"Muslim Women" and Gender Inequality in Australia's Assimilationist-Multicultural Policies. Participation in Sport as a Case Study

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Abstract[*]

When talking about Islam, the "religionization" of subjects - in particular female subjects - becomes the primary analytical tool to describe power relations within cultural groups and in multicultural societies. Likewise, religionization is widely employed in neoliberal western societies to discuss the very identity and human rights of Muslim women in relation to citizenship and migration policies. In the capacity of minority-

group members, Muslim women are hardly ever addressed as fully developed agents of change and self-enfranchisement. Moreover, they tend to be reified as an aprioristically self-standing sociological category and instrument of scientific inquiry.

The Australian case provides an exemplification of how both the monoculturalism of assimilationist policies adopted by several governmental mandates, and the over-celebrated multicultural policies allegedly ending racism, have ended up sanctioning the "ungovernability" of Muslims within Australian society (Hage 2011), by addressing gender inequality as an innate attribute of *being* a Muslim woman.

In the aftermath of the 2005 Cronulla Riots, which more overtly showed the inter-ethnic conflicts of Sydney, the proposal of ending the gender inequality of "minority women" has been increasingly championed by campaigns grown in an increasingly racialized community environment.

The article investigates - through semi-structured interviews - how Muslim women associations in Australia currently intend to approach gender inequality, and how female soccer players in two different Australian cities tell their identity work in relation to their decision of participating in sport. By fully embracing anthropologist Hage's argument (2011), this paper confirms, first, that the antithesis between assimilationist and multicultural views is actually a false issue, in that assimilationist policies still reside at the heart of multicultural governance; second, that the antagonistic binary between "liberal host societies" and "oppressive minority cultures" is misleading, since female players' access to Australian official matches is in practice denied by government policies rather than "minority community" culture.

Keywords: islam, gender inequality, multiculturalism, assimilationism, sport, religion talk.

1. Introduction

A clear academic and social interest in the agency of women of so-called ethnic minority background is a tacit legacy of historical gender violence and oppression. This has

often been discussed in the media as well as in feminist discourse on multiculturalism. For instance, multiculturalism has been described as a threat to female individual rights (Okin 1999), being subjected to a «double discrimination on the grounds of their sex and their minority status» (Langvasbraten 2008, 45), which has by now resulted in being strategic to discuss such topics rather than self-standing or meaningful *per se*[1]. In the present paper, I will refer to normative multiculturalism, which seeks to preserve cultural diversity as a «societal good» (Ivi, 34), in contrast to policies aimed at assimilating cultural difference into majority culture.

Constructed binaries between minority and majority cultures tend to misinterpret gender equity. Gender equity is not only the elimination of discrimination to ensure equal treatment between genders, but it is also about ensuring that gender is legally and morally recognized in a way that equity will be enabled (AEU 2008). Qualitative research prioritizing everyday feelings and facts has largely proved that gender policy rarely manages to universally promote fair treatment, equal opportunity, free choice about work and family and independence from family (Kay 2006).

Unsurprisingly, discourses on male dominance and privileges in Australian Muslim communities prevail, and often intertwine with nationalism. This phenomenon points to the marriage between maleness and national identity, which is certainly longstanding (Joseph 2010). It also raises interest in how some sectors of society – such as sport – are governed with respect to gender. In the case of Australia, government funding for subsidies towards sports activities is equally distributed across industries to allegedly avert gender inequality.

By drawing on one-to-one and Skype interviews conducted with Australian soccer female players with a Muslim background, this article will unearth the contradiction between the official sports dress code and Gender Equity policies in Australia.

I here question the abused instrument of "Muslim women" as an aprioristically self-standing category for analytical inquiry, which leads to inaccurate heuristic outcomes. In other words, the religionization and ethnicization through which Muslim women have often become objects of both public concern and scientific study have proven in-

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[1] Such as domestic violence, early marriages, and genital mutilation, which are acritically associated with an inherent deficiency in "minority cultures".

appropriate. Yet, the femininity of these subjects and their decision to uphold and practice Islamic beliefs can still constitute a sociological variant, which is worth deconstructing *vis-à-vis* a complex environment. Such a variant is therefore used here to question the epistemological validity of studying "Muslim women" as a denominational and ontologically given category.

I therefore draw on the ban on wearing the veil in official (national) sport competitions in Australia to shed light on the interface between the so-called minority cultures, the aprioristic analytical category of "Muslim women", and government multicultural policies.

In this article, I will partially address national policy with respect to gender inequality as experienced and tackled by Muslim Women's Associations in Australia - formal entities representing the female Muslim community. Although the different way in which Muslim communities deal with inequalities have proven to affect women's decision of participating in sport, this article will not tackle hegemonic discourses of femininity within the "minority culture", that deem female participation in sport as culturally inappropriate. Finally, I will investigate the controversial relation between a discriminatory national policy and the muddled experiences of the interviewed female soccer players.

2. Methodologies and epistemologies adopted

The sample recruited for this study has been conducted on an age and gender basis, with no social class discriminant, although a large segment of the women who decide to participate in sport usually belong to Australian middle class.

This study is based on four in-depth interviews with Muslim women – of whom three are members of formal sports associations and Muslim women's organizations in two Australian cities - ranging between 20 and 35 years and mostly being second-generation migrants, all Australian born. Their identity stories and personal decisions behind sports dress code and participation in sport have played a major role, despite the impossibility – and the undesirability - of constituting a large sample. Should four interviews be seen as thin evidence in the Social Sciences, they still uphold sufficient representativeness

standards in a context where female participation is made of very small numbers (which we officially lack). Furthermore, these four in-depth interviews – however more meant to delve into identity work than to ensure demographic or social representativeness - can still be a fundamental point of departure for future studies that address a similar research scope.

