

Discourses on modernisation agendas in the women's sport policy in Oman

Authors: Abdul Rahim Al Droushi, Prof. Ian Henry

Institution: Loughborough University, School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, UK

E-mail: abdulrahim@gmail.com

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Aim

The aims of this study are as follows. First, we seek to trace the emergence, development and explain the current status of women's sport in Oman; second, we examine the women's sports modernisation process as a product of modernity and authenticity debates, involving local and global dynamics; and,

finally we look to illustrate how discourse on modernity and authenticity, globalisation and localisation, have shaped, constructed, and legitimised the modernisation of women's sport in Oman at the competitive and community sports levels in the contemporary context in Oman.

Literature review

Non-western countries were not always given the choice in their path to modernity (Kumar, 1999). However, there are examples that followed different courses and have demonstrated (in contrast to the teleological characterisation of progress of the modernisation thesis, Wagner, 1990) that there can be several pathways to becoming 'modern' (Eisenstadt, 2000). Modernity and authenticity debates in the Arab-Islamic context have appeared in different eras from the birth of Islam until the present day. The current common image of modernity among Gulf societies is that these societies are in a state transition from a traditional to a modern condition. Oman, as one of these states, experienced harsher conditions than any other state in the Gulf up to the birth of the "Omani Renaissance" in 1970 which signalled a major turning point in the modernisation process.

Despite the first sports club in Oman being established in 1942, sport only began to receive better recognition from the late 1970s and early 1980s. The state's attention was focused on education and health during the first decades of the Omani renaissance. Women's sport in Oman did not emerge until the 1990s. However, girls were allowed to participate in PE sessions at schools from the 1970s (Al-Sinani and Benn, 2011). With the establishment of the General Organisation of Sport and Youth Activities (GOSYA) in 1991, women's sports received better attention especially when the first division of Women's Sport was established in 1993.

The modernisation process of women's sport in Oman is characterised by conservatism. This process has resulted in policies that differ at a competitive level from those at community level. Examining the role of society's perception towards women's participation in sport, cultural influences, state intervention and the structure versus agency debate are critical to understanding the Omani path of modernisation of women's sport. This study reveals these important elements through a critical examination of discourses on the modernisation agendas for women's sport in Oman since 1970.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

This study employs a qualitative approach that implements a biographical perspective. According to Miller (2000), this perspective reveals the interplay between the actor and social structure and how the individual has negotiated her/his path through a changing social structure. Given the nature of the study

and the data collection method, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is employed as a data analysis method. The strengths of CDA lie in its nature of looking outside of the text or talk to critically examine the social and political context of discourse (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). A purposive approach to sampling was adopted (as is traditional in the biographical research perspective). Eight respondents, six females and two males, who occupy senior positions as administrative staff, coaches, physical education teachers, and athletes, were selected to provide insights into biographical / policy / organisational experiences of the development of women's sport in the Omani sports system.

Results, discussion and conclusions

On the one hand, responsible governmental bodies have displayed flexibility in relation to different aspects of women's sports in Oman. Examples include placing no restrictions on women's sportswear, the creation of national women's sports teams, provision of support for women's sports initiatives and opening doors to male spectators to attend the Women's Sports Gulf Championship. These measures constitute examples of progressive tools for supporting women's sports at a competitive level. On the other hand, the implementation of women's sports programmes at community level manifests great respect to Omani traditions and customs, gender segregated sports venues, and religious principles (prayer times). These conservative elements are evident only at community sports level.

Cultural and traditional values provoke tribal and regional influences in the debate about women's participation in sport in Oman (The case of the controversy surrounding the attempt to establish the Samail Women's Cycling Team illustrates this point). Appeal to Islam appears not to have been employed to create constraints on women's participation in sports especially at community level. However, Islam has been used in legitimising participation in women's sport in different contexts through citing evidence from Hadith.

In conclusion, women's sport in Oman has exhibited aspects of modernisation, particularly since 1993 when the first women's sport department was established. However, this path incorporates both progressive and conservative elements. Society (rather than simply religion per se) plays an important role in rejecting, negotiating or accepting women's sport. Regional and tribal influences have contributed to this process as well. The intervention of the Ministry of Sports Affairs and Oman Olympic Committee in the modernising of women's sport has differed at competitive and community levels. However, their efforts do not address a range of issues related to women's sport and opens it up to the impact of social and community action.

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