

# Role Models in the Media and Women's Sport Participation in Qatar

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Globalization has had both positive and negative effects on women in Qatar. On the positive side, Qatar has joined the global elite sporting scene, most notably through winning the hosting rights for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. This world-class level activity has been accompanied by pressure for Qatar to increase participation of women athletes. Qatar has responded by dedicating considerable resources to women's sports and Qatari women have been prominently featured in recent athletic events. At the same time globalization has wreaked havoc on the health of Qataris, including rampant diabetes and obesity rates that are the highest in the region and among the highest in the world. One strategy to increase women's activity levels Qatari officials have voiced is that the women competing in the Arab Games and the Olympics are serving as role models. These female athletes have been prominently featured in the local media, to encourage women and girls to engage in regular physical activity. To ascertain if these new role models are indeed having an effect on female residents of Qatar, this article utilizes survey methods to investigate what role, if any, that role models play in the attitudes and physical activity/sports participation levels of women and girls in Qatar. The survey findings indicate that while personal role models such as friends and family play an important role in physical activity, public figure role models, such as those cited by Qatari officials, are far less frequently cited as influences and in fact, only one Arab public figure of any kind was mentioned as a role model inspiring physical activity or sport participation. After the analysis of the findings, the article discusses their implications for public policy in Qatar. At this historic point in the development of elite female athletes in Qatar, the research provides some of the first empirical assessment of the effect role models may be having on women and girls in Qatar.

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*Keywords:*

*women's sports, women's physical activity, role models, media effects, globalization, Qatar, Arab, media portrays, Olympics, mega-events*

### THE MENA REGION – GLOBALIZATION, SEDENTERIZATION AND PUBLIC HEALTH

A half-century ago, many Arab populations of the MENA region were mostly impoverished, living on agriculture, fishing, and small-scale trade. The discovery and exploitation of vast reserves of oil and gas changed almost every aspect of traditional life, thrusting these societies into the center of the global economy, creating enormous wealth almost overnight, and allowing for the almost complete urbanization of the population in a single generation. The changes were perhaps even starker for the small Bedouin populations of the Gulf, who had lived a fairly insulated lifestyle, making a hardscrabble living from the unforgiving desert and pearl diving. Water and food were never plentiful, and malnutrition was always just over the horizon (Fromherz 2012; Walker and Butler 2010). While the gleaming modern cities that can be found throughout much of the MENA region can be seen as a positive sign in comparison to the widespread poverty of the past, incorporation into the global economy (in the form it has taken) has had clear negative effects in the area of health. While globalization may not be the only cause of the health issues in the region, it certainly is a strong contributor. Specifically, the MENA region has been highly affected by diabetes in recent years. The International Diabetes Federation (IDF) has stated that ten percent of the adult population has diabetes, meaning that about 37 million people in the MENA region are living with this chronic disease, and the IDF predicts that this number will jump to 68 million people by the year 2030 (International Diabetes Association 2015).

The leading causes of morbidity and mortality in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are several chronic, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) that are linked with obesity and diabetes (Bener 2006). For example, in 2009, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE ranked globally in the top ten countries with a prevalence of obesity (Mabry 2010). In 2004, 56.4 percent of Bahraini men and 79 percent of Bahraini women were overweight or obese, while 64 percent of the men and 70 percent of the women were overweight or obese in Saudi Arabia (Khatib 2004). Qatar has become the country in the GCC region most affected by obesity and diabetes. In fact, Qatar has the fourth highest rate of diabetes in the world, and ranks sixth globally for obesity rates (International Association for the Study of Obesity 2012). According to the Qatar National Health Strategy, 71 percent of residents in Qatar are overweight. Among the Qatari population, 75 percent are overweight. Thirty-two percent of Qatar's residents are obese or morbidly obese, as is 40 percent of the native Qatari population. Even obesity rates in children are high, with 28 percent of Qatari children classified as overweight. Obesity and diabetes lead

to several chronic diseases, including cardiovascular diseases and blindness (Qatar Diabetes Association 2012). These chronic diseases accounted for 47 percent of the deaths in Qatar in 2008.

The prevalence of obesity in the GCC countries is connected to several factors directly or indirectly linked to the globalization of the local economy including: changed dietary habits, lack of physical activity, and altered cultural lifestyle (Henry, Lightowler and Al-Hourani 2004). The high consumption of food rich in fats and calories is a major factor in the prevalence of obesity (Musaiger 2004). The consumption of large amounts of food is tied to the cultural lifestyle changes and socioeconomic growth in Qatar. The recent economic growth has brought the Westernization of traditional foods, as well as the introduction of readily available fast foods known to be high in fat, cholesterol, and sodium (Ibid.). The serving of large quantities of unhealthy foods at frequent gatherings with family members and friends has become a cultural tradition (Serour, Alqhenaie, Al-Saqabi, Mustafa and Ben-Nakhi 2007), and contributes to the alarming rates of NCDs in Qatar.

