

Chapter 2

Women's Agency and Corporeality in Equestrian Sports: The Case of Female Leisure Horse-Riders in Tehran

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Abstract This study investigated Iranian female amateur riders' experiences and perceptions of horse riding in a sport arena largely appropriated by men. I suggest that women's participation in sport in Iran must be analyzed in the context of patriarchal culture in which gender is a defining factor in one's experiences and success, while social class may also affect access to certain types of sport by narrowing down investment capacities, or using social distinction strategies and culturally assigning certain activities to a specific class. This study's significance is in providing understanding of women's position in leisure Equestrian sport, as well as their position in sport culture in Iran. Findings from participant observation and interviews with female leisure riders showed that women took part in non-competitive equestrian activities in sports clubs. The stereotypical concept of femininity was a major obstacle for women to enter the sport arena because traditional gendered roles dominated perceptions of sport and limited physicality options. Involvement in equestrian activities provided a sense of distinction for the participants. I argue that movement towards a more equally appropriated sports arena requires changes in the traditional concepts of femininity/masculinity to challenge the male hegemony in culture and sports. Practicing gender equality in a small sport community might not be a source of radical change for Iranian female riders, but it is a micro initiative by individuals to practice their agency, desexualize the sport, and challenge its machismo.

Introduction

In contemporary Iranian society, women are not as actively engaged in professional sports as men (Mirghafouri et al. 2009). Gender inequality in sport is a major issue, not only in Iran and other Eastern contexts but also in the West (Pfister 2011), as there still are barriers to participation in sports for women worldwide (Benn et al.

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2011). Women's share of executive and management positions in sport reflects an existing gender gap in their participation in sport. The average percentage of women on the boards of the more than 70 international sports federations was less than 10% in 2011. Of these federations, 29% did not have a single woman on their executive boards, and in 86% of them the proportion of female members was under 25% (Pfister 2011).

Despite women's growing participation in sport in Iran, sports are considered male domains and there are still ongoing debates over women's participation, dress code, and limitations on bodily movements and representations in sport arenas (Bartarinha 2014; The Guardian 2015). Physical and bodily representation in professional and recreational involvement in sportive activities is considered problematic as it might create conflict between socially accepted female body image and body management ideals and the new emerging form of the female body (Bryson 1994).

Equestrian sports have not been favoured by the authorities in Iran since the Islamic Revolution. These sports have usually been dubbed activities related to the West and to Western aristocracy. They have also usually been perceived as luxurious hobbies rather than sporting activities. Women have not had active participation in professional equestrian sports and horse-racing in the past decades. Although there is no official prohibition on horse-riding for women, the ruling religious and cultural ideology and lack of support and investment by sport officials in the country have been prominent factors affecting the weakening of equestrian activities and sports. At the time this research was conducted (in 2015), most of the relatively few professional Iranian horse-riders (women and men) were self-sponsored.

Ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as gender, impact on participation in sport by both the general public and the social elite, whereby gender, social class and ethnicity intersect (Pfister 2011). Social class may affect access to certain types of sport directly, by narrowing investment capacities, or indirectly, using social distinction strategies and culturally assigning certain activities to a specific social class. Studies in Iran show that the upper class participates in sporting activities more than other class strata (Fathi 2010; Razavi and Taheri 2010).

While personal narratives and social research have provided both portraits and discussion of the institutional and interpersonal conflicts surrounding women's participation in sporting institutions and culture (Adelman and Knijnik 2013) in contexts such as European societies (Meier 2005; Pfister and Hartmann-Tews 2003; Scraton et al. 1999), Latin and North American societies (Espinal and Zhao 2015; Adelman and Knijnik 2013; Young and White 2007) and some Asian and Middle Eastern societies (United Nations 2007; Al-Sinani and Benn 2011; Lissista et al. 2010; Wray 2002), there has been little relevant research on the subject in Iran. Given that little literature on gender and sport, let alone equestrian sports, in contemporary Iran is available, it is important to study and determine the barriers to female participation in sporting activities, especially equestrian sports, in an exemplary traditional state such as Iran.

