

The Historical Pathway of Iraqi Women's Engagement in Physical Activity

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Abstract:

The historical trajectory of Iraqi women's participation in physical activity and sports reflects a complex interplay of political social economic and cultural dynamics. Since the 1950s the foundations of institutional involvement were laid through the establishment of physical education colleges and institutes as well as scholarship programs for training female teachers. These developments represented a critical step toward opening educational and athletic spaces for women (Al-Khafaji, 2015). During the 1970s- and 1980s-women's organizations and state-sponsored programs contributed to expanding female engagement marking a period of relative institutional empowerment for women's sports in Iraq (UNESCO, 1979).

However, this trajectory was disrupted in the 1990s by the combined effects of war and economic sanctions. The deterioration of security and financial resources alongside the rise of conservative social norms significantly curtailed female participation in physical activity (Al-Haidari, 2004). Following 2003 new initiatives emerged from civil society academic institutions and international organizations to promote women's sports. Yet these efforts remained limited due to persistent security concerns cultural restrictions and the absence of a coherent national strategy (Mahmood, 2017).

This study seeks to chart the historical stages of Iraqi women's involvement in physical activity analyze the main factors shaping its progress or decline and explore future prospects through a socio-historical perspective. The significance of this research lies in offering a critical reading of how women's physical activity intersects with broader gender dynamics thus providing deeper insight into the role of sport as a vehicle for social transformation in Iraq.

Keywords: Iraqi women, physical activity, physical education, female participation, social history.

Introduction

Iraq represents a unique model for studying the evolution of women's participation in physical activity and sports where historical political social and cultural factors intersect in complex and shifting ways across decades. Since the mid-twentieth century with the establishment of institutes and colleges of physical education in Baghdad Mosul and Basra Iraqi women began to find their way into the field of physical activity through programs for preparing female teachers and trainers. This marked a foundational step toward their institutional integration into educational and athletic life (Al-Khafaji, 2015). Such openness was part of the Iraqi state's modernization projects in the 1950s and 1960s where education and physical training were linked to official visions of building a modern society.

However, this trajectory was neither linear nor stable. It was characterized by significant fluctuations closely tied to political transformations and prevailing security and economic conditions. While the 1970s and early 1980s witnessed strong governmental support for women's sports through the General Federation of Iraqi Women and state-sponsored

programs the subsequent years of successive wars and the economic sanctions of the 1990s resulted in a marked decline in women's participation both in educational institutions and in public sporting activities (Al-Haidari, 2004). This regression was not merely a consequence of weakened infrastructure but also a reflection of deepening social conservatism that reinforced restrictions on women's mobility in public spaces.

Following 2003 women's participation in physical activity entered a new and contradictory phase. On the one hand civil society organizations and academic initiatives sought to empower women through sport. On the other cultural and security challenges hampered efforts to reconstruct safe and sustainable spaces for physical activity (Mahmood, 2017). Although a number of Iraqi sportswomen achieved notable successes at regional and international levels these achievements largely remained individual and insufficient to represent a broader structural transformation.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to provide a comprehensive historical mapping of the stages of Iraqi women's participation in physical activity analyzing the factors that shaped its progress or decline over time. It further seeks to offer a critical reading of past experiences in order to explore more inclusive and equitable future prospects. From a socio-historical perspective the study assumes that women's physical activity is not merely a matter of health or leisure; it also constitutes a contested arena where gender roles are reproduced or challenged thus reflecting the depth of Iraq's broader social and political transformations.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in a combination of theoretical approaches that seek to explain the trajectory of Iraqi women's participation in physical activity as a complex outcome of intertwined social political and cultural structures.

Historical Feminism

This approach provides an understanding of the evolution of women's participation from a historical perspective that connects political transformations social conditions and gender roles in Iraqi society. Physical activity has never been a neutral practice; it has always been linked to women's position in the social structure and the expansion or restriction of their public spaces (Hargreaves, 1994). Through this lens one can trace how periods of political openness created opportunities for the expansion of women's sports while wars and crises led to setbacks and the reproduction of constraints imposed on women.

Social Theory of Physical Activity and Sport

Sociological literature emphasizes that sport is not merely a physical or recreational practice but a socio-political and cultural field that contributes to reshaping existing relations among social classes gender and power (Scruton & Flintoff, 2013). Accordingly Iraqi women's participation in physical activity can be seen as a reflection of the balances between state and society local culture and modernization projects and traditional norms and the demands of social change.

Oral History Methodology

Contemporary studies on women and sport in postcolonial contexts have adopted oral history as a tool to uncover the voices of women who have often been marginalized in official

narratives (Hargreaves, 2000). This methodology holds particular significance in Iraq where the individual and collective experiences of sportswomen remain under-documented. By recording the testimonies of women who worked as physical education teachers or as athletes in school and university teams one can reveal the dynamics of participation the obstacles faced and the strategies employed to negotiate social norms.