It is well known that physical activity is crucial to fighting obesity and diabetes (Hu 2011). Maintaining regular physical activity has several health benefits. Short-term benefits include: a healthier heart, more energy, better ability to deal with stress, and improved sleeping patterns (Pace 2000). The long-term benefits include a reduced risk of early death, heart disease, developing diabetes and/or high blood pressure, and becoming obese (Pace 2000). However, many of the same factors that have contributed to rising rates of diabetes and obesity have contributed to relatively low rates of participation in physical activity on the part of the Qatari population, with over 50 percent of the native population not engaging in any regular physical activity (Henry, Lightowler and Al-Hourani 2004; Musaiger 2007). Clearly, the amount of physical activity required for survival and daily life has decreased radically in the last 50-100 years in Qatar. A number of factors have contributed to this change. The migration to the capital city, Doha, of virtually all of the nomadic, Bedouin, desert dwellers cannot be overlooked as the beginning of the change. City life, with motorized transport, electrical appliances, television, video games, professional office jobs - with their known sedentary style, and the easy availability of housemaids have all resulted in a much less active lifestyle (Musaiger 2007). There are also a number of other factors that contribute to low physical activity levels in Qatar including the hot summer weather, which makes outdoor physical activity problematic for a good portion of the year, time constraints, and having musculoskeletal diseases and/or asthma that limit people's ability to be physically active (Serour, Alqhenaie, Al-Saqabi, Mustafa and Ben-Nakhi 2007).

### THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF INTERNATIONAL SPORTING EVENTS

Along with the significant negative effects of globalization in Qatar have come positive effects. Of relevance here are the perhaps unintended consequences of Qatar's global aspirations in sports. After successfully hosting the Asian Games in 2006, the tiny nation burst onto the international sports scene. The emirate further cemented its position in the world of international sport with its competitive if ultimately unsuccessful bid for the 2016 Olympics (reaching the final five) and then with its successful bid to win the hosting rights for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. At the same time, Qatar's global aspirations in the world of sports have been accompanied by pressure for the country to increase participation of women on its international sports teams.

Qatar responded by investing heavily in the development of elite female Qatari athletes and appears to be making some significant headway. At a recent Arab Games hosted by Qatar, of the 785 female athletes competing 13 percent were Qatari women (both are record numbers) (Walden 2012). Even with this and similar investments, it did not escape notice that until the 2012 Summer Olympic Games, Qatar was one of only three countries in the world that had never sent a female athlete to the Olympics. The International Olympic Committee strongly encouraged the inclusion of women on Qatar's 2012 team (Times of India 2011). In response, Qatar sent four female athletes to the 2012 Olympics in London; all four went on "wild card" bids supplied by the International Olympics Committee, as they did not qualify for their events. For people living outside of Qatar the participation of 100 women in a sporting event or sending female athletes to the Olympics might seem trivial but, in the context of the fairly conservative society of Qatar, it leads to a whole series of questions about what women can and should be able/allowed to do in society.

One strategy employed by Qatari officials to increase women's activity levels is describing those women competing in the Arab Games and the Olympics as role models and prominently featuring them in the local media, to encourage women and girls to engage in regular physical activity. One particularly prominent example occurred during the opening ceremony of the London 2012 Olympics, where Qatar's flag bearer was a female athlete, Bahiya al-Hamad (ESPN Sports 2012). To ascertain if these new role models are indeed having an effect on female residents of Qatar, survey methods were used to investigate what role, if any, role models play in the attitudes, physical activity and sports participation levels of women and girls in Qatar. Before discussing the findings from the survey and their implications for understanding the potential of role models to encourage female athletic activity in Qatar, an un-

derstanding of some of the major concerns associated with Muslim women and participation in sports will be helpful to contextualize the respondents' remarks.