This paper aims to provide further understanding of the relation between gender and horse-riding in contemporary Iran, by conducting an exploratory, qualitative study on a sample population of leisure horse-riders in Iran's capital city. To do this, first, gender-horse relations in Iranian history are investigated. Women's role in equestrian activities and the historical changes to this role are taken into consideration in order to depict the historical background of the relationship.

Since riding is culturally discouraged in Iran, this chapter explores how women overcome possible cultural obstacles to participation. I seek to find answers to questions such as 'are women actively battling against current gender constraints?', 'what is the significance of being a woman rider?', 'how does the body management embedded in the traditional Iranian culture influence female horse-riders' experience?' and 'how does horse-riding intervene in women's roles and life trajectories?' My exploration draws from all available types of evidence and data, such as historical documents, visual evidence, Western travel diaries, possible ethnographic resources on Iranian nomads' lifestyle and sports activities. Having established the socio-historical context, the chapter then provides perspective from the standpoint of Iranian women who do ride. This is principally based on nine semi-structured interviews and participant observation conducted over 5 days (approximately 3 to 4 h each day). The data has been coded, interpreted and analysed according to principal tenets of feminist theory such as *gender equality* and *patriarchy's* effect on women's participation in the public sphere (Beasley 2006). This work is significant in that it provides the first attempt to study the gender-horse relations in equestrian sports in contemporary Iran.

Method

This study has adopted a grounded theory approach in collecting and analyzing data. The grounded theory method stresses discovery and theory development rather than logical deductive reasoning which relies on prior theoretical frameworks (Charmaz 1983). This means significant concepts and notions are extracted from the data gathered from the field of study (Mohammadpour 2011). Because of limited access to female professional riders who take part in formal competitions, research is based on the data collected from nine amateur leisure riders who were frequent visitors to horse-riding clubs in Tehran for more than 3 years, at the time the interviews were conducted.

Data collection was undertaken through qualitative methods of semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation. Interviews were conducted in May and June 2015 in two private horse-riding clubs in Tehran's suburbs. Nine respondents voluntarily participated in the interviews. Interviews consisted of two parts. The first included explaining the research objectives and asking questions on the demographic characteristics of the respondents and their horse-riding experience. The second part included six multipart open questions to explore the objectives of the research.

The sampling method was a combination of random sampling and snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is usually applied in studies which address sensitive issues and require insiders to locate respondents (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). In this study, snowball sampling was applied in order to access the small community of female horse-riders. First-hand respondents played a crucial role in leading the author to respondents who were willing to participate in the research. Horse-riding club clerks were also interviewed to gain secondary information on their clients and general information on ongoing activities in their clubs. The overall duration of interviews was approximately 10 h. All participants were assured of the confidentiality of the research. Participant and direct observation in riding clubs also provided information on rider–horse interactions and riders' attitudes and behaviours in the field. Despite the small number of participants in the research interviews, data saturation was attained and conceptual patterns were recurrent.

Interviewees' average age was 26, ranging between 18 and 34. Two interviewees were employed, another two were housewives, and four interviewees were university students at graduate and postgraduate levels. One participant had just finished high school at the time the interviews were conducted. Only one interviewee owned a horse. The other eight participants paid a rental fee to the club they attended to ride horses belonging to the clubs. The average age my respondents began riding was 18, although answers ranged from 10 to 29 years of age.

Gender and Equestrian Activities: Historical Background

There is historical evidence showing that distancing women from equestrian activities has been the prominent pattern for centuries in Iran. Although equestrian activities such as horse-riding and horse-racing might not necessarily have been gendered in ancient Persian history, women (with the exception of members of nomadic communities) have been distanced from equestrian activities over most of the following centuries.