The names of the research participants as well as the organizations interviewed and their locations will not be mentioned in order to protect the privacy of all individuals, considering the relatively small number of female soccer players in Australia and the associations they generally affiliate with. Finally, this inquiry has been integrated with the consultation of media and government reports sanctioning gender policies as much as sports activities and associations in Australia.

While scholars generally look to Islam to find answers and explanations, this study is mostly intended to focus on the identity work of the interviewed subjects, putting special emphasis on the subjective experience of each interviewee. With this article, I do not aim to seek Islamic influence on female participation in sport. I rather view religion as part of the individual cultural capital. Nonetheless, this is not to deny that women's participation in sport also varies according to individual interpretations of Islam. Prophet Mohammed is said to encourage women to sport – there is a *hadith* speaking of him telling his wife 'Aiysha to run (Walseth and Fasting 2003, 48). At the same time, physical running and screaming are often viewed as male attitude in the deontological code that governs public spaces in Muslim majority societies (Ivi, 57).

Conceiving of religion as only one of the forces that form the individual and contribute to her socialization process is a departure point to understand the imperative of not adopting sexual movements or attitudes in public spaces (Ivi, 54). As Walseth and Fasting have argued (2003), sports clothes are easily associable with sexual attitudes. However, some women have been said to participate in sport to get closer to God and get a place in heaven, rather than using God to be justified in their desire to practice physical activities and perform better (Ivi, 57).

If the association between female body and sexuality cannot go unheeded, the *arbitrium* of - and on - the body has been described as a synonym with self-determination and opportunities to increase power and gender status (Mahmoud 2004). The decision

of joining or not joining a sports team, therefore, still unearths the extent to which power strategies are internalized by the subjects. The interpretation between one's own body and power eventually impinges on the choice of participating in sport. Yet, the decision of Muslim women not to participate in sport does not have to be mechanically seen as compliance with power relations or subjugation to a male dominant society. Every response should attentively be contextualized.

Religion meant as a tile of cultural capital, which forms the Bourdieusian everyday *habitus* of each individual, will now be considered in relation to sport and funding policies that the Australian government promotes and adopts.

3. Australian Governmental Policies in History: Multiculturalism and Gender Inequality

The initial ideology of Australian migration policy was mostly about reinforcement and extension of the British Empire. The white Australia Policy in 1901 used the Immigration Restriction Act to exclude non-white and/or non-Europeans (Hage 1998). Afterward World War II, borders were more open, with an increasing need for low wage labourers and unskilled workers, who were expected to assimilate to Australian society. In the late 1940s, 97% of the local population was British-born (Tabar *et al*. 2003). Aborigines and migrants were presumed to give up their own cultural and linguistic heritage and adopt the culture of the majority. Policies of integration were subsequently introduced over the 1950s and 60s, and adopted as an official government policy towards the Aboriginal people.

The field of national power in Australia (Hage 1998, 57) was initially a "field of Whiteness" dominating the state management of Australian national space since the 1901 Federation. Whiteness does not merely refer to skin color, and, according to some scholars (Tabar *et al.* 2003), not even to what anthropologist Hage describes as

> sanctified forms of the cultural capital of national belonging — the knowledge, physical characteristics, and values - but also the accumulation of national capital by learning how to speak the official language, local cultural practices — that is, by assimilating (Ivi, 270).

All major political parties, at that time, were supporting assimilationist policies, which imply for migrants to give up their cultural baggage and assimilate into the dominant Anglo-Australian way of life (Ivi, 271). Whiteness, indeed, becomes «a strategy of containment preserving the centrality of white national managers while being interested in protecting the symbolic capital of minority ethnicities» (Samovar *et al.* 2009).

If the white Australia policy was initially dominating state management by requesting the assimilation of migrant cultures into the Anglo-Australian way of life, in the 1970s multicultural policies protecting and even celebrating cultural differences were promoted. Policies towards the Indigenous population had once again changed to self-determination. In 1973, the Whitlam government established the official policy of "multiculturalism", according to which the notion of cultural differences within society needs to be accepted and celebrated (Tabar *et al.* 2003, 272).

At that time, the 1978 *Galbarry Report* fostered the adoption of the multicultural policy and way of life, including the introduction of new translation services for migrants, the establishment of multicultural radio services, and the incorporation of multiculturalism into health, welfare, and education policy (Ivi). Throughout Australian history, however, governmental multicultural policies and objectives were continuously changed and lost their effectiveness. Multiculturalism has persisted to the present day as a way of naming the modality of governance in Australia, presently epitomizing a space able to guarantee the only possible social security from the government's perspective. For instance, many Muslim parents stated that they feel almost forced to send their own kids to Islamic schools not necessarily for a better education, but rather for the safety of their children (Phillips 2007).

Prime Minister John Howard eventually forbade his 1996 government to use the word "multiculturalism" in the media or in parliament, to move towards assimilationism and sponsor security and societal cohesion.

In light of this, the Muslim women's participation in sport can be revealing of the economic, cultural, and social capital of migrant communities (Tabar *et al.* 2003, 276). It has been argued that Muslim Australians rarely express their feeling of national belonging due to perceptions of exclusion and being part of an out-group, rather than to

unwillingness to integrate (Rane and Hersi 2012, 136). Indeed, the Australian media coverage of Muslims has a strongly orientalist approach in aprioristically defending this societal group,[2] as though it were homogenous, and portraying it as a threatening Other, backward, inferior, and strange. Thus, construing the idea that Islam inherently threatens the western way of life (Ibidem). The political and public discourses that the Australian press often produce frame "Muslim integration" in society as problematic, defining people only in terms of their own religious beliefs, and seeing Islam as the very impediment to this integration (Ivi, 144).