### MUSLIM WOMEN, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND SPORT PARTICIPATION

Muslim women in Qatar are not unique in their low participation rates in physical activity and sport. Over the past 25 years, a number of studies have focused on the participation of Muslim women in physical activity and sports, partially in response to the lower participation rate of Muslim females in international competitions (Sfeir 1985) and in sports in general (Sports Scotland 2008). Almost all of these studies use qualitative methods, typically involving interviewing a small number of Muslim women about their experiences (see for examples AbdulRazak, Omar-Fauzee and Abd-Latif 2010; Dagkas and Benn 2006), which makes it difficult to use them to draw general conclusions. However, the rich insight these studies provide into the experience of Muslim women with physical activity is helpful in understanding the sorts of issues Muslim women may experience, and has strongly informed the development of the survey items, explained in the method section below. These studies tend to focus on constraints Muslim women may experience, including wearing the hijab and the supposed conservatism of Muslim families' vis-à-vis women and girls (see Guerin, Diiriye, Corrigan and Geurin 2003).

There is a strong agreement among Muslim women from a variety of backgrounds that Islam encourages women to be physically active (Jiwani and Rail 2010; Walseth 2006; Walthseth and Fasting 2003). For example, Walseth and Fasting (2003) found that a relatively diverse sample of Egyptian women agreed that Islam promotes physical activity for women. An oft-cited example is that the Prophet Mohammed ran races with his wife, both losing to her and beating her. Young Shia Muslim Canadian women in Jiwani and Rail (2010) indicated that in their view physical activity was a means to becoming a better Muslim. In the studies reviewed here, no Muslim women were reported to indicate that their religion restricted physical activity for women per se but rather believed that Islam requires Muslims to take care of themselves in a variety of ways, including keeping one's body healthy via physical activity.

There are, however, other aspects of Islam as it is currently practiced in many parts of the world, which may constrain the ways in which women can be physically active. These include: wearing the hijab, the requirement for modest dress, and the need to avoid being the recipient of a male gaze, all of which can result in a need for sex-segregated exercise spaces if physical activity is to be engaged in. In Muslim communities there is also sometimes a fear of de-feminization, that is, a concern that sporting

females will become too strong and lose their femininity (AbdulRazak, Omar-Fauzee and Abd-latif 2010). As is true of most religions, however, there is considerable diversity in interpretations and the practice of Islam, resulting in a variety of experiences for Muslim women with regard to sport and physical activity. Additionally, Muslim women live contextualized lives, in which their families can play a major role. Thus the families' views of the proper roles and behaviors for girls and women must also be taken into account.

Perhaps because it is the most visible aspect of being a Muslim female, as well as a factor that can obviously affect the experience of physical activity, the wearing of the hijab in relation to physical activity is a main focal point in many studies. It is typically at least mentioned, even in papers not specifically focused on it. In one study of young Muslim women living in diaspora in Canada, they indicated that wearing the hijab was a personal choice, one that is between a woman and God and can be a "crucial part of their identity" (Jiwani and Rail 2010, 262). However, there is no unanimity in the respondents' experiences of and feelings about the hijab in relation to physical activity. To begin with, not all Muslim women wear the hijab. Additionally, some of the respondents indicated that the hijab enabled them to be physically active because of the protection it affords. Many indicated that the hijab and physical activity are quite compatible. Others indicated that it can be physically uncomfortable because they get hot or the hijab can hinder their movement. Finally, some indicated that they felt conspicuous wearing the hijab around non-Muslims. To be sure, despite the variation in beliefs and practices regarding the hijab, it is a critical aspect of many Muslim women's identities and, thus, relevant to the experience of physical activity. The need to dress modestly and/or not exercise when in places where males can view them is commonly mentioned by Muslim females as a barrier to sports participation (Koca, Henderson, Asci and Bulgu 2009). How much of the body should be covered and in what manner (e.g. loose clothing) is not uniformly agreed upon.

The need to exercise where males cannot view them is often managed by the provision of sex-segregated exercise facilities. Many Muslim females (and males too) believe that they must not act in a way that could lead males to gaze at them with any sort of sexual thoughts (Jiwani and Rail 2010). The men in their lives may also share such beliefs. For example, Turkish women reported that jealous husbands worried about males watching them exercise (Koca, Henderson, Asci and Bulgu 2009). If women behave in a way that elicits such a gaze, they, rather than the male, are culpable. Thus, Muslim women who understand their faith in this way are understandably quite uncomfortable exercising where males (typically males not from their family) can see them. In many

Islamic countries it is the norm that sex-segregated facilities are provided - not only for exercise but also waiting areas for doctors, governmental offices, hair or beauty salons, immigration lines at airports, and so forth. In the absence of such facilities, and similar to the situation with modest clothing, Muslim women living in Diaspora may paradoxically experience less freedom than they do in their home countries (Nakamura 2002).<sup>1</sup>

As is the case in many cultures, the family often plays an important role in the lives of Muslim girls and women (AbdulRazak, Omar-Fauzee and Abd-latif 2010). Some Muslim females report that their families' desires supersede their own, e.g. if they wish to be physically active but their families believe it is not appropriate, then the family may disallow their participation (Kay 2006). Muslim families are not without variation, however. Some Muslim women and girls report that their families strongly encourage their participation in physical activity and sports (Kay 2006).

