

The Influence of Religious and Socio-Cultural Variables on the Participation of Female University Students in Leisure Activities

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Abstract: This study aimed to determine the influence of Islamic belief and socio-cultural variables on the participation of Muslim female university students in recreational physical exercise (RPE) as a leisure time activity. A total of 400 students in an age range of 18-24, who study at different departments of Muğla University, participated in the study on a voluntary basis. An interview guideline covering questions to explore the influence of Islamic belief on RPE behavior was developed by the researchers, based on the existing literature. The open and closed-ended questions tackle the extent of that influence and the importance of Islamic teaching on the participation in RPE as well as the background of the participants. One to one interview method was applied in the study. Through the findings of the study, it was concluded that socio-cultural variables are more active barriers, compared to the religious variables. Elements considered as a barrier to the participation are mostly related to the gender-based view of the Muslim community towards women. It was recommended to carry out further studies in larger sample groups applying different methodologies.

Key words: Leisure • Recreation • Exercise • University • Female students • Islam • Turkey

INTRODUCTION

Neulinger defines leisure with three criteria; the mood, voluntary participation and its value by nature [1]. In leisure time, defined as the time that remains after work, vital needs and personal care, the creative, productive and useful activities we participate in for personal, psychological and social satisfaction without any restriction and addiction are called recreation. It satisfies our needs for mental and physical refreshment [2]. Recreational physical exercise (RPE) is the exercise conducted in leisure time for psychological, mental and physical benefits [3].

Studies that examined the leisure behaviors of women through European and American-centered perspectives have been replaced by those that investigate the lives and leisure activities of women from different cultures [4-9]. In his book, *Constraints to Leisure*, Jackson clearly shows the accelerated number of studies addressing the barriers to leisure. Such studies attribute these barriers to inequalities in participation in leisure activities, as well as types of participation in recreation and leisure activities for different groups [10]. The interaction between unequal

participation in leisure activities [11] and variables such as gender, race, social class, religion and living-place has been a frequently-studied subject [12].

Theoretical Framework: There are many negative issues concerning women's participation in recreational physical exercise. Unequal participation as the most important negative issue has often been overlooked. Inequalities might be more annoying for women. However, proper and active participation in physical exercise contribute significantly to physical, cognitive and psycho-social development. Thus, some women are in an endeavor to make "proper" participation in sports and physical exercises as well as being merely "active" in sports and physical activities. In this context, differences between men and women in participation in physical exercise do not appear as mere differences, but also there seems to be some gender-based hierarchical division of labor. It might be surprising that Sports, especially Physical Exercise, which is studied as a scientific discipline and claimed to be universal, has been influenced by hierarchical, gender-based beliefs and tendencies. However, social outcomes of the studies which have considerably increased in

the last five decades in the West and in the very last decade in Turkey, concentrating on beliefs and claims that can be a barrier to women's participation in sports and physical exercises, have started to be visible.

Studies on barriers to leisure activities started in 1980s. The barrier is considered the variable that makes it impossible for an individual to participate in a leisure activity, although he or she wishes to take part actively in a leisure activity [10]. Most of these studies [10,13,14] emphasized that women encounter such barriers more intensively than men do. The most frequently suggested barrier is the scarcity of time for women, which results in a limited range of options due to the place, roles and responsibilities of women in society. Furthermore, women are also subject to the lack of technical skills and financial resources more frequently than men [15,16].

Goodale and Witt [17] suggest that most of the studies on women and leisure time had dealt with the barriers which were listed as economic conditions, facilities, marital status and parents' attitude, scarcity of time, child care and social norms. Moreover, the cultural and ethnic background plays an important role in giving shape to leisure [12,18-20]. Therefore, the relation between leisure and women's cultural identity, religious and ethnic background should be taken into consideration upon studying the barriers to leisure activities [20]. Culture and religion are clearly interconnected and are also related to leisure [21].