Intersectionality

Women's participation in physical activity in Iraq cannot be understood in isolation from the intersection of other factors such as social class geography (urban versus rural) and sectarian or ethnic affiliations. For example, the experience of women in Baghdad differs considerably from that of women in southern or western provinces which explains the disparities in opportunities available and restrictions imposed (Crenshaw, 1991). This approach helps deconstruct the general picture into multiple patterns that reflect the complexities of Iraqi reality.

Comparative Dimension

The research also benefits from comparative literature on women's participation in physical activity in other Arab and regional contexts such as Egypt and Iran. These comparisons reveal that participation trajectories are consistently shaped by the balance between modernization projects and conservative cultural policies (Pfister, 2010). The comparative lens allows the Iraqi case to be situated within a broader framework highlighting both commonalities and distinctive features.

The Historical Trajectory of Iraqi Women's Participation in Physical Activity

The Beginnings (1950 – 1968)

This phase represents the institutional starting point of Iraqi women's involvement in physical activity. In the 1950s with the growing official emphasis on education physical education departments were established at the Baghdad College of Education for Teachers and later at other institutions. The main objective was to prepare female teachers specialized in physical education for girls' schools (Al-Dujaili 2010). Scholarship programs were also introduced to send students to Egypt and Eastern European countries to benefit from their expertise in physical education which facilitated the adoption of more modern training methods. These initiatives were closely tied to the state's modernization project and the rhetoric of "women's liberation" aligning with the vision of building a modern nation. This gave Iraqi women an initial opportunity to enter a domain that had previously been regarded as exclusively male (Al-Khafaji 2015).

Institutional Expansion (1968 – 1980)

With the rise of the centralized state in the late 1960s women's participation was reinforced through the establishment of women's sports federations under the General Federation of Iraqi Women. Physical education for girls was formally incorporated into the school curriculum and women's sports clubs were opened in Baghdad Basra and Mosul. In the 1970s Iraqi women's teams began to participate in regional Arab competitions granting women's sports a degree of legitimacy at the regional level (UNESCO, 1979). This expansion coincided with the state's growing discourse on gender equality as part of its

“socialist modernization” project where sport was seen as a tool to promote the image of the productive modern woman. Nevertheless, this expansion remained confined within the framework of state centralism meaning that participation was largely driven by political and ideological agendas rather than broad social demand.

War and Sanctions Challenges (1980 – 2003)

The Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) led to a major decline in women’s sporting activities due to the state’s preoccupation with the war effort and the reduction of economic resources. Although some activities continued in universities and schools the lack of security and the redirection of national resources toward the war effort restricted the spaces available to women (Al-Haidari, 2004). During the 1990s economic sanctions exacerbated the decline causing the collapse of sports infrastructure and a sharp decrease in government funding. Additionally, the resurgence of socially conservative attitudes further undermined public acceptance of women’s participation in physical activity. This stage represented a significant rupture in the trajectory with participation shifting from public spaces to limited spheres primarily within universities and some educational institutions.

The Post-2003 Era

After the fall of the former regime and Iraq’s entry into a new phase civil and academic initiatives emerged to rebuild women’s sports. Civil society organizations promoted women’s empowerment through sport and new women’s sports federations began to appear. However, this period was marked by contradictions: on one hand some Iraqi sportswomen achieved notable individual successes in Asian and international competitions (such as athletics and women’s football); on the other persistent security challenges sectarian violence and cultural constraints prevented these achievements from evolving into a broader national project (Mahmood, 2017). Moreover, the absence of a clear governmental strategy to support women’s sports meant that efforts remained fragmented and inconsistent. Nevertheless, this stage can be considered a phase of “partial revival” of participation especially in major cities that offered relatively more open spaces.

Factors Influencing Iraqi Women’s Participation in Physical Activity

Official Policies

Government policies have played a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of women’s sports in Iraq. During the 1950s and 1970s the state supported the establishment of physical education departments and teacher training programs while also facilitating participation in Arab and regional competitions (Al-Dujaili, 2010). However, this support declined significantly during times of crisis particularly throughout the Iran–Iraq War and the economic sanctions of the 1990s when military spending was prioritized over educational and athletic sectors (Al-Haidari, 2004). After 2003 despite attempts to encourage women’s participation through the Ministries of Education and Youth and Sports the absence of a clear national strategy hindered the achievement of sustainable institutional outcomes.

Social and Cultural Norms

Social norms remain among the most significant barriers to expanding women's participation in physical activity. In many Iraqi communities' women's engagement in sports is still perceived as a violation of traditional roles tied to family honor and domestic responsibilities particularly in rural or tribal areas (Mahmood, 2017). Such cultural perceptions restrict the establishment of women-only sports clubs and limit girls' opportunities to participate in school sports on a wide scale. Although major cities such as Baghdad Basra and Najaf have witnessed relatively greater openness the rural–urban divide remains evident.