The picture that emerges from the literature on Muslim women and physical activity is that while physical activity is encouraged and perhaps even required by Islam, many aspects of Muslim women's lives may constrain the ways in which they can be active including: the need for modest dress, avoiding the male gaze, and the absence of sex-segregated facilities in some places. I now turn to the question of women in Qatar who are situated in a rapidly developing country caught in both positive and negative aspects of globalization.

#### PHYSICAL ACTIVITY FOR WOMEN IN QATAR

Qatar was, until very recently, a primarily Bedouin country. Physical activity for the sake of exercise did not exist when the nomadic Qataris worked hard to scratch out a living from the harsh, inhospitable desert. The modernization that Qatar has recently and rapidly experienced has brought with it the

<sup>1</sup> Many Muslim girls in Diaspora experience considerable conflict between their desire to wear modest clothing and the clothing requirements of physical education classes and sports teams. In some cases, physical education teachers and coaches were willing to ignore the rules to enable the girls to participate. In other cases, they were not, resulting in significant conflict for the girls. Some resolved this conflict by not participating in sports, others ignored the teachers and rules and some conformed or adopted a variety of strategies such as pulling on clothing to attempt to cover themselves. Nakamura notes the paradoxical situation: Westerners may feel that Muslim girls and women living in Diaspora are freer than they would be in their "oppressive" home countries, however, inflexibility regarding clothing rules and a lack of acceptance of the requirements of the girls' practice of Islam may result in them actually experiencing less freedom.

dietary and disease problems referenced above and increasing contact with the global community and its values – of particular relevance here are values regarding women. Women in traditional Qatari society are above all to be protected. In this sense, protected means to protect their virtue from men, who can taint a woman simply by their gaze. As one example, it is quite a recent development for Qatari women's faces to be displayed publically in the media of any kind, from paid advertisements to wedding announcements. In this area the path breaker was Sheikha Mozah, wife of the former Emir of Qatar, who has been a very visible advocate for many changes in Qatari society. She became the first Qatari woman whose face was depicted in the media when she, along with her husband, was interviewed on the American news show *60 Minutes* in 2003. Now it has become commonplace to see Qatari women's faces in the press and on TV but there are still families who will not allow this, and will even go so far as to require the removal of their daughters' photos that may have been published in brochures.

Unlike women in Saudi Arabia, women in Qatar are not required to wear robes or cover their hair with a hijab, are allowed to drive, and gained suffrage the same time as Qatari men. They participate in sports in schools and elsewhere, a right their Saudi counterparts still lack (Saudi Women Push 2012). At the same time, Muslim women dress modestly and most non-Muslim Qatari female residents do so as well. The majority of publically available services from government offices to banks have separate waiting areas for men and women. Esthetic services such as hair salons, massage companies, nail salons and the like are exclusively sex segregated, almost always in separate buildings. Gymnasiums are similarly almost completely segregated. The main public university in the country, Qatar University, has separate men's and women's sides to the campus. The government supported Qatar K-12 schools are similarly completely segregated. Girls do participate in physical education classes in these schools, but away from the male gaze. Women are kept separate from the potential attention of men in many circumstances, whether at the gymnasium or the doctor's office.

As Qatar has rapidly modernized, an enormous influx of foreign nationals has been required to serve in a variety of jobs from construction to the highest professional levels, although not typically in government jobs. Most of these foreign nationals are men; as a result, only 25 percent of the population in Qatar is female (Qatar Statistics Authority 2012).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Informal conversations with Qatari informants have revealed the significant cultural conflict experienced when the virtue of Qatari women is perceived to be under threat from the burgeoning population of foreign men whose presence is required for Qatar to develop in accordance with its national goals.

The idea of a woman exercising or participating in sport in a public space, where men can see her, is still anathema to many segments of the Qatari population despite the recent changes in the country. Women do participate in sports in Qatar, and they do exercise outside, but typically they are foreign women; if they are Qatari, they tend to wear the abaya, a long black robe, when exercising. Typically for such women this would involve walking along the Corniche or at a park, usually in the company of a male. Muslim women from other countries often also wear the abaya when exercising outside.