It was found out that some studies have been conducted to understand the lives of women of different cultures [7,8]. These studies also reflect some cultural and religious notions of the societies where these women live [4,18,22]. Leisure barriers of women were also discussed from various aspects [10]. The above-mentioned studies provide information about women and leisure. However, they acknowledge the need for further studies on women in developing countries and the effect of religion and culture on leisure behaviors. These studies mostly dealt with the Jewish-Christian influences in North America, Europe and Australia. There is few information concerning leisure behaviors of Muslim women in European and Middle Eastern countries.

A Muslim is the person who upholds the religion of Islam and submits himself or herself to Allah. Muslim people believe in Allah and the Holy Quran, which was sent to the Last Prophet Mohamed (s.a.v) about 1400 years ago. The Holy Quran and the Prophetic Hadith have been the main sources to regulate the way of life in Islam.

Although Islam attaches importance to development and preservation of physical and spiritual well-being whatever the gender is [23], researchers, especially non-Muslim ones have pointed to the fact that the man-woman discrimination in Islamic teachings are non-compliant with Islamic beliefs; and suggested that the proportion of Muslim women's participation in sports and recreational physical activities is rather low [24].

Although Turkey is a mostly Muslim-populated country, Islamic understanding and practice of Muslim citizens is rather different from those in Middle Eastern countries [22,25,26]. There are only a few studies on RPA behavior of Turkish Women and the influence of Islam on RPA participation. There seems to be a requirement for updating the studies to observe the life of women in various social milieus within the changing social structure. This study adds to the literature that enriches itself with examinations of the life of women in different cultures from the leisure point of view. It is important to understand the leisure behaviors and barriers for women. Therefore, this study was designed to understand the effect of religious beliefs and socio-cultural variables and the living-place on the participation of female Muslim students who are Turkish citizens into physical exercise as a leisure activity and to explore other barriers as well.

METHOD

Participants: This study was conducted in 2009. Participants are 400 female undergraduate student volunteers, studying in different departments in Muğla University. Age of students ranges between 18 and 24. All participants are Muslim and Turkish citizens. No student is physically or mentally handicapped. Families of all students live in other provinces.

The Interview Process: The study used prepared interview guide, based on the questionnaire in the Master Thesis by Sedat Canbaz [27] titled "Sports and Religion in the Changing Society" at Marmara University, Institute of Social Sciences. The guide contains some questions about socio-demographic characteristics of the participants. Additionally, the guide includes some items to define the RPE barriers. There are also some items to define the impacts of religion as a potential factor on participation in physical exercise. For an accurate and coherent interpretation of all these items, questions concerning religious life have been added.

Table 1: Breakdown according to academic departments

DEPARTMENTS	n	%
Chemistry	58	14,5
Physics	70	17,5
Mathematics	70	17,5
School of Foreign Languages	72	18,0
Turkish Language and Literature	68	17,0
Technical Education Faculty	62	15,5
Total	400	100

Table 2: Breakdown according to the regions

REGIONS	Place of Birth		Last 10 years		Difference	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Aegean	130	32,5	160	42,5	+30	+7.5
The Mediterranean	60	15,0	120	27,5	+60	+15
Central Anatolia	24	6,0	20	5,0	-4	-1.0
Marmara	26	6,5	36	9,0	+10	+2.5
Eastern Anatolia	50	12,5	20	5,0	-30	-7.5
South-Eastern Anatolia	90	22,5	30	7,5	-60	-15
Black Sea	20	5,0	14	3,5	-6	-1.5
Total	400	100	400	100		

Table 3: Leisure barriers

	Place of Birth		Life-Place		Difference	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Parents' Pressure	187	46.75	121	30.25	-66	-16.5
Religious Belief	83	20.75	77	19.25	-6	-1.5
Social Pressure	56	14.00	22	5.50	-34	-8.5
Lack of Places allocated only to women	45	11.25	79	19.75	+34	+8.5
Boyfriend's Pressure	11	2.75	73	18.25	+62	+15.5
Scarcity of Time	9	2.25	16	4.00	+7	+1.75
Other	9	2.25	12	3.00	+3	+0.75

Table 4: Opinions of students concerning the relationship between religion and exercise