Security and Political Conditions

Security and political instability have been among the most influential factors disrupting women's sports. Successive wars (1980–2003) and post-2003 sectarian violence restricted women's mobility and access to sports facilities. The targeting of public facilities during waves of violence created a climate of fear making sports participation socially associated with security risks (Mahmood, 2017). This fragile environment rendered women's sports largely an elite activity accessible only to specific social groups.

International Organizations and External Support

International organizations such as UNESCO and the International Olympic Committee played a limited role in supporting Iraqi women's sports mainly through workshops or funding small-scale local programs (UNESCO, 1979). However, these initiatives remained partial and did not translate into a comprehensive national policy. After 2003 some international NGOs attempted to promote sport as a tool for peacebuilding and women's empowerment but weak coordination with local institutions and a lack of sustainability limited their effectiveness (Pfister, 2010).

Discussion

The historical trajectory of Iraqi women's participation in physical activity demonstrates that this involvement was not merely the direct outcome of official policies but rather the result of an ongoing and complex negotiation between governmental strategies social norms security conditions and international support. Women's sports in Iraq did not develop along a steadily progressive path; instead, their trajectory was consistently tied to the broader transformations experienced by Iraqi society.

First it becomes evident that **official policies** played a decisive role during moments of foundation and expansion yet they could not withstand prolonged crises. The state's priorities often shifted toward issues of war and security aligning with scholarly arguments that sport is frequently instrumentalized as a political tool in service of state projects rather than being treated as an autonomous field for social development (Hargreaves, 1994).

Second the study reveals that **social and cultural norms** have always constituted the deeper framework governing women's participation. While the state at times opened opportunities for education and athletic competition the sustainability of these initiatives was contingent on the extent of local community acceptance. This finding resonates with the propositions of the

social theory of physical activity which argues that sport reflects and reproduces existing gender relations and balances (Scruton & Flintoff, 2013).

Third the impact of **security and political factors** became especially pronounced after 1980 as wars and sectarian violence significantly limited women's access to sports facilities. In this sense women's participation in physical activity can be regarded as a "social indicator" of political stability or instability expanding during periods of peace and contracting sharply during times of conflict (Mahmood, 2017).

Fourth the analysis shows that **international support** acted as a catalyst but lacked sustainability. While initiatives by UNESCO and the International Olympic Committee helped open new opportunities they did not lead to structural transformation. This underscores the conclusion that genuine enhancement of women's participation in sports requires a comprehensive national framework integrated with support from civil society (Pfister, 2010).

Taken together these findings suggest that Iraqi women's participation in physical activity serves as a sensitive indicator of broader social transformations. It reflects changes in gender roles the reconfiguration of state-society relations and the balance of forces between conservatism and modernization. Therefore, strengthening women's participation cannot be achieved through sports policies alone it necessitates a holistic vision that addresses underlying social and cultural structures while ensuring safe and institutionalized environments for women.

Conclusions

- The study demonstrates that Iraqi women's participation in physical activity did not evolve along a linear path but was instead shaped by fluctuating historical phases that reflected Iraq's political social and economic transformations. While the 1950s and 1970s witnessed institutional openness wars and sanctions led to a sharp decline in the 1990s.
- Institutional and political support proved to be decisive in creating opportunities for women yet it remained fragile and unsustainable in the face of crises. This indicates that sports policies alone are insufficient unless coupled with broader social transformations.
- Social and cultural norms consistently acted as barriers to female participation preventing individual achievements from developing into a wider societal movement.
- Women's involvement in physical activity can be regarded as an indicator of broader gender and social transformations reflecting degrees of openness or restriction within Iraqi society across decades.
- The future requires more comprehensive national strategies focused on strengthening safe environments integrating educational athletic and health institutions and ensuring collaboration with civil society and international organizations to achieve sustainable women's participation.

Recommendations

1. **Educational Policy Reform:**
Integrate physical activity for girls into the school curriculum as a mandatory component with proper training and qualification of female physical education teachers to meet the specific needs of Iraqi society.
2. **Provision of Safe and Sustainable Spaces:**
Establish women-only sports clubs and secure facilities especially in the provinces ensuring environments that respect cultural sensitivities and guarantee girls' safety from security and social threats.
3. **Promotion of Historical and Anthropological Research:**
Support academic studies that document the experiences of Iraqi women in sports including oral history projects to correct official narratives that have often neglected women's voices.
4. **Integration of Women's Sports into National Health and Education Policies:**
Recognize sport as a tool for improving public health and disease prevention rather than a mere recreational activity through national programs linking physical education to school health initiatives.
5. **Strengthening the Role of Civil Society and International Organizations:**
Encourage joint initiatives between the government local NGOs and international bodies to empower women through sports with an emphasis on program sustainability rather than short-term projects.
6. **Awareness-Oriented Media Strategy:**
Launch media campaigns highlighting the achievements of Iraqi sportswomen at local and international levels aiming to challenge stereotypes and foster greater societal acceptance of women's participation.

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