While it is clear that globalization is having beneficial effects on the participation rates of Qatari women in sports at the elite level, and a negative effect on the health of Qataris, what is not known is how to increase participation levels of women and girls generally in Qatar. To this point, the Qatari government has taken a two-pronged approach to the problem. On the one hand, they have taken an approach analogous to the one used at the elite level, what can be called a "build it and they will come" strategy. As a case in point, Qatar recently installed exercise equipment next to the walking/running path located along the Corniche, one of the most used outdoors exercise areas in the country. It is not at all clear, however, that merely providing opportunities is sufficient in a culture where women have historically and still do not enjoy the same freedoms of movement that men have. Commenting on the public location, one woman noted "I do feel that most of the women, find it difficult to work out on these equipment (sic) for socio-cultural reasons. Many feel the lack of privacy - doing a bench squat is not like brisk walking in the public" (Huda 2011).

Simultaneously, and perhaps in order to overcome such prejudices, Qatari sports officials have attempted to overtly link elite participation and more general sports activity for women. Thus, the Head of the Arab Games and secretary general of the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC), Sheikh Saoud Bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, was recently quoted as saying: "It is my hope that the Arab Games will provide inspiration to the next generation of Qatari athletes to embark on a journey to one day become Olympic champions in front of their home fans in the years ahead. (...) Furthermore, a higher involvement of women in sport means more female role models whom our children can look up to. This can only be good for the future of Qatar" (Walden 2012). This and similar quotes from high level Qatari sports officials were commonplace in the local and international media during the time of the Arab Games in December of 2011 and, also, during the more recent announcement in the spring of 2012: that Qatar would be fielding female athletes for the first time in the London 2012 Summer Olympics. Noor Al-Mannai, CEO of the Qatar Olympic Bid Committee was quoted as saying: "We are happy to

have two wildcards and we are looking for more.<sup>3</sup> They will be role models for other girls, here in Qatar and across the region. We genuinely want to build a movement here. It's time" (Doherty 2012). Thus it would appear that at the elite level of women's sport participation, the forces of globalization are having noticeable and positive effects in Qatar.

### RESEARCH QUESTION

The question then is whether the recent increased participation of women in Qatar at the elite level has had any noticeable trickle-down effect on women and girls in Qatar? Media coverage of the Qatari female athletes in the Arab Games in December of 2011 was unprecedented in Qatar. Daily reports of their successes were featured in most newspapers in the country during the games. Similarly, media reports of the Qatari female Olympic athletes have been widespread. In and of itself, the participation of these women in sporting events is unparalleled in Qatar. To determine whether a trickle-down effect has indeed started, I used survey research methods to ascertain the role, if any, role models play in the attitudes and physical activity and sports participation levels of women and girls in Qatar. The survey examined their participation rates in physical activity; what, if any, sports role models they have; whether or not they believe role models serve an important purpose in their own and other's participation in sports; and their evaluation of the depiction of sporting females in the Arab media. At this historic point in the development of elite female athletes in Qatar, this research provides one of the first empirical assessments of the effect role models may be having on women and girls in Qatar.

### METHOD

The data reported here are part of a larger project investigating the experiences and attitudes of female residents of Qatar in regards to sports and physical activity utilizing survey methods. The survey was developed based on the findings from the literature on Muslim women's experience of sport and physical activity as well as the physical activity literature with particular attention paid to barriers to regular physical activity participation women face.

### SURVEY DISTRIBUTION

The survey was self-administered and online. The online nature of the survey may have resulted in a bias toward more Internet savvy women being in the sample. The Survey Monkey link was distributed via email distribution in Education City, Qatar and

<sup>3</sup> After this statement Qatar was granted two more wildcards and sent four female athletes to the Games.

Doha, Qatar, and via social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Because of the distribution method, it is impossible to calculate a response rate. Of the 561 people who clicked on the link, 233 finished the survey for a 41 percent completion rate.