Herodotus, the Greek historian, reported that 'Iranians teach three things to their children before they reach 25 years of age: horse-riding, archery and honesty' (Isavi et al. 2010). In Ancient Persian history, horses were valuable creatures mostly because of their role in religious cults but slowly became important as the major means of transportation (Majidi 2014). During this period, equestrian activities and sports may have not been gendered. In the Achaemenid era (330–550 B.C.) horses and horse carts were the prominent means of transportation for noble families and aristocrats. Aristocratic women rode horses to travel around and watch over their lands. Quintus Curtius Rufus, the Roman historian, reported that the Persian queen, the king's mother and courtesans rode horses beside the king. Heracleids, the Greek philosopher, also mentioned that courtesans accompanied the king on horseback for hunting activities. In Persian mythology, there have also been examples of goddesses and female figures who ride horses. For example, it is reported that Anāhitā

(a prominent deity, the goddess of water and a military woman) rode a cart pulled by four horses (Isavi et al. 2010).

After the fall of the Achaemenid Empire and other pre-Islam dynasties (Seleucid, Parthian, Sassanid) the social order went through great transformation. Since the pre-Islamic cults and activities were not favoured by rulers in the Islamic era, social norms and everyday social practices changed in form and content. This was also the beginning of a long era of insecurity and instability from 652 A.D. to 1927 A.D., during which 150 dynasties ruled in Persian territory, with only four having relative control over their lands: the Seljuk, Mongol, Safavid and Afsharid dynasties.

In 1037 A.D. Seljuk Turks advanced from their homelands near the Aral Sea, first raiding into Khorasan and then into mainland Persia. Historical evidence on daily life is rare after the Seljuk's establishment. Mongols raided Persia in about 1375 A.D., resulting in further destruction of historical evidence and cultural patrimony. However, during and after the Safavid era, established in 1501, evidence reveals that women's participation in outdoor and public activities diminished. Strict dress codes and limitations on movement in public spaces were enforced (Rahimi 2012: 234; Meri 2006: 849). During Safavid Shah Tahmasp's reign, women were not permitted to ride horses anywhere in public spaces and it was generally preferred that they never sat on horseback or held the reins (Ravandi 1978). This law changed later, as revealed in travel diaries by Western visitors and Iranian historians' writings of the later Safavid period; courtesans and rich women used carts instead of horseback riding, while prostitutes (protected by the court at the time) rode horses inside the city (Chardin 1993; Rahbari 2009). Some of the Shah's concubines and wives also went hunting with the King in women-only groups (Della Vale 1969).

D'Alessandri, a Venetian diplomat who visited Persia in 1572, noted that women wore long robes and veils that covered their whole body and face. Tenreiro, another European traveller, also noted that elite women who rode horses were fully veiled. It was also observed that, unlike in the European tradition, women rode astride. D'Alessandri suggested that the Shah's mother rode 'like a man' (Matthee 2011: 104), referring to her position on the horse, as she used to sit astride.

Even during this era, there were many poems, fables and stories in which women were depicted as great horse-riders, demonstrating what remained of pre-Islamic structures of gendered activities. A notable example is Samake Ayyar, a prose narrative which originated in the milieu of professional storytellers, was transmitted orally and written down around the twelfth century (Encyclopedia Iranica 2015). In this story, there were professional female riders who competed with men in equestrian activities (Arjani et al. 1996). These women, such as Roozafzoon and Mardandokht, were praised for their mastery in the art of riding, and for their courage. Similar stories were narrated by prominent poets and writers such as Ferdowsi (935–1025), Saeb (1601–1677) and Asadi Toosi (unknown-1080). Ferdowsi wrote about Gordafarid, a heroine in his book *Shahname*

But one of those within the fortress was a woman, daughter of the warrior Gazhdaham, named Gordafarid ... she wore her battle armor like a knight without a moment's delay, and gathered her long hair under the armor; then rode out from the fortress on an agile horse; like a lioness eager for battle. She roared at the enemy ranks, 'Where are your heroes and warriors, your courageous and tested chieftains?' (Ferdowsi, *Shahname*).

