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BEYOND ‘DEFECTING’ AND ‘SWAPPING’ NATIONALITY

Emigrant Women Athletes and the Iranian Gendered Bio-Politics

Ladan Rahbari

Introduction

Phrases such as ‘muscle drain’ (Spiro 2012, 487) or ‘brawn drain’ (Adjaye 2010, 30) are sometimes used to refer to the migration of highly skilled sportspeople, often from the ‘Global South’ and ‘less developed’ countries to the ‘Global North’ or ‘highly developed’ countries. While elite sportspeople often have high international mobility, their mobility does not always involve a change of nationality. When a change of nationality takes place, it sometimes takes the form of voluntary abandonment of allegiance to a country for the athlete to be able to join and play for another country. This phenomenon is referred to as ‘defection’ or ‘nationality swapping’ (Mack 2012) as well as switching nationalities (Jansen 2018). Switching nationality has occurred at the Olympics for almost 70 years (Mack 2012) and is often considered problematic and a betrayal to one’s (first) nationality (Gardish 2005). Despite this, the practice is not uncommon, and many countries have a history of naturalising athletes to score better in international sports competitions.

Countries grant citizenship to individuals in return for different forms of capital, including economic capital, when the price is perceived to be ‘right’. More than a quarter of the world’s countries even go as far as developing cash-for-citizenship programmes, which make it possible to purchase passports from them (Jansen, Oonk, and Engbersen 2018, 525). Like the investment-migration schemes that target the ultimate rich, talent/skill migration is often very selective and targets the most ‘skilful’ individuals. Even though they are selected through extensive vetting strategies, skilled migrants are not immediately accepted in recipient societies as ‘citizens’. Migration based on talent/skill is believed to challenge the classic notion of citizenship (Jansen, Oonk, and Engbersen 2018, 524), which is based on four pillars of membership, rights, duties and participation (Adjaye 2010, 31). A narrow definition of citizenship might cling to an individual’s ‘origin’ as a definitive factor in delineating membership. Nationalist and nativist accounts of citizenship sometimes do not take kindly to the naturalisation of migrants, no matter how talented and skilful they are. This reluctance is traceable in the public and media discourses, where the ‘defection’ of athletes from the Global South to the Global North and some Middle Eastern countries in the past two decades has engendered

new debates over questions of citizenship (Adjaye 2010, 29). Naturalisations of prominent athletes are widely reported in media broadcasts, often focusing on non-Western athletes who get naturalised in Western contexts (Jansen, Oonk, and Engbersen 2018, 524). When it comes to national sports, especially because international sporting competitions are often intertwined with nationalism (Adjaye 2010, 32), questions of 'true' political belonging and membership are often raised.

Multiple nationalities and a sense of belonging are not mutually exclusive. Minority ethnic athletes may feel connected to both their new nations and their countries of 'origin'. However, many athletes who have different nationalities do carry a burden of ambivalence (Adjaye 2010, 35) in terms of both their belonging and citizenship. Some athletes may have strategic reasons for choosing the national team they want to play in (Agergaard 2019, 134), making an informed and agentic choice driven by a complex array of personal and professional factors.

Additionally, although there has been convergence, states continue to vary significantly in their nationality practice. Some states accept, and others reject dual nationality (Spiro 2012); this means that athletes can compete with the new nationality if they give up the first one. Furthermore, for athletes who have refugee or stateless status, the situation can become difficult (Nafziger 2016, 315–316), and sometimes it takes a long time until they can compete with a new nationality. Acquiring a 'passport' to participate in sports competition is also not always a path to full political belonging or citizenship, as countries like Qatar are known to issue 'mission' temporary passports for their players. These passports can expire after a period and do not lead to permanent citizenship for the athlete (Reiche and Tinaz 2019, 8–9). Thus, citizenship and political belonging are not always convergent categories, and ethnic minority athletes can face discrimination and othering, if not racism.

It is not only in the recipient country that unfavourable views on 'new' citizens exist. Athletes who leave national sports in one country to join another are often demonised and seen as traitors to their 'own' (or better, first/former) nationality. For instance, to punish their athletes who had 'defected', a Kenyan sports minister declared in 2000 that such athletes would be treated as foreigners and, therefore, must apply for visas to visit their home country (Adjaye 2010, 36). Countries such as North Korea are known to treat their 'defectors' harshly. However, athletes who change nationalities are likely to return to their first country, sometimes to reunite with their families (Mellis 2020, 69).