### SAMPLE

Although convenience sampling is not the preferred sampling method for a variety of well-known methodological reasons including a lack of representativeness, in this case it has resulted in a quite diverse sample on a number of standard demographic measurements. The mean age of the respondents is 28 (SD = 8.9) with a range of 17-60. They are highly educated, with 91 percent having attending at least some university, 38 percent were current undergraduates, 30 percent held Bachelor's degrees, and 20 percent had at least some post graduate education, although 3.4 percent had not yet completed their studies. The sample is extremely diverse in terms of nationality, with passport holders from 46 countries. Only eight countries had more than five members of the sample; they are the United States, n=37, Qatar, n=34, Pakistan, n=19, India, n=15, Canada, n=10, Egypt, n=10, Jordan, n = 9, and the United Kingdom, n = 6. Although nationality is highly diverse, in terms of ethnic identity there is more homogeneity as 47 percent identified themselves as from the MENA region, 25 percent as European/American, 20 percent as South Asian, and eight percent as East Asian. Most of women in the sample, 64 percent, were not married, while 33.4 percent were married and 2.6 percent were divorced. The most common religion is Islam; 59 percent of the sample identified themselves as Muslim, 28 percent identified themselves as Christian, 3.4 percent as Hindu and 9.4 percent as "other."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The relatively low number of Qatari respondents could be taken as problematic for a study of the effect of Qatari female athletes in Qatar. However, the present research is concerned with the effects of these potential role models on female residents of Qatar, regardless of nationality. The health issues facing the people of Qatar are not exclusively in the Qatari domain but rather are experienced by non-Qatari residents of Qatar as well. Also, Qatari sports officials have indicated that they hope the Qatari female Olympians will be role models for both Qatari and non-Qatari girls. These statements can be better understood when one realizes that Qatar has a long-standing practice of naturalizing athletes for its national teams, as the native population of 250,000 is quite small and native athletic talent has been slow to develop. For example, the female Qatari Olympic swimmer, Nada Arkaji, 's dad is such a naturalized athlete who plays for the national football team, which leant Nada nationality as well. Finally, the number of Qatari women in the sample is proportional to the number of Qataris to non-Qataris in Qatar, making this a typical sample.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present research is centrally concerned with women's and girls' sports role models at this historic point in the development of elite women's sports in Qatar. The survey investigated what role models women have, what influence they have had and what the women think about the portrayal of sporting women in the Arab media. The findings indicate that sports and physical activity role models are important influences on many of the women in the sample, but role models tend to be people who are personal acquaintances, rather than public figures or professional athletes. When asked if there were people in their lives who had influenced them to be active or play sports and asked to check all that apply, the women indicated a wide variety of people had been influential, including, in order of most often selected: friends, male family members, female family members, coaches and public figures, and others as seen in Table One. Roughly three quarters of the role models selected were personal acquaintances while about 25 percent were some sort of public figure, including professional athletes, celebrities and fictional characters; that is, personal acquaintances were 3 times more likely to be a role model than were public figures. Only 31 women, 12.8 percent of the sample, indicated they had no sports or physical activity role models.

Further evidence for the prominence of personal rather than public role models comes from two open ended questions that asked the respondents to specify in turn: who are their most influential personal acquaintance, and then their most influential public figure role models and how those persons had influenced them. Of the 233 respondents, 166 chose to answer the first of these optional open-ended questions, concerning personal role models. Of the 166, 14 indicated they had no role models and eight

indicated a public figure rather than a personal one, although only four specific celebrities were named. The personal role models included spouses, parents, friends, other family members such as siblings and cousins, coaches, and teachers. For the corollary question regarding public figure role models, significantly fewer respondents answered ( $n = 92$ ), and of those, a large majority ( $n = 72$ ), indicated they did not have a public figure as a role model and three indicated a personal role model. Sixteen respondents indicated in the open-ended items that they had some sort of celebrity role model; of these five did not mention a specific role model but rather mentioned celebrities generally. Thus, only eleven respondents indicated a specific public figure as a role model, even though this question was preceded by a yes/no question asking if the respondents had a public figure who was a role model and 48 answered in the affirmative. The public figure role models included Michael Jordan, a contestant from the Biggest Loser, and famous male and female tennis players. Notably, only one Arab athlete was mentioned, though not named: the female Qatari runner who won a race wearing a cover-up, which is an athletic version of the hijab and body covering. Given that these data were collected immediately after the Arab Games, during which news stories of Qatari female athletes were prominently displayed in the local media and during the announcements of the first ever Qatari female Olympic athletes, the fact that only one of them was mentioned is sobering. The almost complete lack of any Arab role models for physical activity is striking as well.