The gender-based exclusion of women from equestrian activities evident in the Safavid era continued through the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979), during which women received some support from the government to participate in sports and public/outdoor activities, but still faced barriers imposed by prevalent cultural norms regarding female modesty.

Turkmen and Qashqai¹ nomads (and other Iranian nomadic ethnic groups) might have been an exception to the gendered exclusion from equestrian activities in Persian history. Qashqai nomads had traditionally used horses for transportation and for annual migrations through mountainous areas in the south and central parts of what is now contemporary Iran. Women in these areas were taught to ride although they did not ride horses in hunting activities as frequently as men; instead, they took care of horses as well as other animals important for nomads' survival. The relationship between woman and animals was compatible with their caregiver roles in the community.

Turkmen² men and women have been well known as great horse-riders. Horse-racing is a popular sport among Turkmens of Iran, and there are festivals of horse-racing and equestrian performance at Gonbad-e-Kavous and Bandar-e-Turkmen, two major cities well known for being the homeland of Iranian-Turkmen inhabitants. Today, women's participation in these events is limited and mostly ceremonial; however, even this ceremonial representation of women's role in equestrian activities is meaningful, revealing an effort to keep these cultural traditions alive.

With the exception of cultural groups such as the Turkmen, horse-racing and other equestrian activities in Iran are male-dominated, as are other sports and related activities, except those which minimize the display of female bodies, such as chess and shooting. Women's participation in sports is thus limited. From racing in the arena to watching games in a public stadium,³ the female body is excluded from sport spaces. In this context, the question of doing sport in hijab is an important one, as Iranian Sports Federations insist on an Islamic dress code for their female athletes (Pfister 2011) if women are to participate in sport.

¹Qashqai is an ethnic group made up of a number of tribes and sub-tribes, residing mainly in central and southern Iran.

²Turkmen is one of the ethnic groups residing mainly in an area in the northern and north-eastern areas of contemporary Iranian political territory.

³Iranian women are usually not allowed to enter stadiums to watch official sport matches except in women-only enclaves.

Men's Sport, Women's Battle for Everyday Life

As explained in the previous section, women's participation in equestrian activities has had ups and downs in Persian history. Today, restrictions in sports range from limiting the types of outfits which women can wear, to determining which sports they can freely take part in. The traditional dress code is often perceived as a barrier to free movement which prevents women engaging in many fields of sports (United Nations Written Statement 2013: 3). However, in the last decade, Iranian women have been practising their agency and claiming their right to participate in sport by concentrating on mostly male-oriented sports such as soccer (Kamali 2010), by campaigning to be allowed to enter stadiums (Bartarinha 2014), and mastering less controversial sports such as archery and shooting (Pfister 2003). Graine (2012) has reported that Iran has a higher percentage of female soccer players than Japan and more total female players than South Korea, despite the fact that women active in sports in Iran face more barriers to stop them from competing than do their East Asian counterparts.

Equestrian sports are among the most female-friendly sports in the world, as nearly 80% of riders around the world are women. Modern-day equestrian sports are unique in that men and women compete directly against one another (Vetmeduni 2014); but as Thompson and Adelman (2013) suggested, women's success in achieving higher representational levels requires careful interpretation, as that success may have fundamentally changed the nature and gendered meaning of that sport (Thompson and Adelman 2013).

The Iranian horse-riding federation has both men's and women's departments, and privately owned and managed horse-riding clubs are also open to men and women. Although all other sport facilities around the country have distinct spaces or timetables for men and women, horse-riding facilities mostly welcome men and women at the same time and in the same space. This might partially imply that authorities consider these facilities function more as recreation than as sport. This may in part reflect reality, since despite the fact that women are regular visitors to horse-riding clubs in Tehran, they have taken part in equestrian activities more as a hobby than as sporting activity.

