncle’s who say girls should play handball, fathers who shout when they score, fathers who were coaches in younger years (Kliger 2020).

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