In the endemic viewpoint, however, there is no conflict of loyalty between Islam and Australian citizenship as a personal feeling,[3] as statistics collected among 50% of Australian Muslims – aged 24 and under – show (Phillips 2007). There is often the pre-assumption that the relationship between western liberal governments like Australia and the Muslim community should be eased (Ghobadzadeh 2010), whereas the fact that among the 226 members of the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia there are no Muslim women is not dealt with at all (Ivi). In fact, in terms of formal appointments, Muslim women continue to be under-represented. For example, when John Howard established a Muslim Advisory Committee after a meeting with Muslim leaders in August 2005, the committee was already lacking female representation at that time: that is to say, out of fourteen members on the panel, only three were females (Ivi). This happens despite the fact that women make up 47.3% of the total Muslim population in Australia (Ivi).

Australia is still sometimes recounted as a *terra nullius*, a land with no previous local population, inhabited by the sons of the colonizers, who, at some stage, had to deal with

[2] For example, last April 2015 an Australian 23-year-old woman, Stacey Eden, hit the national headlines for standing up for a Muslim woman being bullied on a Sydney train. In this case, "Muslimness" is treated as something to defend by patronizing the victim, who is voiceless and denied in her biographic power of speaking herself. Media coverage of the episode helped depicting Muslims as a "minority", way in which Eden named the woman she defended in official interviews. This shows how the language of a paradoxical assimilationist multiculturalism (Hage 2011) identifies stereotypical characteristics of an ethnic and confessionally marked subject as innate in that subject. Both assimilationism and multiculturalism in Australian policies therefore seem to imply a high degree of representational violence.
[3] A statistical snapshot on Muslim Australians is available from a Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) fact sheet that includes unpublished 2001 Census data on birthplace, ancestry, sex and geographic distribution in Australia. The fact sheet shows that Australian residents who identify themselves as Muslim (281-578 individuals) make up approximately 1.5% of the population and that 36% of all Muslims in Australia were born there.

"Islam", depicted as a homogenous entity bringing multiculturalism from overseas. In this context, inequalities are seen as coming out of traditional minority cultures, and multiculturalism is practically a sugarcoated form of assimilationist monoculturalism (Hage 2011), which bountifully gives a "fair-go" to differences (Australia is in fact commonly referred to as the "fair go country", where life becomes easier and more generous for anyone).

4. The Endless Debate on Multiculturalism and Women's Rights

There is a common belief that all Muslim women are endemically homogenous and harmoniously seamless (Atasoy 2006; Hamdan 2007), whilst differences go beyond the Shiite and Sunni sects, which are the most known. Multiculturalism policies have fostered sub-multicultural communities of Muslims who share common features while at the same time differ *vis-à-vis* many other characteristics (Hamdani 2004; Nesbitt-Larking 2007; Saeed 2003; Yasmeen 2007, also mentioned in Ghobadzadeh 2010).

It has been argued that women's participation in organizations and institutions rather than in formal electoral politics marks the difference, for instance, between multicultural Australia and multicultural Canada (Ghobadzadeh 2010). Muslim women-founded organizations and Muslim communities are the spheres in which Muslim women seek to fulfill their political ambitions (Ivi).

Such Muslim women's associations mostly concentrate on public speaking, professional trainings, human rights workshops, and provision of children services. Supporting refugees, facilitating new arrivals' integration, organizing courses including language courses for women, financial support, and social services are the main activities in all 14 women's associations across Australia[4].

The activities of these associations seem to primarily be centered on fighting gender inequality by making women do and learn things, rather than discussing inequality as a discourse, or necessarily linking it up with religion. The Australian government rather uses equality as the banner of multiculturalism, rendering gender inequality an issue in-

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[4] I have collected this information via a Skype interview with the leader of an Australian Women's Association. September 2015.

herent to "minority culture". By doing so, the Australian government implicitly constructs the mainstream white model for fostering gender equality, especially after the Cronulla Riots in Southern Sydney in 2005, when ethnic conflicts took place between the "white" and the Lebanese components of Australia's youth society.

In the interviews conducted, none of the interlocutors emphasized any correlation between political participation and participation in sport in the capacity of association members to a socio-cultural group officially deemed to be called and experienced as a "minority". [?]

Multiculturalism and feminism – or, more appropriately said, general women's rights – have been discussed as inherently at odds with each other. Such discussions have however failed to shed light on the endemic stratification of minority cultures, conceiving of them as monolithic and therefore ignoring the gender power relations underlying them (Langvasbraten 2008, 35). In this regard, it should also be noted that in Australia it is not easy to discuss "minority culture" or social groups, in that, after the Australian Aboriginal genocide and the survival of a very small component of that population (roughly 5%), the descendants of British colonizers yet cannot be compared to the native-born majority peoples of other countries where no genocide of an indigenous population has taken place and where there was a paradoxical «conquest of the state by the nation» (Arendt 1951, 275) in the formation of the modern state era (i.e. European countries, which, however, hold the largest responsibility in colonial history's violence in overseas territories).

In a nutshell, speaking of "Muslim minority culture" in Australia can even be misleading. Nonetheless, Human Rights organizations and Muslim associations have mobilized to end forms of violence against "Global South" women, too frequently portrayed as «deaths by culture», to which western women parade as being more «immune» (Narayan 1997, 84). Thus, minorities are mainly constructed by ethnicities or confessional features, rather pointing to how much political power these societal components own and not to real demographic indicators (Carpi 2015).

The challenge at stake is therefore forwarding gender equality policies that would not stigmatize or generalize cultural groups (Langvasbraten 2008, 47), and, above all, view the latter as shifting.