In the pages that follow, female amateur riders' conceptions, experiences and perceptions of riding are examined within the context of a traditional patriarchal society. Where needed, direct quotes are provided to back arguments.

Motivation to Ride and Women's Agency

Nine respondents participated in the semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in two private horse-riding clubs in Tehran's suburbs. These horse-riding clubs were privately owned and managed recreational spaces which provided riding classes and rented horses to their clients. Riding classes accepted both male and

female individual trainees, but all the trainers were men. All respondents took weekly dressage classes in the English style of riding, once or twice a week. One respondent was interested in polo but was not considering learning it because she did not have the time. The youngest respondent (18 years old) expressed her ambition to pursue riding and ‘maybe take part in a competition one day’.

One club reported that at least 40% of their clients were women, while the other estimated female visitors to be half of overall visitors

Women are as enthusiastic as men in horse-riding ... we definitely prefer female clients. They are lighter, easier to train, and nicer to the animals.

Findings from interviews with the participants suggested that participating in equestrian sports had usually not been the result of a conscious individual decision-making process. In this sample, the majority of respondents (eight out of nine) had started riding either after being encouraged by one or more experienced male family members, or having been accidentally drawn into the sport in other ways. Four respondents mentioned encouragement received from male family members as their incentive to start horse-riding

I owe this to my *husband*. He encouraged me to learn riding before we got married and we have been doing it together ever since... I don't think I would have known about these places if not for him... It is not a popular activity.

Similarly, but slightly different from the above participant, the following respondent who is of Turkmen descent believed that family heritage has played a great role in shaping her interest in the sport

I don't know if I ever chose to do this... I was born to this *family* in which everyone was into horses... of course I could choose not to do it if I wanted to, but I was on a horse with my *father* before I could write my name.

Four participants were encouraged to try the sport by enthusiastic friends who were already active in riding, or accompanied friends to riding clubs and later grew interested in the sport

My first riding experience was totally *accidental*. I was invited by a friend on a weekend... once we entered the club I got interested and gave it a try... now I am a regular visitor; almost addicted to the sport.

There was one participant who had started riding horses with no family background and no friends involved in the sport. She started riding when she was 18 and now she is 33

[I am] as interested as the first time... You remember Silas⁴? I wanted to ride a horse since I first watched that show. It was my dream since I was a teenager... my *brothers* helped me in convincing my *father*. It was really hard to convince my father who thought it was not *girly* enough. I had to go on hunger strikes more than once... it was not easy.

⁴Silas was a 1981 German adventure TV mini-series based on a Danish children's book with the same name. It tells the story of a young boy, an avid rider, searching for his horse. The show was on air during the 1990s on Iranian national TV channels.

Even where there was individual and independent will power at work to get involved in the sport, the male guardian's role was prominent in facilitating participation.

Women in a Male Domain: The Question of Femininity

In Iran, sport and entertainment activities for women and girls are exclusively held indoors or in closed, single-sex spaces. These spatial limitations may have affected women's tendency to pursue sports, as it has been suggested that it is partially due to the hot, enclosed nature of facilities that sport programmes for women are not popular (Meier 2005). This is an issue not only in regard to professional sports (such as indoor soccer), but also other sporting and recreational activities such as swimming. Despite such limitations, Iran has experienced an increase in the number of women participating in sports in the last few decades. Although there is no public record on the number of the athletes, the vice presidency of the *Ministry of Sports and Youth* reported in 2011 that the number of female athletes and branches of sport open to them are on rise (Farsnews 2011). Women are pushing against boundaries shaped around sports and taking part in sports which were formerly considered aggressive and masculine. Soccer is the most popular sport in Iran yet women are not allowed to attend stadiums to watch soccer. Given that it is much easier for women to pursue indoor sports, a recent rise in the number of female outdoor soccer players in the country could imply that women are actively trying to battle against the present constraints (Kamali 2010).

