

Multiculturalism versus universalism: More about “London Olympics 2012: Justice for Women”?

Annie Sugier, president of the LDIF and of the Atlanta + Committee on women in the Olympics ()*

(1) Theoretically, multiculturalism is a good concept as far as it doesn't mean we should consider as acceptable that fundamentals human's rights – in particular women's ones – can vary according to cultural and religious traditions and beliefs.

The issue is not a secondary one: women's status has huge impacts on demographic, economical, political developments of world wide societies.

The 1979 United Nations Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against women (**CEDAW**) is very clear on this issue (see article 5): States Parties shall take all appropriate measures: “to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view **to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices** which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women”.

This however is far from solving the issue: CEDAW is one of the United Nations Convention signed by the greatest number of States but at the same time with the higher number of “reservations” based on cultural and religious considerations. Which is a way of rejecting the CEDAW?

(2) Our intention in this presentation is not to elaborate more on CEDAW objective and effectiveness but rather to show the contradictory position of those who accept universality only as far as men are concerned.

The best example we could find is the Olympics.

The Olympic Stadium is a site in which one law applies: the Olympic Charter founded on universal principles that rise above all racial, social, religious and cultural differences.

The Charter is a powerful tool that firmly rejects all forms of discrimination including those of race and gender. Each member of the Olympic Movement swear he or she will respect this common Law (“Olympic Oath”) and that he or she will be the ambassador of Olympic values and not of his or her national politico or religious influence.

Nelson Mandela understood this, with his true statesman's vision and perhaps also because he was himself a sportsman. By obtaining the exclusion of South Africa from the Olympic Movement on the charge of apartheid, he dealt the strongest blow to Pretoria, attacking its international image.

If apartheid was finally and happily vanquished, other forms of discrimination persist in the Olympic stadium, in particular sexual discrimination. It too flagrantly contravenes the terms of the Olympic Charter.

(3) This is the reason why on the initiative of the League for international Women's Right, a French NGO created by Simone de Beauvoir, seven demands were addressed to the Olympic Movement in the perspective of the 2012 Olympic Games in London. A leaflet (“**London Olympics 2012: Justice for Women**”), presenting these demands has been published and is available on the LDIF web site. An “International Support Committee” and a Public Petition were very recently launched with the support of the European Women's Lobby, representing a network of 2500 NGO. In UK, “One Law for All” (*) is promoting a common statement on the project.

The 7 demands reflect two kind of discriminations: those related to classical discriminations cases and those due strong constraints imposed to any women in societies built on sexual segregation because of cultural or religious beliefs.

Everybody agrees with the fact that the first category of breaching in the Olympic Charter should be abolished: i.e. unequal treatment of women in the practice of sports; unequal representation of women in governing bodies, unequal symbolic rewarding and publicity of female athletes etc... Although there is no debate about the justification of these demands political will is still missing to arrive to concrete equality.

Far more litigious are the demands challenging the breaches in the implementation of the Charter based on societal conceptions of segregated societies. Those who defend these conceptions say they promote “real dignity of women” and “complementary male and female roles instead of equality”. Three of our seven demands are related to this issue: we ask for the exclusion of the countries sending male only delegations to the Olympics, we ask for the banning of religious or political signs in the Olympic Stadium and venues, and we ask that IOC no longer support the separate Games for Islamic women organised every 4 year by Teheran. The two last one are the most debated.

(4) Let’s consider more thoroughly the arguments in pro and against our demand to:

- **ban any religious signs** from the Olympic stadium (including the Islamic veil)
- **stop supporting the separate Games** for Islamic women organised by Tehran,

We should first keep in mind the fact that these two demands are based on fundamental principles of the Olympic Charter:

- **Rule 51 on the neutrality of sport** (‘No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic site, venues or other areas’)
- **Principle of non-discrimination** (‘Any form of discrimination (including gender) is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement’).

The main opponents to these demands are experts (*) in sport and research involved in the “**Accept and respect declaration**”. As members of a “Study Group on Improving Inclusion in physical education and sport fro Muslim girls and women”, they produced the above mentioned declaration as an out put of a meeting at the Sultan Qaboos University, in Oman (11–16 February 2008).

The declaration asks for a more flexible implementation of sport rules as far as Muslim women are concerned, going as far as accepting segregation (“gender grouping”) and modification of the international rules(to “ embrace Islamic requirements”) Se for instance two of their recommendation:

- Recommendation 5: “We recommend that people working in the sport and education systems accept and respect the diverse ways in which Muslim women and girls practise their religion and participate in sport and physical activity, for example, choices of activity, dress and **gender grouping**”.