In Iran, the recent migration of elite men and women athletes has created public, media and political debates. In this chapter, I will discuss the cases of two Iranian women athletes, Kimia Alizadeh and Shohreh Bayat, as two recent cases of Iranian women athletes' emigration. In the following, I first briefly present a general outline of women's sport in Iran after the 1979 Revolution. Then, I introduce the cases of Kimia Alizadeh and Shohreh Bayat. In the discussion and conclusion, I show the significance of Iran's gendered bio-politics on elite women athletes' emigration.

Women's Contemporary Sport in Iran and Women Nationality Switchers

The Iranian Revolution in 1979 has had important consequences for women's rights and activities in the country. While these consequences go beyond sports and affect women's education (see, e.g., Rahbari 2016), employment (see, e.g., Moghadam 2018) and political participation (see, e.g., Tajali 2020), among other issues, in this chapter, I will focus on women's sports. As a result of the new Iranian regime's adherence and enactment of traditionalist and patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law (Rahbari, Longman, and Coene 2019), some women's sports activities were discontinued. While women maintained the right to practise physical activity

and sports, both amateur and professionally, the politically enacted state laws and regulations play a hindering role in women's participation in sports (Pfister 2003).

Among the regulations put in place after the Revolution, 'gender segregation' is an important principle that guarantees zero physical contact between men and women (Rahbari 2020). In sports, this meant that not only men's and women's sports authorities are sometimes separated, but also temporal and spatial arrangements are made so that all sports facilities remain single-sex and that women are not publicly visible when they do sports (Rahbari 2019). Women still do take part in many forms of outdoor sportive activity in parks and open spaces (Pfister 2003), and according to the country's dress code laws, they must cover their bodies except for their hands and face while being in public, including when doing sports.

Iran's sports regulations for women also dictate strict dress codes for women athletes, regardless of whether they compete nationally or internationally. The regulations are so strict that even though many international organisations such as Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA) recently started to permit the hijab as an accepted sportswear, Iran fails to meet the standards because of demanding too much from its athletes. This has happened on multiple occasions, including in Taekwondo and Canoeing in the 2004 Olympic Games (Hargreaves 2007), in soccer in the 2011 Olympics (Erdrink 2011) and in Karate in the Islamic Games in 2013 (Radio Zamaneh 2013). While complying with the international sportswear regulations has been an issue, a greater issue for women athletes in Iran is the internal pressure to comply with public visibility rules. Women athletes have repeatedly been punished, expelled and banned from national and international sports for reasons such as revealing too much skin or hair (Najibullah 2008). Iranian sportswomen have also been targeted by state organisations for 'wearing make-up', colouring their hair and having tattoos (Fozooni 2008, Masgreh News 2014). The state's dress code regulations also exclude women from sports that require forms of physicality that are considered 'inappropriate' by the authorities, or sports which cannot easily be reconciled with Iran's dress code regulations. This category of sports includes but is not limited to swimming, gymnastics, water polo and bodybuilding (Jahromi 2011; Iran Online News 2017).

In Iranian official media, women's sports are often not televised and occupy a marginal position in reporting, especially in mainstream national outlets either run or systematically monitored by the state authorities. When televised, women's embodiment is often subject to heated debates and contestation by Iran's conservatives. In 2013, a televised broadcast of a women's martial arts competition raised the ire of religious authorities (Tehran Bureau 2015). The public's views are divided when it comes to women's sports. While many Iranians do not have an interest in women's sports, and some are against broadcasting women's competitions, others favour empowering women's sports by any means, including creating more public visibility. Women politicians in Iran, such as parliament members, have also attempted to increase women athletes' visibility on public media platforms (Donyaye Eghtesad 2007), but their attempts have often faced resistance by political hardliners.

There has not been extensive academic inquiry into the migration of Iranian sportspeople and athletes, and the phenomenon's prevalence is unknown. However, for decades after the 1979 Revolution, Iran has been dealing with the migration of athletes. While sportspeople have migrated for various reasons, there is a recurring theme in the migration of women athletes that has to do with Iran's gendered bio-politics and institutionalised body control regime, which includes compulsory veil and dress code regulations. The list of women leaving Iran for reasons revolving Iran's repressive body politics is long. Among the notable cases of women athletes emigrating, seeking asylum or switching nationality is dragon boater Mina Alizadeh

who left the camp while attending the world contest in the Czech Republic, travelled to Germany and asked for asylum in 2009 (Rostampour 2014). In 2019, boxer Sadaf Khadem remained in France after taking part in an international boxing contest without covering her body and hair. She feared arrest and decided not to return to Iran (BBC 2019). Chess players Dorsa Derakhshani and Mitra Hejazipour were both fired from the Iranian national team (in 2017 and 2020, respectively) after taking part in international games without covering their hair (Younesipour 2020b; Peterson 2020). Derakhshani has ever since joined the USA national chess team, while Hejazipour currently resides in France, and it is not yet known if she will play for another country.