There is consensus among interviewees about the liberal nature of equestrian sports compared to other sports; for example, an interviewee opined

Gender is always an issue; but in horse-riding, I think, less than other sports. In this case, we [men and women] are quite equal in our deprivation... the [equestrian sports] federation is weak or does not have any budget; and they also have other priorities... this [private horse-riding club] is open to men and women at the same time, while women are not even allowed to enter stadiums to watch soccer or volleyball; so, there is slightly more *equality*.

Younger generations involved in sport are questioning the traditional cultural barriers that stand in the way of their participation in sports. One interviewee mentioned a very common belief still existing among Iranians regarding young girls' bodily motions and practices

Our moms tell us we might lose our *virginity* if we jump off high places (laughs). All [Iranian] girls have heard this at one point of their lives. My mom made me believe that not only jumping but biking and definitely riding a horse will lead to the same outcome... for us [Iranian girls] it is always somehow related to virginity and being *decent*, feminine.

In lifelong processes of socialization, individuals acquire female and male identities in accordance with the prevailing gender arrangements in a particular society (Pfister 2010). In Iran, cultural emphasis on female values such as virginity and chastity prohibits any kind of heterosexual relationship before marriage.

Virginity is related to family honour, and having premarital sex can lead to stigmatization of a family as dishonoured and immoral; it can also lead to loss of marriage prospects (Rahbari 2013).

Some Iranian cultural traditions limit women's physical activity to private spaces, such as rooms in a house, and semi-private spaces, such as backyards. It is expected that girls will learn the relationship between their bodies and these safe spaces as soon as they reach puberty; otherwise the process of feminization is considered to be problematic. As one participant put it

I was the little *rebel* of the house... I was an only daughter to my parents and had grown up with three brothers. So, everyone blamed the wrong nurture I had received for my lack of *femininity*.

Sport is intricately related to gender identity. Gender identity, the sense of being male/female/other, develops within the context of relationships and cultural spaces (Fisher et al. 2013). Physical activities are intertwined with the structures, norms and ideals of a society, and they always mirror that society's gender order and gender hierarchy (Pfister and Hartmann-Tews 2003).

In terms of body covering, riding clubs are places in which the official dress codes are often violated, but violations are condoned by the authorities. Although women are officially not permitted to appear in trousers and jackets in public, they actually do so in riding clubs. The official female clothing in Iran is the chador or a long coat (a *manteaux*) which covers the upper body, usually above the knee, accompanied by trousers and a head cover which should cover the hair and the neck area. Thus, women riders actually experience a suspension of the official dress code regulations (except the head cover) in horse-riding clubs. One respondent explained

[Horse-riding clothes] look quite the same for men and women; except the headscarf, which troubles some people, but at least we don't wear the *manteaux*.

Interviewees enjoyed relative freedom in their clothing choice in the private horse-riding clubs, because they could usually wear jackets or shorter coats. This experience produced a sense of freedom in women who rode.

Significance of the Horse

All interviewees associated riding horses with positive adjectives such as *liberating*, *healing* and *refreshing*, mostly because of the gender-neutral nature of the activity, the space and their perceptions of their relationship with the horse. A respondent indirectly mentioned the gender issue by noting that horses are gender-neutral

It is a *liberating* experience... It is one of the very rare moments in every week when I forget everything and live in the moment... one of the few places I feel free... the horses don't care if you are *man* or *woman*. That makes them better than most people.

Another participant explained her satisfaction from the experience of interacting with horses. The rider obviously perceived the riding practice as an exchange in which the horse is an active agent

[Horses] are very *intelligent*... Sometimes I think they realize my feelings better than human beings. It is a pity they cannot communicate like us [human beings]... they do [*communicate*] in other ways though... they can look at you and say, 'you look happy today'.