According to some scholars (Song 2005), by accommodating a minority cultural group, societies allow the most powerful members of some social groups to oppress more vulnerable members within their group. The problem of gender inequality within minority communities therefore partially stems from struggles internal to the culture (Ivi); however, the internal-external dyad, which seems to explain the source of cultural conflict, is still not satisfactory as gender statuses are rather shaped by intercultural and phenomenological interactions (Ivi). In other words, what lacks is the «interactive view» (Ivi, 474). Hence, in Australia we cannot properly speak of minority norms threatening majority norms in pursuing gender equality. This view misconceives culture as a well-bounded group, self-standing and unchangeably definable, like in Kymlicka's positive view of multiculturalism (Waldron 1995).

By embracing social constructivism, community membership can be changed as much as the categories of belonging which are associated with a particular culture: the historical and collective discussions within the same cultural group and between insiders and outsiders – as much as this remains distinguishable - should not go unheeded. Waldron's words (1995; also in Song 2005) in his critique of Kymlicka's hymn of multiculturalism and preservation of culture are worth a mention: «To preserve a culture is often to take a favored snapshot of it, and insist that this version must persist at all costs». Cultures, to him, are actually «multiculturally constituted». Likewise, Shachar (2001; also in Song 2005) stresses that all societal and cultural groups are always reacting to the effects of state power and are therefore shaped by such reactions.

In Australian society, the religious "belonging" has overshadowed race and social class variants. This is what can be called "religionization". Nonetheless, the sexist discrimination or violence acts coming from structural forces of the cultural community - or outside the latter - have a "boomerang effect" (Song 2005, 486). The dichotomy between «egalitarian majority cultures and oppressive minority cultures» (*Ibidem*) remains false, but media tend to concentrate on such variables when speaking of immigrants or people born and bred in Australia.

Media and scholars have often discussed the tension between particularistic and universalist understandings of the political identity which underpins the Australian nation state, in which the universalist are more favored. The elaboration of democratic citizen-

ship, which is both tolerant[5] and inclusive, has gradually been foregrounded (Stokes 1997)[6]. Multiculturalism is paraded as diversity, and showcased on reality TV shows, such as Master Chef Australia. Mariam Veiszadeh, an Australian activist of Iranian descendent, as a voice for the Muslim community denounced that the Master Chef Show in 2012 included not only people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds but also from several religious backgrounds. Multicultural tokenism, hence, emerges as to highlight the fair-go character of Australia, being more inclusive and diverse than ever[7].

There are generally three frameworks in which gender inequality is considered to take place in Australia (McCue 2008): pay scales and salaries, women's leadership or representation in high echelons or social sectors, and violence against women. This article mostly focuses on the second category, engaging with sport as an arena of societal encounter or denial of the latter.

How does community engage with these three phenomena of inequality? How does the central government address them instead? None of the inequality categories are inherent to Muslim communities. Nonetheless, patronizing inequalities by presupposing inability to defend oneself – as, for instance, wearing a veil or embodying terror following the "2014 Sydney hostage crisis" - is part of the propaganda for the multicultural enterprise of Australian society, in which Twitter tags such as "I'll ride with you" in defense of discriminated Muslims had been used.

All interviews conducted with members of women's associations confirm that the image of the "oppressed veiled women" is the most visible part of the Muslim population. Identity is here reduced to people's lifestyle: values, rituals, food (Tuori 2007). In the interviews conducted, the head of an Australian Muslim women's association confirmed that it is the «visible female Muslim» – commonly called the «public face of Islam» (McCue 2008, 12) - the one who is imagined by the government like an inherently

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[5] This term has increasingly accumulated negative connotations in that tolerance always includes the power not to tolerate, and therefore disguises and reproduces power relations (Hage 1998).

[6] It is interesting to note that there were two conceptions of identity in Aboriginal political thought: one based on equality and shared citizenship; the other on a distinctive Aboriginal identity, already pointing to a tension between assimilationism and multiculturalism.

[7] Similarly, as I will later mention (p. 17), in Australian media it is possible to read: «There's a big battle underway in Western Sydney for the hearts, minds and dollars of football fans. It's traditionally a rugby league heartland, but the AFL is making inroads with the establishment of a Greater Western Sydney team. And, for the last three years, the Auburn Tigers Australian Football League club has run an all female predominantly Muslim team» (From *ABC*, June 26, 2013).

oppressed being. For instance, according to an interviewee (September 2015), the Australian government seeks to over-perform by promoting compensation strategies, such as hiring a larger number of veiled women in public institutions. She contended that the government gives jobs more easily to women wearing a *hijab* in a bid to better marketize their confessional identity and make them employable: «Private corporate image is a problem, because it does not include our image… you need a uniform to benefit from the multicultural machine».

Nevertheless, emphasizing "Islam" as the primary characteristic of cultural minority groups in Australia is misleading for several reasons. Aside from the problematic nature of the "minority" notion in a migrant-built country like Australia, women's conditions within and outside Muslim-majority societies are poorly described by religion *per se*. Moreover, the status of Muslim women is rather explained by using determinants other than religion, which, in turn, should be distinguished between religion as theological tenets and theodicy (that is what is just for God), and religion as an interpreted code and performed everyday practice (Varisco 2005).

According to the interviewees, enhanced sports activities among the young females of the so-called minority groups engendered heterogeneous opinions within the Muslim communities in Australia, deeming sport as suitable for women or not.

The multicultural tokenism is however deployed by the media to confirm state policies and allegedly promote women's active participation in sport and society. This is not to deny that segments of the Muslim communities in Australia also have opposing views with respect to females playing soccer: many of the people involved in sports activities, however, rather speak of new deontological and behavioral codes that should be learned.

Such codes in fact refer to women's role within society, going much beyond sports activities. For instance, a Muslim Women's Association establishes walking groups in Sydney's western suburbs[8], in addition to encouraging women from the community to learn how to swim – "Aus-swim teacher" - and join female gyms. The only Muslim girls' soccer team established in the frame of the Australian National Sports Club in

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[8] This does not necessarily identify with the place where research has been conducted.