These findings also raise the question of the role of global media. Although it is beyond the main focus of the paper, it is nonetheless intriguing to speculate on the role of global media, in this case apparently Western media, in the region. The media landscape in Qatar is quite diverse, with 40 print publications

**Table One: Sports and Physical Activity Role Models by Category**

Role Model	Response Percent	Response Count
Friend	51.0%	124
Male family member (father, uncle, brother, etc.)	38.0%	92
Female family member (mother, aunt, sister etc.)	37.0%	90
Coach	26.8%	65
Public figure or celebrity (political leader, TV/music/movie star, etc.)	24.9%	58
School figure (teacher, professor, school counselor etc.)	16.9%	41
Female professional athlete	12.8%	31
None	12.8%	31
Fictional character (from a TV show, movie, video game, book, etc.)	5.5%	23
Male professional athlete	7.4%	18
Virtual friend (someone you mostly have contact with online)	7.4%	18
Other (please specify)	5.8%	14
Religious or civic leader	3.7%	9
Mentor (professional or other)	2.9%	7

**Table Two: Mean Ratings for Availability and Value of Female Sports Role Models**

Items	Mean	SD
There should be more coverage of female sports events in the Arab media	3.81	0.90
If there were more coverage of female sports in the Arab media, more women would participate in sports	3.78	0.92
There is a shortage of good female role models who encourage females to be physically active	3.71	0.88
To be physically active, girls and women need good female role models	3.59	1.03
Physically active females are portrayed positively in the Arab media	3.02	0.99
In the Arab media, physical activity for women is encouraged	2.65	1.42

including: 11 newspapers in English, Arabic and Malayalam, 12 TV channels (nine of which are in Arabic), six radio stations and multiple online news sources (Dun and Al Islam 2011). A wide variety of content is available across these platforms, including local, regional and international and in a variety of languages. Perhaps the preponderance of Western role models cited by the women in the study is indicative of the strong penetration and/or effects of Western media in the region. This is an interesting question that future research could pursue.

It is particularly noteworthy that such a high percentage of respondents (72 out of 92) felt compelled to indicate they did not have a public figure as a role model in the open-ended question, whereas only a very small number (n = 14) chose to indicate a corresponding lack with regard to personal role models. While it is always difficult to speculate about a negative result, an initial guess is that, by emphasizing the lack of public models, respondents wanted to call our attention to a fact about the reality of life in Qatar that they felt to be of particular concern. Supporting this interpretation are the answers to items regarding the availability and value of role models for physical activity in the Arab world. The pattern of answers to these items indicate that the respondents believe that there are not enough female sports role models in the Arab media and more of such role models would be positive influences on women's physical activity levels.

Table Two presents the mean values for responses regarding the availability and value of role models. The mean values for these items are in Table Two. The highest mean values were for two items regarding the amount of coverage of female sports in the Arab media. The respondents agreed that "if there were more coverage of female sports in the Arab media, more women would participate in sports" and that "there should be more coverage of female sports events in the Arab media." They also agreed that "there is a shortage of good female role models who encourage females to be physically active" and that "to be physically active, girls and women need good female role models." There was less agreement, with means close to the neutral point, on two items about how active women are portrayed in the Arab media: "physically

active females are portrayed positively in the Arab media" and "in the Arab media, physical activity for women is encouraged." Taken together these data indicate that the respondents not only have few public figures as role models but also believe more should be done in the Arab media to promote women's sporting events and women's sports role models to encourage women to be more physically active.

While the respondents do not have many public figures as role models, they have been inspired in a variety of ways by their personal role models, including both active and passive modeling. One type of active role modeling occurred when the role model specifically verbally encouraged the respondent to be active. As one respondent noted, "He [a coach] always had the most positive words and was very encouraging of living an active lifestyle, even though I really stunk at the sport!" Another type of active role modeling occurred when the role model engaged in behavior that stimulated the respondent to engage in physical activity, typically this involved co-attendance at some sort of exercise activity. Examples included a husband who accompanies his wife to sporting events; the example she cited was a diving course about which she said "I would never have done that on my own;" and friends who accompanied the respondents to the gymnasium or other exercise activities. Active strategies also included the ways respondents' parent(s) had brought them up. For example, one respondent cited both her mother and father as her physical activity role models and indicated they influenced her "by raising me to always be physically active from a young age and to see it as a way to have fun, not another chore." Sometimes active modeling was simply described as support, without the respondent indicating the means by which support was experienced.

On the other hand, passive modeling typically occurred when the respondent was inspired by the example set by the role model. Often this was an example set by friends or family members who lead active lives; as one respondent noted "several of my friends are committed to wellness-they have set a fine example for me," and another noted "they lead by example, by living healthy, being active, and staying happy." Sometimes the role model was inspirational



by successfully managing some sort of constraint, especially noted was managing hectic schedules and children while staying active. Mothers were often cited as this type of role model: “my mother by her persistent desire to stay fit despite the lack of time.” Passive role models often were inspirational via the motivating type of activity they engaged in. Examples here included marathon runners, an Olympic swimmer, and other successful competitive athletes, such as the captain of a basketball team. Finally, the physical abilities and/or appearance of passive role models was sometimes inspirational: such as a friend who lost a large amount of weight or a role model who is in particularly good physical shape or “looks amazing” or “had the body that [I] wanted to have.”