Similarly

Before I started [riding] I thought it was just like biking. I was always fascinated by biking. Little by little I realized I was wrong; because here, you are *interacting* with a *smart* being... this is where I can forget about the mess in my kitchen and enjoy my time with my lovely [horse] friend. It is refreshing.

Human–animal relationships have been explained by several theories in the social sciences such as *social exchange theory* in which non-economic social situations are analyzed economically and actions are contingent on rewarding reactions (Emerson 1976). Emotions are, however, neglected in this approach, mostly because of behavioural and rational choice assumptions about actors taking part in the interactions (Lawler and Thye 1999: 218) as always acting in relation to positive and negative rewards for their actions.

There have been other studies suggesting that human–animal bonds have qualities similar to interpersonal relationships (Smolkovij et al. 2012). My study also provides evidence for such arguments.

I don't like horse racing. I think these loyal, kind and generous animals are mistreated... riding is different; I do feel that *they enjoy* giving us the ride as much as we enjoy riding them. In racing, they are forced to do things; they are whipped and often hit. I have seen it with my own eyes... when I take [horses] out for riding I can see the joy and gratefulness in their eyes.

This shows that riders perceived the emotional bond that is created as satisfying for the horses as well as for themselves. Respondents feel an emotional bond with the horses and show their concerns about their well-being. Rider–horse relations were often discussed in terms of emotional exchange by the respondents, for example

There are times that you actually are able to choose [the horse you want to ride] but not often... it would be more beneficial for horses too [to have the same riders] because they get *attached* to each other.

Women experience a sense of attachment in their relations with horses. There is very little data on human–animal relations in Iran, mostly because having pets is not a common practice and is sometimes subject to legal punishment.⁵ Studies

⁵It is illegal in Iran to appear with pets (especially dogs and cats) in public spaces. Stray animals (mostly dogs and cats) living in urban areas are sometimes culled. The few existing animal shelters in the country are privately owned and totally dependent on animal lovers' donations and funding.

including animals usually focus on health or nutrition, to improve the industrial production of animal products. Farm animals are seen in a utilitarian framework and ritual animal sacrifices are still a common cultural phenomenon, practised widely on religious occasions or at celebrations such as wedding ceremonies. Iran is slowly developing its own ethical regulation systems for animal experiments (Izmirli et al. 2010), and initiatives are taken to protect some wild animals. However, farm animals, pets, animals kept in zoos, or kept for sport and entertainment are not protected by the legal system. This is important also because Iran's ranking in the Animal Protection Index is G, representing the lowest possible level of animal welfare, according to the World Animal Protection Organization (2014). In this context, individual involvement and private funding are the main supports for animal welfare.

The Social Class Dimension

Equestrian sports have been appropriated by the upper-middle and upper classes, because economic factors play an obvious role in people's likely participation. Although further research is required to explore the relation between socio-economic background and women's participation in equestrian sport in Iran, it seems that it is simply more affordable for higher class women to access the sport. One clerk working in the riding club mentioned that social class and financial resources were important factors affecting their clients' interest in the sport

Mostly *rich* people, you know, the well-off [attend the club]. Others might stop by once or twice but they usually do not return... Our prices are not high at all, considering the costs of this place; but I guess they might be high for less well-off people.

The participants did not rate the prices as high. They believed that the factors which make a small group of people attend these clubs were rather *cultural*. An interviewee suggested

I think *most people* see [horseback riding] as a *Western* phenomenon... it might be so, but this is not the only Western thing our culture has adopted.

The above example implies that being a part of this minority and getting involved in the sport is producing a sense of *distinction* in participants, also suggested by this example

I am happy that *not all kinds of people* attend these places. Seriously, I like the ambiance... people who [attend this place] are nicer and more respectful.