This chapter discusses the cases of Kimia Alizadeh and Shohreh Bayat because of what their mediated stories have in common: (i) both are successful, internationally and nationally acclaimed Iranian women athletes at the peak of their careers; (ii) in both cases, the women spoke against the limitations they faced in Iran because of strictly gendered body politics, and the compulsory hijab; and (iii) both cases have received large-scale national and international reporting. However, their cases are also different: while Alizadeh left Iran following a pre-planned migration, Bayat was 'forced' to self-exile following a national controversy over her hijab. I aim to present a critical analysis of how the Iranian gendered bio-politics and the state's body control practised on the female body have affected their sports. I will complicate the discourses around 'defectors' and nationality 'swappers' by discussing the cases of these elite women athletes' emigration in 2020.

The Two Early-2020 Cases

Case 1: Kimia Alizadeh

It was a day of nation-wide celebrations in Iran when taekwondo athlete, Kimia Alizadeh, won a historic contest at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, and it was specifically a moment of pride and joy for Iranian sports. So much so that the conservative national TV's sports channel broadcasted the competition live from Rio, even though Kimia Alizadeh appeared in a taekwondo outfit. Alizadeh was, of course, covering her head with a veil. However, it was a rare moment for Iranian TV, as showing Iranian women in anything less than long and loose outfits is a deviation from Iranian state-run media strategies. The win was historical because Alizadeh, who was 18 years old at the time, became the first Iranian woman to win an Olympic medal (a bronze medal, to be more precise). She also became the youngest Iranian athlete to win an Olympic medal for Iran. Alizadeh was greeted at the airport by ranks of Iranians in an unprecedented welcome event for a woman athlete. She spoke about this event in a TV presence soon after arriving in Iran from Rio (see the programme here, Aparat 2016). In 2019, BBC named Alizadeh one of its top 100 'inspiring and influential women' from around the world (Felton 2020).

Four years after Alizadeh won the bronze medal in Rio, it came as a nation-wide shock when she announced that she emigrated to Europe and would no longer represent Iran. Alizadeh's announcement, which happened via an Instagram post on her personal account, explained that she was tired of the 'hypocrisy, lies, injustice, and flattery' in Iranian sports. She stated that she had been treated as a 'tool'. She wrote, 'I, Kimia Alizadeh, am not a history maker, a heroine, or the front runner of Iranian [sports] caravan, but one of the millions of oppressed women in Iran' (Felton 2020). In her post, she went further to complain about the abuses she had faced and criticised the misogyny and patriarchy of some sports authorities and the mandatory veil (Specia 2020).

The post immediately caused controversy, backlash, and widespread reactions, especially online, inside, and outside Iran. While there were many supportive online reactions, the hashtag

#kimiaalizadeh was also used to express anger, disappointment, and sometimes insults against Alizadeh. While some of these insults had a personal nature, others believed that Alizadeh's decision affected other sportswomen in Iran as her emigration would make authorities suspicious and make things even harder for women athletes in Iran (Felton 2020). Above all, Alizadeh was called a 'defector' and a 'traitor' (Eghtesaad24 2020). Personal attacks and baseless rumours were spread about her personal and marital life in Farsi-language online spaces (see examples in Digital Shahrvand 2020). Fabricated narratives about Alizadeh's migration were created and circulated online. As it is often the case with online abuse, these narratives' sources remain unknown, but private users disseminated them.

In the official Iranian media, Alizadeh was called 'the girl who forgot everything' (Irna 2020) and 'disrespected millions of Iranian women' (Mashreghnews 2020). The 'forgetting' referred to the nation-wide recognition, gifts and support she had received in Iran and was meant to portray her as ungrateful. Taekwondo Federation's president Mohammad Pooladgar denied the allegations of negligence made by Alizadeh's supporters and stated

...joining the outsider voices that claim negligence towards her, are clear injustice towards the [Iranian] people and the Islamic regime, even more than they are unfair towards the country's sports authorities. How can one claim negligence after so much kindness and gratitude [to her]?

(Quoted in *Hamshahri Online* 2020)

As shown in the quotation above, the response associates Alizadeh's critique of sports authorities with 'outsider' voices. This tone characterises many political discourses in Iran where the association with foreign and often Western countries is used as a strategy to silence, undermine or debate the validity of the arguments made by critics. Since a large body of Iran's political critics resides outside of the country and within the diaspora in Europe and North America, authorities in Iran employ arguments of dependency and allegiance on foreign states to enhance their nationalist discourses. The same authority stated elsewhere that '...imperialist politics reaches out to every direction to fabricate these accusations', claiming that there is an 'imperialist' agenda behind Alizadeh's critique of Iran's officials (Salameno 2020). Alizadeh also received criticism from Iranian councillor and former taekwondo athlete Hadi Saei, who voiced his criticism in different media, calling seeking refuge in other countries 'a grave degradation for any individual' (Tabnak 2020a).