REGIONS	I agree		Perhaps		I don't agree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Religion encourages any type of exercise	153	38.25	54	13.50	193	48.25
Religion does not intervene with exercise	24	6.00	23	5.75	353	88.25
Exercise should not be performed with clothes that religion does not allow	171	42.75	49	12.25	180	45.00
According to religion, men and women are not allowed to make exercise together	111	27.75	40	10.00	249	62.25
Women should not make exercise in places where men can see them	74	18.50	24	6.00	302	75.50
Exercise made with clothes that religion does not allow should not be watched	105	26.25	154	38.50	141	35.25
In Islam, it is a sin to participate in exercise with men	73	18.25	104	26.00	223	55.75

Table 5: Islamic practices of students according to their birth-places

REGIONS	Aegean		Mediterranean		Central Anatolia		Mediterranean		Eastern Anatolia		S. Eastern Anatolia		Black Sea	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
I read Holy Quran	2	1.5	3	5.00	4	16.6	3	11.5	6	12.0	5	5.5	1	5.0
I wear headscarf	14	10.7	9	15.0	5	20.8	6	23.0	5	10.0	4	4.4	3	15.0
I pray five times a day	11	8.4	4	6.00	2	8.33	2	7.60	5	10.0	3	3.3	2	10.0
I fast in Ramadan	67	51.5	32	53.3	16	66.6	12	46.2	24	48.0	24	26.6	8	40.0
My daily behaviors are														
in line with the religion.	56	43	38	63.3	12	50.0	11	42.3	20	40.0	16	17.7	9	45.0
I believe in Allah	130	100	60	100	24	100	26	100	50	100	90	100	20	100
I believe in Prophets	130	100	60	100	24	100	26	100	50	100	90	100	20	100
I believe in Angels	130	100	60	100	24	100	26	100	50	100	90	100	20	100
I believe in the afterlife	130	100	60	100	24	100	26	100	50	100	90	100	20	100
I believe in fate	130	100	60	100	24	100	26	100	50	100	90	100	20	100
I believe that prayer														
is the order of Allah	130	100	60	100	24	100	26	100	50	100	90	100	20	100
I believe that fasting is														
the order of Allah	130	100	60	100	24	100	26	100	50	100	90	100	20	100
I believe that Alms is														
the order of Allah	130	100	60	100	24	100	26	100	50	100	90	100	20	100
I believe that Hajj is														
the order of Allah	130	100	60	100	24	100	26	100	50	100	90	100	20	100

* The Table was prepared according to the "yes" answers.

Procedure: Researchers interviewed the students in the same room, under the same conditions and in line with ethical rules. Students read and signed the deed of consent presented to them before each interview. Students were reminded that they were free to leave the interview anytime they wish. Although a ready-to-use guide was utilized, additional questions were asked in line with the course of the interview and anything that the participant wanted to add were also noted. Each interview took 45 minutes and all interviews were concluded in 6 months.

Analysis: Data was analyzed using quantitative methods, such as frequency and percentage and interviews were analyzed using descriptive analysis.

Findings: Table 1 shows the breakdown of students according to their academic departments and Table 2 displays the breakdown of students according to their place of birth and the place where they had lived for ten years before the university. Table 3 reflects the leisure barriers of students according to their place of birth and the place where they had lived for ten years before the university and their perception of the impact of Islam among these barriers. Table 4 gives the opinions of students concerning the relationship between religion and exercise, while Table 5 tells about the Islamic practices of students according to their birth-places.