Despite the interviewees' evaluation, according to the horse club workers, the costs of owning a horse are high for Iranians earning the average wage. Only a few riders at the professional level own a horse. Hourly horse rental rates at private riding clubs, such as those attended by the participants in this study, are also rather high when compared to the official minimum hourly wage defined by the Iranian

Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare: The average hourly rates of the two clubs studied in this research are approximately 15 times the minimum hourly wage of an Iranian worker in 2015 (Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare 2015).

Conclusion

This study's findings suggest that women are drawn to equestrian sports mostly through family and acquaintances. Getting involved in the sport is not seen as a major trajectory in women's lives, unless they are professional riders competing in formal competitions. In the sociological lifecourse approach, trajectories are relatively fixed patterns of possibilities and limitations which play an important role in shaping future decisions and experiences (Willis and Reid 1999). Although agency and individual autonomy are more emphasized by birth-groups born after the 1980s, in accordance with the traditional discourse of gender identity, sports are still not a turning point in women's lives. Turning points result in radical changes in life trajectories (Moen et al. 2001), while for Iranian women, sports activities including equestrian sports are mostly seen as a break from daily activities and are aligned with previously fixed life schedules.

Participants in this study did not explain their interest in equestrian activities in terms of skill or self-fulfilment, but in terms of their emotional exchange with animals and development of positive emotions such as *freedom* and *euphoria*.

This research also revealed that equestrian activities are appropriated by the *upper class*. Gender and class merge, as social placement operates through patriarchal and patrilineal systems, and wealth is further concentrated in the hands of men and further promotes women's poverty (Lindsey 2011). The gender-based division of labour and a symbolically conveyed gender duality determine social structures and everyday life, as well as ways of thinking and of understanding things (Pfister 2003). The ability to possess social power derives from the ability to control various social resources. These resources can be anything and everything and might include things such as land, capital, social respect, physical strength and intellectual knowledge (Livesey 2015). For now, practicing equality within a small sporting community such as the one studied in this research might not be a source of radical change in accessing those resources, but it can be a micro-initiative for individuals to desexualize sport and challenge its presumed connection to masculinity.

Women's sport culture must be analyzed in the context of a patriarchal society (Puig and Soler 2003) in which gender equality in sport is a cultural and political issue and the resources that provide necessary power to bring about change are either systematically or culturally allocated to men. Any alteration towards a more equally appropriated sports arena requires changes in the traditional concepts of femininity and masculinity, and in women's role in the economy, as well as their access to resources, if they are to challenge male hegemony in sports. Surmounting

the current order and creating a gender-neutral and diversified version of sport requires collective activism by men and women.

Similar to the findings of the research conducted by Green et al. (1981), this study shows that women's full-time responsibilities such as doing the house chores and caregiving activities might stop women from pursuing career in sports. In accordance with Al Busafi (2015), findings of this research suggest that women take part in non-competitive activities in sports clubs. Female horse-riders interviewed in this study addressed the issue of a stereotypical concept of femininity as a major obstacle to their entering the sports arena. Similar to Singleton's (2013) discussions on girls' stories in the British context, Iranian girls are nurtured by tales of family-centred ideals which do not include physicality. Also, as pointed out by Lee and Macdonald (2009), culturally traditional gendered roles dominate perceptions of sport and physicality options. Similar to Wipper's (2000) findings, the interviewees in this research recognized horses as partners and significant participants in equestrian activities. The finding that equestrian activities are appropriated by the upper classes is similar to findings in other Asian countries such as India (Majumdar 2005), in which gender equality is more attainable in the urban upper strata. Participants also reported that their involvement in equestrian activities also provides a sense of distinction based on their social class.

This study is an introductory contribution to understanding Iranian women's participation in leisure equestrian activities. Its significance lies not only in providing understanding of women's position in leisure equestrian sport, but also their position in sport culture. It is necessary to note that further research is required to test and bolster findings of this research. It is possible to expand this research by involving sample populations including women from lower classes, women who want to ride but face too many obstacles to do so, as well as the significant-others of women who ride.

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