Lakemba, a Sydney western suburb, emphasizes «Muslim women's leadership» (McCue 2008, 103).

Muslim women associations in Australia, in the interviews conducted, argue they receive generous funding from the central and local government (July, 2015). This funding is then invested in the promotion of sport for young women. Also, the New South Wales (NSW) federal state helped a women's association to train young females through the Department of Sport and Recreation. Such a wide financing from the side of governmental entities in Australia for Muslim-only sports groups has been paraded as "multiculturalism". It is meaningful that the NSW government funded a lifesaver program (McCue 2008, 104) in which Muslim women participated only after the 2005 Cronulla Riots which hyped discourses of racialization and religionization, viewing the moral and material preservation of cultural diversity as a potential threat to national unity.

Gender equality, definable both as an ideology and a set of practices, is seen as innate in the majority nation, whilst multiculturalism is defined as a challenge posed from outside (Tuori 2007, 22). Nation building is in fact involved in the act of facing or having gender equality, in a long tradition where discourses and politics of gender equality have been embedded in nationalist discourses (Holli 2003, 19). Thereby, gender equality becomes something to deliver to other parts of the world, re-establishing "us" and our achievements as a nation (Tuori 2007).

As mentioned, in Australia there was no homogenous nation until a certain date, and, until now, homogeneity is constructed by national discourses. In this framework, multiculturalism is about otherness, «marked through the migrant women, who are seen as the origin of difference that enables multiculturalism» (Ivi, 27). Equality is therefore depicted as a «fantasy about a state of non-power, to which migrants should inherently be educated», and also a lesson that teaches migrants to unlearn the patriarchal gender order in which they live (Ivi, 28-29). Recognizing inequality, as a result, is an act of racialized structures and discourses on the migrant's status in any destination society. Inequalities are consequently looked for within migrant families or communities as a whole, rather than in the overall society. In this framework, having to use standardized uniforms when playing sport means to comply with the majority deontological code,

allowing for the condition of belonging to the nation and being socially recognized as players "able to represent" the nation.

Since the welfare system of liberal western democracies is generally viewed as woman accommodating, "host" societies feel burdened with the Churchillian responsibility to uphold their gender order and foster a sort of «equality training» (Ivi, 30).

5. Sport as a Scope of Empirical Analysis

Teach your children swimming and archery
and tell them to jump on the horse's back
('Omar Ibn Khattab)

Australia is a country where social policy develops along community lines: insofar as the state increasingly structures social policy around cultural differences by granting relative autonomy, community leaders end up accumulating ethnic-political capital and taking up power roles within their own communities (Tabar *et al.* 2003). Many scholars (Walseth and Fasting 2004, 123) have wondered whether, in European countries, sport organizations can promote integration, being usually treated as autonomous and self-regulated bodies.

The Australian government does concede freedom of initiative and policy-making to "minority communities", but no activity is generally hampered. Being a young woman and participating in sport is seen as a challenge to the boundaries of one's ethnic identity, although, as mentioned, Islam encourages sports activities to uphold personal health. Different socialization agents, however, have gradually depicted Islam as a foe of sports activities to protect women's dignity and bodies.

The young women I interviewed have confirmed that there is a debate within their communities with regards to what means for women to be good Muslims, which also stands for the struggle for social status within a collective identity (Mernissi 1995).

To understand sport as a narrative and a relational category of analysis – rather than a homogenous and essential one (Somers 1992) – helps to outline the interface between identity work, socialization, economic status, and involvement in sport.

In the general literature on the topic (Walseth 2006, 87), harassment and gossip are often the price that women joining sports teams undergo, being often accused by the most conservative side of their community – or, better said, by hegemonic notions of femininity - of becoming "too western". Sport may mean spending much time outside of home, arriving late in the evening after training, being watched by men during matches, and, in some cases, being away from home for several days (Ivi, 91).

Also the social status of many Arab origin families – i.e. the Lebanese, mostly forming the working class in contemporary Australia – is a sociological discriminant which too often goes unnoticed with respect to confessional belonging. The unaffordability of the cost of transport and the act of joining teams are interrelated. Lack of migrant communities in sport is also explained by such sociological factors, which have less to do with an allegedly unavoidable "Islamic" repression of women.

Nevertheless, it is also true that the choice of participating in sport involves decisions on one's own body and self, from a personal and a political perspective (Palmer 2009, 27).

In brief, sport and integration work in western European countries is based on the idea that there is a link between civil society, democracy, and sport, as these associations are thought to be mini-democracies (Walseth and Fasting 2004, 109). To participate in these organizations is therefore thought to be a lesson in democracy. It is believed that immigrants can learn the majority group's values and norms via participation in sport, which is exemplified by fair play and democratic values (*Ibidem*).

The tension that scholars from Northern Europe (Walseth and Fasting 2004; Langvasbraten 2008; Tuori 2007) have therefore identified lies between assimilation (implying the adaption to an existing sport culture) and through integration strategies based on multiculturalism (sport cultures differ in accordance with the minority culture). This tension underlies a diverse relationship with the central government. In this regard, it was meaningful that, in the viewpoint of my research participants, my own approach to such research aprioristically identified an opposition between the Muslim community and the Australian government.

It is also argued that (Walseth and Fasting 2004, 117) the existence of minority clubs leads to less social contact and interaction between minority and majority youths. Lov-

ell's study (1991; mentioned in Walseth and Fasting 2004), for example, illustrated that minority women left the majority football club in favor of their "minority club", because they were feeling more "culturally comfortable". This may be seen as a failure of majority clubs in integrating minorities. This happens because not only they fail in preventing racism and discrimination, but also because they are failing in making the official culture of sport penetrated by multiculturalism. Australia, in this sense, is a failing case study with respect to Norway, where migrant groups are invited to rather change the dominant sport culture, although the latter remains male dominant (Walseth and Fasting 2004, 118).

