

Rules of the game: Challenges and paradoxes in women's sports wear regulations in Boxing

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ABSTRACT:

Sports wear regulations has been a hot topic in recent years, particularly rules and regulations for the wear of garments like hijabs during boxing matches. The issue has been that some boxing referees had enforced a ban on headwear such as hijabs during matches, even if the rules and regulations didn't explicitly mention this. One argument used by the referees were that the hijab could be a possible danger for strangulation during matches. However, in 2019 AIBA, the International Boxing Association, changed their sports wear regulations, to explicitly include the wear of hijabs when boxing. Earlier, it was not the practice for some boxing referees to permit hijabs. In this paper, we therefore aim to show how women's sports wear regulations in boxing can contribute to the exclusion of some athletes, while including others. In particular, we look at some dilemmas that Muslim women face in the boxing sport, caused by western norms for sports attire. Analytically, we depart from former research on barriers to Muslim women's participation in sports, and theoretically we depart from theories of path dependence, organizational governance, and individuals' responses to these logics. Our findings show that individual interpretations by referees were one of the main exclusionary mechanisms for Muslim women's participation in boxing. This concretization of the rules in 2019 does now not leave any room for referees' individual interpretations regarding hijabs, and could be understood as political signals by AIBA in the work for equality for Muslim women boxers.