In Western media, Alizadeh was introduced primarily as a 'defector' (see, for instance, reporting on Alizadeh in *Reuters*, *Washington Post*, *CNN*, *BBC*, *Deutsche Welle*, *France24* and *Euro News*, among many others). Western countries are known to parade nationality changing athletes, especially those from underdeveloped context, as 'symbols of freedom' (Mellis 2020, 69). Similarly, some used Alizadeh's defection as grounds to criticise women's rights in Iran. The US State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus, for instance, wrote on Twitter that Iran 'will continue to lose more strong women unless it learns to empower and support them' (Felton 2020). Titles such as 'Iran's Theocracy Will Collapse Because of People Like Kimia Alizadeh' (Gillespie 2020) appeared online.

Case 2: Shohreh Bayat

The case of a 32-year-old Iranian chess referee, Shohreh Bayat, is different from that of Kimia Alizadeh in some ways, but what they had in common was that Bayat was also at the very peak of her career when her dress code created a nation-wide controversy. She was 'the only

female Category-A International Arbiter in Asia', and was called 'a great ambassador for her country' by Nigel Short, the vice-president of the International Chess Federation/The Fédération Internationale des Échecs – FIDE (Ching 2020). At the time of the incident, Bayat was attending the Women's World Chess Championship in Shanghai in 2020 as a chief arbiter, a role she was assuming for the first time (Rainsford 2020). She was attending the games after being invited by the World Chess Federation, and when travelling, she had no intention of not returning to Iran (BBC 2020). Like Alizadeh, Bayat was following the compulsory hijab regulations and appeared in the games with a 'loose' veil. However, during the games, photos were taken of her that showed that she was not observing the compulsory veil 'properly'. The images circulated on the Internet as she was still in the game, and there were immediate controversy and criticism by conservative media in Iran. The pictures were taken from specific angles, 'they wrote that, I did not wear the hijab deliberately in order to protest against it', Bayat explained in a BBC interview (BBC Newsnight 2020).

Bayat's dress code was immediately politicised, to the point that there were claims that she had unveiled deliberately to join the Iranian women's ongoing protests against compulsory hijab. Bayat first asked for a written guarantee from the Iranian authorities that she would not get arrested in Iran if she returned (Vasilyeva 2020). After learning that a written guarantee would not be issued and knowing that she would risk being arrested and possibly face persecution, Bayat 'chose' not to return to Iran. 'I could not take the danger and risk to [go] back to Iran', Bayat stated (BBC Newsnight 2020) in her video interview with BBC, where she also broke into tears explaining that she did not have a chance to say goodbye to her family before travelling to the UK. Iran's Chess Federation asked her to write an apology and to post it online to protect her from possible prosecution. Bayat refused to do so because she did not want to express support for the hijab publicly (Vasilyeva 2020). Bayat, like Alizadeh, not only openly criticised the compulsory hijab law after emigrating, but she also similarly presented herself as one of the many Iranian women who are oppressed by Iran's body politics. 'I am one of the millions of women in Iran. We are all [the] same, and I am just one of them', Bayat stated, further explaining that the costs of her choice not to cover her hair according to the Iranian regulations have been huge to her, but she emphasised that she did make 'the right decision' (BBC Newsnight 2020).

Despite clarifying that she did not intend to leave Iran before the hijab controversy, the validity of Bayat's explanations was scrutinised. Some Iranian media and social media users claimed that Bayat deliberately unveiled as a 'publicity stunt' to create an excuse for her emigration (see, e.g., 8dey News 2020). Social media users expressed both solidarity and resentment in reaction to Bayat's decision not to return to Iran. The official Iranian media blamed the Federation for Bayat's appearance. However, the president of the Iranian Chess Federation, Mehrdad Pahlavanzadeh, who was questioned about the incident by the media, explained that the Federation distanced itself from the incident and stated that they had nothing to do with Bayat's partaking in the Shanghai chess tournament; she was participating in the games not as a representative of the Federation, but in their individual capacity (Tabnak 2020b).