6. The Tension between Australian Sport Policy and Individual Narratives

Statistics on Muslim Australians, available from a Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC 2001), show that almost 50% of Australian Muslims are aged 24 and under (of the 102 566 Australian-born Muslims around 30% claims Lebanese ancestry, 18% claims Turkish and 3% broadly defined Arab ancestry). Muslim women living in Australia were, in 2006, 162,635 out of a total 340,394 Australian Muslim population, comprising 1.7% of the total Australian population (Cat. No. 2068.0 - 2006 Census Tables). Muslim women born in Australia totaled 37.7% (Cat. No. 2005.0-2006 Census Table).

In the Australian Broadcast Corporation news, it is possible to hear that

> there's a big battle underway in Western Sydney for the hearts, minds and dollars of football fans. It is traditionally a rugby league heartland, but the Australian Football League (AFL) is making inroads with the establishment of a Greater Western Sydney team. And, for the last three years, the Auburn Tigers Australian Football League club has run an all-female Muslim team.[9]

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[9] The news can also be listened on the following ABC-News link: http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-06-26/muslim-womens-afl-team-takes-off-in-western-sydney/4782464.

A veiled woman participated without giving up her *hijab*, but in the all-Muslim-women team. These women, however, are described in the Australian media as "the champions of multiculturalism".

AFL, in fact, enacts the law according to which Muslim women can play with long pants, but exclusively in Muslim teams rather than national teams. The *de facto* inequality, which is caused by the Australian national policy disciplining participation in sport, goes far beyond the debate within Muslim communities in Australia about women's "dignity" in sport. However, positive feedback has been collected so far from women participating in only-Muslim-female-teams in Australia, as the three of them pointed to the risk of being discriminated against outside of their community. Multiculturalism, in these circumstances, seems to allow for their only chance to actively participate in sport. «This is seen as an opportunity to overcome simplistic views on Islam and women», as a Muslim female football player recounted (September 2015).

As abovementioned, the only Muslim girls' soccer team established in the frame of the Australian National Sports Club in an Australian city's suburb further leds the media to speak of "Muslim women's leadership" (McCue 2008, 103). A leadership, however, which seems to be recognized and affirmed as long as it moves within the boundaries of community culture, and develops within it, while maintaining its pre-established model. Therefore, it neither ends up changing the official majority sport culture nor challenges it.

Although, according to the interviewed female soccer players, governmental policies disciplining sports activities are becoming increasingly flexible (i.e. playing with long pants is allowed in only Muslim teams), the sport governmental regulations show how the policy at hand remains assimilationist in practice. The "official face of Australia" cannot embrace a *muhajjaba* (veiled woman) kicking a ball in a national variegated team.[10] Yet, the government largely funds the sports activities of Muslim community groups, in which they can wear anything they want when they play, and are not forced to standardized uniforms. This controversial governmental practice, thus, remains assimilationist for the official face of a successfully multicultural Australia (Hage 2011),

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[10] As far as the author is aware of at the time of writing, the official female dress code in national soccer matches has not been reformed yet.

while dooming constructed minority cultures to further segregation and to identifying with a reified cultural diversity.

In other words, in "Muslim matches" female soccer players can wear anything they want. The government practice is therefore of twofold character: *de facto* assimilationism on the one hand, and, on the other, token multiculturalism. As a result, the segregation and the arbitrary homogenization of cultural diversities and social groups take place.

It is worth mentioning that the three research participants, all soccer players (in)formally affiliated with Muslim women associations in Australia, were quite reluctant to provide answers on the Muslim-government relationship, which, when taken as an object of study, is usually described as aprioristically conflicting in scholarly research, not only in Australia. Islam - as abstract belonging - and "multicultural liberal governments" are generally defined in international and national media as antipodes. Therefore, my research study was unlikely to be seen as a blank page that still needs to be written in light of scientific analysis.

Despite their initial bias, all research participants pointed to the fact that there seems to be a lack of accordance between Australian multicultural integration policies, the way sport is organized in the country, the actual debates within the Muslim community in Australia, and their own personal way of experiencing participation in sport. Also in the basketball and handball sport federations, there is a ban on the headscarf during official matches in several Christian majority societies such as Norway (Walseth and Fasting 2004, 121). This law, which encountered the resistance of Muslim women who want to play by keeping their veils – although they recognize that this sometimes limits their physical performance - undercuts the issue of non-religious female subjects who do not wish to wear shorts to be able to play in public, in that they do not feel comfortable in showing their legs for reasons other than confessional.

Therein, the non-religious element in scholarly analysis has widely been overlooked, leaving small room for discussing how to deal with differences which are unlikely to be classifiable at an overall societal level. For instance, an Australian woman who had converted to Islam a few years before, decided to abandon this religion because she felt she was burdened with the external expectation of representing, at a physical level, what

a "Muslim woman" is supposed to look like[11]. A female soccer player I interviewed, likewise, described her experience in the Muslim female soccer team as a «segregation experience at the margins of the national sport» (September 2015).

She abandoned soccer, as she had no alternative team to play in other than the Muslim community one or the national one, which was forcing her to wear shorts in official matches. The non-Muslim who does not feel to comply with the standard dress code in official matches does not desire to join an "identity-shaped team" and cannot feel free to play and represent "the nation" by dressing the way she feels like.