DISCUSSION

Even though some regions are highly represented in the study, students were born in seven different regions. It is observed that most of the students born in the Black Sea, Eastern Anatolia and South Eastern Anatolia had lived in regions that were different from their birth-places for ten years before university. It is understood that these students had migrated from the above-said regions, which are known to be rather conservative to the Aegean and the Mediterranean regions, which have a more western way of life. Turkey has experienced a significant migration flow from underdeveloped eastern regions to developed western regions since 1950s, which resulted in a blend of traditional and modern elements [28]. We can also mention the effects of traditionalism and modernism in our study. The life of Turkish women is affected by leisure approaches as well. Muftuler-Bac [29] and Kara [30] described such a distinction between two types of Turkish women as the polarization between Islamic culture and secular thought. We do consider such an approach as prejudiced, because it accuses of not being secular the female students who deem it inappropriate to participate in exercise along with male students and refuse to make exercise with a dressing style that is not in line with Religion in places where men can see them and even consider it a sin (Table 3 and 5). Instead of polarization of Turkish women as conservative and secular, some

exercise programs can be offered only for Muslim girls/women who complain about the lack of gender-specific activities, as suggested by previous studies [6,9,22,23,25,26,31,32].

According to the birth-place of participants, the most significant barrier to leisure is seen as the parents' pressure, religious faith and pressure of the milieu. As we analyze it according to the place of residence, students listed the same variables as the top two items. The pressure of the milieu which was listed as the third most significant barrier according to the birth-places is replaced by the lack of girls-only places and pressure of boyfriends (Table 3). It is observed that female students who left their parents to live on their own in regions with different cultures perceive the pressures of their parents and the milieu as a less significant barrier. On the other hand, the pressure of boyfriends is more significant in place of residence than it is in birthplaces, which can be explained by the increased proportion of female student's having a boyfriend in their new milieus and their perception of the pressure from their boyfriends as a barrier (Table 3). Religion is equally perceived as a barrier in both regions.

Our expectation to see that the leisure barriers of students born in Eastern, South Eastern and Central Anatolian Regions would be different from those of others was met. It can be suggested that migration heavily moves towards the Mediterranean and Aegean Regions, that female students get adapted to more flexible cultural and social conditions in these regions and that the place of residence is a more dominant factor than the birthplace. In his study on the barriers and perspectives to leisure, Pfister [31] states that the life-style and tendency differences among the geographical regions should definitely be taken into consideration upon studying the participation of Turkish women in leisure exercise. According to the results of this study, it is obvious that social and cultural restrictions are perceived as more significant barriers than restrictions according to the Muslim faith. Students who consider the Islamic faith as a barrier to participation in leisure exercises are even less than half of the interviewed students. On the other hand, social variables are perceived as barriers by 65%. Economic factors are not a significant barrier (Table 3).

The answers rendered by female students to the question whether Islam or Islamic way of life is a barrier to participation in exercise pose a wide range of variety. A significant proportion of students (48.25%) are of the opinion that religion does not encourage exercise. Although Turkish women are equal to men before the Law, some researchers suggest that this equality and

independence do not fully apply in practice [33]. The pressure of boyfriends that is heavily seen in the findings of the study shows us the influence of traditional thought and inadequate independence and autonomy of Turkish women in the society. A study conducted by Kıray [34] in seven different residential areas points out that women spend their leisure by mostly visiting each other. As a result of the rapid changes in our social structure, social roles of women have been redefined, the fact that allowed them to assert themselves in some fields as men do. However, gender is still seen as an important part of the social influence and an important factor that restricts leisure activities [35]. This makes women disadvantaged due to the traditional values and attitudes as well as the socio-economic structure in Turkey [36]. There are still many barriers for women in many milieus. Barriers to leisure for women are not only a case for Turkey. Women encounter more barriers to participation in leisure activities than men do. Leisure alternatives of women are less than those of men [37]. It was stated that the family structure and gender play a significant role among factors affecting the participation of women in leisure activities [38, 39]. Because of the patriarchal structure of Turkish Society, the traditional attitudes concerning gender roles of men and women are seen within the society [40] and men and women internalize their gender roles thereby [41]. While boys are encouraged to be more outgoing and independent, girls are raised as dependant and obedient. Furthermore, the law confirms the patriarchal family structure, where the father always says the final word in the family [42]. The fact that female students are subject to the directions and pressure of their boyfriends, who are even not their 'spouses', is a variable that is still seen as a barrier even in 2009.