In Western media, Bayat's predicament was broadly reported (see, for instance, reports in *BBC*, *CNN*, *Washington Post*, *Alarabiya*, *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, among many others). While Bayat was not called a defector, her case was often placed beside Kimia Alizadeh and other elite athletes. These reports often presented Bayat as a victim. Similar to Alizadeh's, Bayat's predicament has been presented in the media within the grand narrative of Iran's oppressed women, with one article claiming that Bayat 'might even face the death penalty on her return' (Keene 2020) while no evidence of such a penalty exists.

While calling themselves one of the many oppressed women in Iran, Alizadeh's and Bayat's choices to emigrate represent the complexity of agency in making 'choices' that women athletes make in the face of political and social oppression. However, overall, Alizadeh's and Bayat's emigration and the message they conveyed were overshadowed by nationalist bashing of their 'defection' and/or 'opportunism' on the one hand, and anti-regime discourses of women's victimhood on the other hand. The internal dominant narratives simplified the reasons behind their emigration and blamed external forces for their decision. By doing so, the media and public narratives failed to represent the complicated, difficult and agentic aspects of Alizadeh's and Bayat's decision to take back control over their lives and bodies from the Iranian state.

Discussion: Women Athletes' Emigration and the Iranian Bio-politics

In the previous sections, I discussed the cases of two Iranian women athletes, Kimia Alizadeh and Shohreh Bayat, as the recent cases of Iranian women athletes' emigration. I presented the reasons behind their 'decisions' to depart from Iran as well as the public and official reactions to their emigration. I showed that in Iran, Bayat and Alizadeh faced accusations of 'treason' and received negative reporting by official Iranian outlets. Both athletes have also received positive messages of support and solidarity from the public. Many reactions by users in social media have entailed a mixture of grief and frustration. A great number of these messages – whether negative or positive – draw on discourses of nationalist belonging and gratitude to express regret and anger over the perceived 'betrayal' of the athletes, albeit sometimes understanding why the athletes chose to depart from or not return to Iran.

In Iran, the female body is represented in the official outlets as a prominent source of discursive power to define bodily legitimacies and possibilities by the Islamic state; the female body is thus used as a symbol and bearer of Islamic and Iranian national identity (Rahbari, Longman, and Coene 2019). The nationalist discourse that obsessively delineates how the gendered body may appear, move and behave in public spaces has its implications in the sports spheres. The female body is not always presented as a controlled object but as one that is valued, revered, idealised and excessively sacralised. Iranian leader Ayatollah Khamenei's words on women's participation in sports illustrate how this discourse is built. He stated, 'everybody should appreciate from the bottom of their heart the value of women athletes who participate in international sports arenas [wearing their] hijab and with modesty'. He also praised athletes who do not shake hands with the opposite sex when they receive a medal, stating that they 'are exporting the Iranian revolution to the world from the sports arena' (Younesipour 2020a). The body of a woman athlete competing for their country is symbolically representing the nation, despite the limitations to represent the diversities within the nation. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Iran's gendered bio-politics, characterised by and holding dearly to the control of women's embodiment, does not tolerate unruly forms of bodily display.

In Western media, Bayat and Alizadeh have been presented and sometimes reduced to the examples of the 'usual' mistreatment of women inside Iran. However, the cases of Bayat and Alizadeh do not only represent structural gender discrimination; they are also examples of high-profile emigrant women who challenge and scrutinise Iranian gendered bio-politics, not only in the sports sphere but also in speaking against the regime's gender discrimination. Moreover, Bayat and Alizadeh are symbols of Iran's ideological failure. Both women have grown in the heart of the Islamic Republic of Iran and have been, at least for the greatest part of their adult life, worked their ways through, within and despite the limitations they faced inside the Iranian bio-political regime. They are for this, the best representatives of the failure of Iran's gender ideology and suppressive political vetting and screening systems.

Returning to my discussion on 'defection' and nationality 'swapping', I argue that looking closely at narratives such as those of Bayat and Alizadeh complicates the picture to the level that using these terms would become inaccurate if not misleading. To call them 'defectors' reinforces a toxic and nationalist discourse of loyalty and presents them as women who abandoned their 'nation'. The picture, as I attempted to depict it in this chapter, is far more complicated. Iranian migrant women athletes neither lose their nationality nor seek to 'swap' it in exchange for other nationalities. Many of them, including Bayat and Alizadeh, express sorrow for having to depart from their countries. Bayat and Alizadeh showcase that such terms do not do justice to the narratives of Iranian women athletes who face gendered discrimination and patriarchal oppression. While they are not purely 'forced' to leave, their 'choices' are driven by fear of persecution and the will to take control of their bodies and professional trajectories. Thus, emigration might not be the final resort for all emigrating elite athletes, but it can offer some a path to a safer and more prosperous future.

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