This surely illustrates how sport organizations could attract more Muslim women if they were more culturally sensitive, and not only along religious lines. Sport can therefore become an arena for multiculturalism: this not only implies that people from different ethnic groups participate in sport, but also that the orthodox culture of sport becomes more diverse and influenced by different ethnic groups' cultures (Walseth and Fasting 2004). However, the body of literature on Muslim female sport participation tends to be focused on their confessional belonging, making of Islamic theodicy an exclusive category of analysis. I have rather privileged a practical understanding of Islam as one of the bricks constructing the individual's cultural capital in lived experience. Thereby, people who do not feel any affiliation or belonging generalizable within a given society still remain out of the official picture and are left with few possibilities of being integrated and feeling comfortable in sports organizations.

"Women" remains an important category of analysis of this societal phenomenon, because they are seen as the ideal-type conveyers of ethnic identity, in particular in situations of diaspora, where the families become more committed to preserving their own sense of "belonging" at distance though their daughters (Ivi, 120).

The following anecdote, reported by one of my research participants, highlights that cultural sensitivity is often a mere façade for change. According to a 30 years-old soccer player (September 2015), women who enter male mosques can get arrested in Australia – «as it happened once» - but they were not willing at all to define themselves as «feminists» or «feminism supporters», which is said to be a taboo word in their community language. When they refer to feminism, one of my interlocutors argued that (September,

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[11] Informal conversation held with an Australian woman. September 2015.

2015) some women she knows were using the expression «the F word» as though they were referring to something unsayable. Bringing change without naming it is the motto.

This article, still based on a small number of interviews, is a first attempt to push the research effort beyond the sensitivity to cultural difference, which should be viewed as obviously articulated. It rather aims to forward an idea of multicultural which leaves large leverage for performative subjectivities which refuse to be part of anything culturally, economically, or religiously graspable.

Women need to comply with the national uniform – shorts or skin for sports other than soccer - when playing in non-Muslim teams. This has strengthened segregation between the different cultural and ethnic groups within society. As another 22 years old female soccer player specified (Skype interview, November 2015), «with your team you have your own rules and you can relax». In practice, many sports clubs do not accommodate either religious or alternative dress code in Australia, and this raises plenty of issues at a national policy level, which is therefore the source of gender inequality. This, therefore, has little to do with "cultural minorities" or "Muslimness" countervailing unquestionably liberal democratic governments.

Furthermore, according to the data collected, the limitations of the cost of sports activities, family and time commitments are all issues which are under-researched unlike the Islamic beliefs, and yet complicate the picture, not being restricted to Muslim women (McCue 2008, 106). Another soccer player pointed out that her cousin, coming from a low economic status family in a cheap suburb, has never managed to join a sport team.

> The fee is generally quite affordable in comparison with other countries like Australia, but the fact that she needs to work extra hours to earn a living totally impeded her to do any physical activity. See? This has nothing to do with the fact that she is a Muslim […][12].

Inequality is rather engendered by written laws: women with children are scarcely supported in their desire to engage themselves in team sports activities. Females are not

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[12] September, 2015, Australian city.

supported by government policies to raise their children, and childcare remains the main concern to be able to manage private life in parallel (ISANA 2014, 8).

Nonetheless, the recent participation of Muslim women in Australian national soccer teams did generate an internal debate within the Muslim community, as some religious hardliners do not see female participation in sport as culturally appropriate. Aside from diversities in the endemic cultural understanding of sport and recreation, in the present study it is evident how gender inequality does not merely stem from the minority-inherent culture, but it is largely fed by the majority one. Moreover, the interaction between these two internally differentiated cultures of sport goes unheeded.

Schools and sports codes, indeed, discriminate in practice the participation of some communities in the national arena, implying, for example, the team to wear shorts or, in other cases, a skirt. However, according to the interviews conducted, the women felt more discriminated against by the fact of not being able to play with a *hijab* rather than seeing the headscarf itself as a tool which discriminates them within larger society, or makes them feel coerced by their own community.

The social architecture of Australian society is rather problematic when we also come to other professional sectors - such as Law - that is male dominant, and, likewise, the overwhelming majority of CEOs in Australia have no equal representation in terms of gender. The head of a MWA (Skype interview, July 2015) affirmed that gender inequality is discussable within the Muslim community in relation to religious factors rather than to civic status. For example, Muslim women do not have women-only mosques in Australia.

Notwithstanding, the female soccer players I interviewed have often mentioned that sport clubs and schools are trying to change this policy, but the efforts are not being made with consistency at a national level. Sport, in such circumstances, cannot become a means for minority women's integration.

All participants mentioned a series of factors other than religious, which dissuade some of their acquaintances from joining sports teams or practicing sport *tout court*. Some of these factors are connected to their social positioning in Australian society and are already discussed in previous literature.

Harassment – physical or only verbal – for religious or racial reasons has also been reported as playing a role in preventing some social groups to join sports activities and reluctantly send their kids to sports classes and events, although this seems to be less the case in the Australian context (Palmer 2009).

It is generally contended that the limits of cultural assimilation – and therefore the reluctance to join national teams rather than "minority teams" - tend to provide a more appropriate explanation for the lower employment level of the second generation of Muslim women migrants in Australia (Foroutan 2008). Australian Muslim women migrants are said to «retain their cultural identity» – being «an island in the island» – and therefore resisting complete cultural assimilation in Australian society, where female participation in the labor market is significantly high (Ivi, 233).

However, it is not due to a lack of cultural "assimilation" that women do not benefit from social or sports policies fully. This assumption presupposes the aprioristic liberalism of the larger majority society in which the "cultural minority" at hand lives. Conversely, it has been proven (Foroutan 2011, 122) that the changes in employment patterns depend on family formation – which can partially be connected to ethnic origins and cultural customs – and length of residence in the destination country for native-born or foreign-born women in Australia. The presence of Muslim women in the employment sector, thus, has little to do with their provenience or migration status (being native-born or overseas-born), let alone with their religion (Ivi, 137). Ultimately, the scarce presence of Muslim women in the employment sector also depends on inappropriate work policies – such as poor financial support for women raising children, and the prohibitive cost of childcare (ISANA 2014, 3) - which make the labor market incompatible with women's paid work, and impinge on gender equity (Foroutan 2011) as well as participation in sport. The employment factor and social status heavily depend on the pattern of labor dictated by the majority society of destination, which too often goes unquestioned.