Although personal role models were influential in a variety of ways, as noted already, few public figure role models were specifically mentioned in the open-ended questions. Of the 16 responses to this question, the most commonly mentioned type of role modeling noted by seven of the respondents is passive and concerns the appearance and fitness of the role model as inspirational. The other way the public figure role models were inspirational was also via passive modeling, by their character or success, as one respondent noted “Maria Sharapova, she’s confident and successful.” Six of the respondents simply listed their role model without explaining how they had been influenced. These data lead to the inescapable conclusion that for the respondents, public figure role models are far less influential, both in number and in method of influence, than are personal role models.

### CONCLUSION

Qatari sports officials have confidently proclaimed that the current Qatari elite female athletes are role models and will inspire women and girls in Qatar. If the findings here are generalizable, then the elite level progress being made in Qatar has not yet trickled down to the everyday female resident of Qatar, despite considerable media coverage. There are a number of possible explanations for this finding. It may be still too early for a role model effect to have occurred as it can take time for role models’ reputations to be built. While this may be true, it is nonetheless surprising that only one respondent mentioned anything about these groundbreaking Qatari female athletes, and that no other Arab athletes were mentioned. Given that the survey was live during the critical period of media coverage, it was reasonable to anticipate that more than one respondent would mention them. Perhaps the problem is one of marketing. For public figure role models to be effective, people must know about them.

It may be that there was a failure of effective media campaigns about the Qatari female athletes to enhance their abilities as role models. During

the period of the Arab games there were multiple stories in the local press about their successes, including the winning of more gold medals than the Qatari men and the groundbreaking aspect of their participation. The stories were not difficult to find and figured prominently in paper versions of the newspapers. Nonetheless, it is possible that significantly more coverage over a longer period of time is necessary for elite Qatari athletes to function as role models. It may also be that aspects of mediated communication limit the public figure role models’ mechanisms of influence. The respondents would not typically be in personal communication with the elite female athletes, which could limit active role modeling. The survey purposely did not mention any specific names of role models or nationalities, nor ask about types of influence. Instead, the respondents were asked about public figures with examples and about male and female professional athletes. It may simply require a lot more coverage before specific names of new entries to the sports world are remembered, internalized, and start to function as role models.

Finally, it is also possible that in the world of sport, personal role models are far more important than public figures, at least for these respondents. Engaging in physical activity and sport on a regular basis requires a certain level of commitment which, as is well known from rising obesity levels among other NCDs, is not easy for many people. Having a personal role model who consistently and actively encourages physical activity may be far more important than the passive modeling of public figure role models. The data certainly support this explanation as, overwhelmingly, personal role models figured more prominently than public figure role models in the physical activity of the respondents. At the same time, there is some indication that the respondents emphasized the lack of public figure role models for themselves and also thought the Arab media could do a better job of promoting Arab female athletes and sports. Of course this is not an either/or proposition; it may be that having both personal and public figure role models is most effective for encouraging physical activity.

Future research could continue to investigate the development of women’s sporting opportunities in Qatar, measuring the effect of media campaigns designed to increase physical activity participation. Qatar provides an unusual test bed because of its recent and rapid development. Few public health campaigns have been attempted compared to more developed nations and native role models are just starting to emerge, enabling the study of media campaign effects in a relatively uncluttered market with a short history, which allows for fewer competing explanations for potential effects.

This study may be limited due to the relatively small sample size and convenience sampling method.

Accessing a national, random sample in Qatar is difficult at this stage of development. Nonetheless, future research could use probability sampling methods to increase the generalizability of the findings.

Globalization in Qatar has been a double-edged sword for women. While it has undeniably brought significant health problems it has also brought unprecedented opportunities for elite female athletes. The next challenge for Qatar is to address the issue of the everyday female resident and her physical activity levels. Perhaps leveraging of the first-ever elite

female athletes via effective media campaigns could be effective. However, paying closer attention to the critical role of personal role models – coaches, friends, and family – likely would have a faster and more comprehensive effect on the physical activity levels of female residents of Qatar. Public health and public policy officials should consider developing personal role models to help women in Qatar increase their physical activity levels to combat the epidemic rates of NCDs.

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