The answers of female students in the study concerning the relation between religion and exercise revealed that religious faith is considered as a significant barrier to leisure by 20% of the participants (Table 3), whereas there is a high perception (48.25%) that religion does not encourage to make exercise (Table 4). The reason lying beneath such a negative perception by students may be their perception that Islam prohibits exercise and similar leisure activities, which may stem from their lack of knowledge about the True Islam. The fact that only a small portion of students read The Holy Quran may constitute a ground for such a perception (Table-5). In fact, when we analyze the studies on this issue, the following Hadith of the Prophet-*"There are two gifts which most people get deceived of: "Health and Leisure*

Times" (cited by Buhârî in the chapter of Kitâbu'r-Rikâk in his famous work *Sahîh*) and also *"Take the advantage of five things before they happen to you: Enjoy the life before death comes upon you, your health before illness, leisure before occupation, youth before elderly and wealth before poverty"* greatly help people understand the perspective of Islam over leisure [43]. According to Islam, leisure is not a time to waste [44]. In Islamic faith, leisure can be enjoyed, provided that it is purposeful and meaningful, not excessive or too consuming. What is essential in recreation is to make a gain in the end of the activity we participate. Therefore, activities such as gambling (lottery, horse-races and bets) and alcohol consumption and excessive use of the internet point to the waste of leisure [2]. These actions are all prohibited by Islam anyway. On the other hand, Islam recommends exercising for both men and women; because Islam attaches utmost importance to spiritual and physical development of human beings [23]. The holy verse (El-Enfal, 8/60) says *"Against them make ready your strength to the utmost of your power"*. The Prophet Mohamed interpreted the word "strength" in this verse as archery. The Holy Prophet considered archery as a skill to be learned in childhood and to be kept until death; he favored to make sportive activities to enjoy the leisure as one has free time, gets unoccupied, or as one needs some refreshment. Horse-riding, jogging [45], wrestling, swimming [46,47] are among the physical activities highly recommended by the Holy Prophet himself. Another Hadith of the Holy Prophet may lead people to weightlifting. He once passed by a group of people who were trying to lift a very large rock, in order to see who was the strongest one and allowed them to do so [47]. The Holy Prophet also made running contests with his wife Aisha. Aishawon the first contest and Prophet Mohamed won the second race (Ebu Davud, Beyhaki). It is believed that he lost the first race in order to encourage his wife to do sports and won the second race to send a warning to his wife who had gained some weight. Işık [48] also suggested that Holy Prophet permitted folklore dances, too. He watched and listened to the Abyssinian musicians and dancers making a festival (Buhârî, Müslim) and also allowed them to dance in the Masjid and his wife Aisha to watch them dancing (Buhârî). Our Prophet encouraged many sportive activities in his era and he also himself joined some of these activities and his companions also joined in. Prophet Mohamed advised people to do sports themselves as well as encourage their children to do. He said, *"The right of a child over his/her father is to learn from him how to read and write, to swim and to shoot*

arrows" (Beyhaki). In addition to the advices and recommendations of Holy Prophet on sports and physical activities, He never welcomed giving up sports in later years. He said, *"If a person learns, but then gives up shooting arrows, he is not one of us"* (Müslim). Therefore, some companions of the Prophet kept on practicing archery even in elderly age to obey the Prophet's orders (Müslim). Prophet Mohamed also stressed the psychological benefits of sports, as well as the physical ones. He said, *"If one of you feels sad, he has nothing to do but wear his bow to disperse his sadness"* (Taberani). He also expressed, *"None of you should give up playing with his bow and arrows (doing exercises)"* (Müslim). As a conclusion, Islam deems it appropriate to make moderate physical exercises and leisure activities for entertainment, relief and pleasure with Islamic dressing codes, provided that it does not prevent prayer [49].

CONCLUSION

The study was conducted in MuğlaProvince, where the western lifestyle is highly dominant. We should bear in mind the digital value of the sample and that students in this study live in a much more socialized, flexible culture than students living in other cultural regions and that they are rather free from the pressure of parents and the milieu, being far from home. Despite such constraints, this study may propose a perspective as to the participation of Turkish and Muslim female university students into physical exercise as a leisure activity and also offer some ground for further studies on women and leisure.

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