- Recommendation 6: “We urge international sport federations to show their commitment to inclusion by ensuring that their dress codes for competition **embrace Islamic requirements**, taking into account the principles of propriety, safety and integrity”.

(5) Our arguments to challenge the “Accept and respect “ declaration are the following:

- **Meaning of the Law in Sport:** What characterizes modern sport is the uniformity of rules. Making an exception for Muslim women would be unfair towards other religions. Either the rule is changed for all or it is strictly applied.

- **Meaning of the Law in Women’s right struggle:** Being submitted to the same law has been an essential step in the long battle of women to reach formal equality with men. It would be unacceptable to go back in the other direction.

- **Muslim women struggle for freedom:** Instead of helping Muslim female athletes, such an ‘inclusive view’ of rule 51 would rather put in great danger those who dare to respect the Olympic dress code.

- **Politico-religious messages:** Those who signed the ‘Accept and respect’ declaration are confusing religion and politico-religious requirements as promoted by the president of the Islamic Republic of Iran as early as 1991 (Cf. his speech at the Opening ceremony of the *First Islamic Countries Women Sports Solidarity Congress*: “as far as women and sport in the Muslim communities are concerned, we face serious problems to which we must find appropriate solutions”, the objective being to conciliate the practice of sport for women with” the belief in preserving the purity of women and in the teachings of Islam — to prevent the corruption which may result from the simultaneous presence of men and women athletes in one and the same area”).

(6) Perhaps the best argument we can put forward to better understand what is at stake is to ask to those who are hesitating because of the sensitivity of the issue, to think about what Hassiba Boulmerka (first female Algerian gold medallist and Muslim), said:

- **On the dress code:** ‘(there are rules) you cannot wear the hijab on the track, just as you cannot wear shorts in the mosque’. The journalist of “Sport’s” added ‘To some mullahs in Algeria, who have denounced her “for running with naked legs in front of thousands of men”, the answer is just as doctrinaire’ (Sport Illustrated, 18 September, 2000)

- **On separate Games for women:** ‘For all those who know something about sport, these Games represent nothing. In my opinion, sport means high moral values. If you begin by separating women and men, as it is done in these Games, it is the best way to kill women’s expression’, (Sport’s September, 1996),

- **On the Atlanta + (*) campaign:** ‘I share completely their views. Their demands are progressive and help lot women in Arab countries’ (Sport’s September, 1996)

(7) At the end of the day who are we helping?

Women struggling for their freedom or extremists threatening them? We have a lot of examples of violence against women because of their naked legs or hairs (cf. the Muslim rebels in the north Caucasus, information in the Guardian, 16.09.2011- and in Algeria, information in Martine Gozlan blog, 02 09 2011- .

With very good intentions those who are promoting the “accept and respect” declaration are putting in danger the Muslim athletes who respect the law.

Wearing hijab is not a step forward, it is the contrary.

Pioneers like Nawal El Moutawakel (Morocco, gold medallist in 1984)) and Hassiba Boulmerka (Algeria, gold medallist in 1992), are Muslim, but they were not (and are still not) veiled although they were threatened by extremists in their country. Rania ELWani, an Egyptian swimmer did not wear the hijab in 1996, when she was a well-known champion appearing in a traditional swimsuit, while she has now adopted the hijab! Neither was the female Iranian football team 35 year ago

Based on public documents one can follow the influence of Iran on the challenge of international sport regulations as far as female athletes' sportswear is concerned. This is not just a **cultural or a religious issue**: recent photographs show — without any doubt — that we are facing a politico-religious message.

To make it short: what we ask is that at the London Olympic Games, we don't betray the future Hassibas!

We ask every body to be logical : either we change the Olympic Charter for everybody – and then the Olympic Stadium will become a place where any kind of religious or political propaganda or expression will be allowed - , or we keep the Law as it is with it's very clear rule 51, which means that such propaganda or expression is forbidden..

(*)

- **LDIF**, Ligue du Droit International des Femme/ League of the International Women's Right (<http://www.activ-consulting.com>), member of the European Women's Lobby through the French Coordination (CLEF)

- **One Law for All**, BM Box 2387, London WC1N 3XX, UK
nelawforall@gmail.com (www.onelawforall.org.uk)

- **IAPESGW**, International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women (email: klofstrom@caaws.ca)

- **Study Group** on Improving Inclusion in physical education and sport fro Muslim girls and women, (IAPESGW with Sultan Qaboos University, OMAN, 11–16 February 2008.)