Working Out While Muslim. Women around the world are inventing ways to balance faith with fitness

BY AZADEH MOAVENI

The first time I went jogging in Tehran, I nearly hyperventilated after four blocks, despite wearing the gauziest of headscarves and a decidedly immodest pair of Nike Capri pants. The fabric covering my ears and neck stoked my body temperature unbearably, and the pleasurable strain of running gave way to acute discomfort. "How am I going to stay fit here?" I wailed to my Iranian girlfriends, experts in the dilemma of balancing exercise with Islamic modesty codes. They offered me plenty of advice, from wearing headscarves with ear slits to calibrating outdoor exercise to the seasons to finding women-only gyms.

For the pious Muslim woman, one of the greatest challenges of modern life is how to get a good workout. There are many schools of thought addressing this practical problem, and often the answer boils down to comfort vs. one's attachment to a particular sport. I am a runner by nature, but my discomfort threshold is ridiculously low, and while living in Iran I gave up running in favor of hiking. (In the seclusion of the mountains, no one frets if you tie a bandanna over your hair instead of a proper veil.) During snowy Tehran winters, I pushed myself to go skiing, since modesty ceases to be an issue when you're bundled in a ski suit and hat. Perhaps my cardiovascular endurance plummeted with all the varied exercise, but hey, I was cross-training out of the clutches of the morality police, and I was pretty comfortable.

Many Muslim women are more devoted to their favorite form of exercise. If they are runners, they must run; if they are swimmers, they must swim. For these women, there are only two options: a clever outfit that breathes and sequestration in a same-sex exercise facility. The athletic veil, or "hijood," is made from high-tech fabric that's meant to wick sweat from the skin. It debuted when the Bahraini sprinter Roqaya al-Ghasara wore it while competing at the 2008 Olympics. While it takes a certain steely piety to wear the hijood—its slick ninjasque style might be too assertively Muslim for some—the relative ease of sweating or swimming in something other than heavy cotton is unbeatable.

For some Muslim women, though, gender-segregated exercise is the preferred solution. When you've grown up in a culture in which men and women relate prudishly, not even a Coolmax barrier of high-tech Lycra is going to put you at ease panting alongside men in a coed exercise class. Women-only gyms and gyms with women-only hours or rooms dot the whole of the Islamic world. In the U.S., women-only chains like Curves and Linda Evans Fitness created a way for Americans from Muslim countries to retain their piety without seeming to embrace separation. I have fond memories of following my mother around her local Linda Evans center in California, watching Pakistani matrons and white soccer moms chat while striding energetically on long rows of treadmills.

For the fitness-minded faithful, the terrain varies dramatically from one country or region to another. But it remains entirely possible for Muslim women—from the gently shy to the severely pious—to respect their religion and stay in shape.