Australian media have shown how the participation in sport can be seen as a visible achievement for women at a personal and community level. Joining sports teams does not jeopardize their belief in Islam and their identification in the Islamic culture (widely meant), but is rather portrayed from within as an «adjustment strategy» to make their

own process of identification further evolve (Markovic and Manderson 2000). The "Muslim different" is still recognized according to visibility criteria: the veil, which sheds the spot light more on women than men.

Hierarchies of power and opportunities can also be identified within the "minority" community of Muslim female soccer players. Indeed, in light of the correlation between labor and participation in sport, it is relevant that, also in the labor market, native-born women in Australia are more benefitted than foreign-born women, who are erroneously analyzed through criteria merely regarding their ethnic origin and the length of residence in the destination country (Foroutan 2011).

7. Conclusions. What after Post-Multiculturalism?

This article is an attempt to deconstruct the sociological category of "Muslim women", which is often still employed as aprioristically heuristic in academic literature. By doing so, it calls for further studies, which embrace a dereligionization approach, that is discrediting religion talk as an aprioristic way of understanding later generation female migrants and Muslim Australian born women. Findings show that the economic and social status of these women contributes to their decision of participating in sport to a greater extent than their religious beliefs and practices. Yet, women – especially if wearing a veil – are rarely addressed as civic and political subjects, who, for example, advance the claim for having a women-only mosque in Australia. As scholars, we need to interrogate this frame, in which religiosity is only one of the factors which condition personal choice.

The "Muslim different" is still recognized according to visibility criteria: the veil sheds the spot light more on women than men, and needs to be negotiated once again for Muslim females. This paper has questioned the ethnicization and religionization of "Muslim women" as aprioristic heuristic tools to understand the interspace between sport, Islam, and government "multicultural" policies.

Briefly, unclassifiable personal reasons, as well as economic and social status, shape the individual female choice of participating in sport to a greater extent than confessional beliefs and ways of experiencing Islam within one's own cultural community and

outside of it. The anecdote of the non-Muslim woman having no possibility of joining a soccer team in her hometown functions as a litmus paper. Moreover, Australian national policy enhances *de facto* gender inequality while hallowing the "white" way of living as the ideal model.

Multiculturalism has often been declared "in crisis" as most liberal governments are presently retreating from commitment to preserving cultural diversity, and are rather pursuing security, cohesion, and integration (Isin and Turner 2007, 11). If religions like Islam have mostly been discussed in terms of ethnic capital - holding, in turn, "symbolic worth for national identity" (Tabar 2010) - media discourses on female participation in sport have also been racialized in the case of "minority cultures" which are believed to be unable to assimilate.

Discourses on post-multiculturalism have lately gained ground in academic environments in order to stress the flawed features of the "multicultural glory" of our age, which started in the 1970s in self-defined liberal western societies. Post-multiculturalism has therefore been defined via the combination of national identity with the official recognition of cultural diversity through ceremonies of citizenship and language tests (Gozdecka *et al.* 2014, 52). Australia constitutes the perfect case in point. This, however, has moved rhetoric multiculturalism towards a tacitly assimilationist monoculturalism (Hage 2011). In order to address cultural inequalities - which are seen as mostly stemming from traditional "minority cultures" – particular institutional moves, like forbidding the Islamic veil in official sports events, have been advanced. This also implies patronizing forms of racism and a major emphasis on the post-Cronulla riots' ethical politics of increasing security and societal cohesion (*Ibidem*).

As the head of a Muslim women association in Australia questioned (Skype interview, July 2015), «how are we supposed to live together? There has never been *de facto* assimilationism in Australian political democratic history. We are a series of cultural groups who keep running in parallel», even when the government, as previously mentioned, was overtly advocating for assimilationism.

The Australian government seems to empower cultural minorities to actually mark the imaginary place where tolerance and human progress should be identified. The interviews I conducted stress the burden of patriarchal structures of majority and minority

communities on females – mostly in terms of social status, economic capital, and flawed national policies. Such patriarchal structures *de facto* have been legitimized and accepted, flowing into the multicultural rhetoric of the central government, as considered "natural" and proper to a (contrived) Islamic monolithic culture.

Misleadingly, in the official Australian discourse, the appeal to culture is also associated with an arbitrary and reified construction of "majority women", who are therefore defined as "British white-descendant women". The connection between religion, migration experience, and citizenship (Gozdecka *et al.* 2014) has left large room for the religionization of Muslim women's identities, through which their actually muddled subjective experiences in sport are recognized and defined.

When veiled Muslim women are seen as the ones crossing the ocean and "causing" multiculturalism in Australia (even when speaking of later generations) and penetrating Australia "fair-go" democratic society, "minority" female soccer players are identified most of the time with their relational experience to religion.

This study has sought to explore participation in sport as it is disciplined by national policy and identity work, by questioning the analytical categories of religion and ethnicity as exclusive or predominant means of understanding. The abandonment of "one-size-fits-all" interpretations of practicing sport, and thinking of such a practice *through* aesthetic and multi-ethical values, may in fact work towards an epistemological re-foundation of identity and subjectivity studies. Relegating this study to the over-researched field of "Muslim women" – too often meant as a well-bounded sociological category - would draw, once again, public attention to what can be assessed *in relation to* western femininities and the widespread Orientalist taste for discussing an imaginary "Muslim body", dress code in sport, and its sexual implications.

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