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September 10, 2009

FITNESS

# Exercise Tailored to a Hijab

By ABBY ELLIN

THE first time Julia Shearson rode her bike after converting to Islam seven years ago, her headscarf became stuck in the wheel.

She lost her balance, and by the time she got going again she was met with stares as she whizzed along, arms and legs draped in loose clothing, her scarf billowing in the breeze.

“You have to overcome the looks,” said Ms. Shearson, 43, the executive director of the Cleveland chapter of the Council on American-Islam Relations. “It’s already hard enough to [exercise](#), and if you look different ... it’s even harder.”

As a Muslim woman in the United States, Ms. Shearson has found it difficult to stay fit while adhering to her religious principles about modesty. Islam does not restrict women from exercising — in fact all Muslims are urged to take care of their bodies through healthy eating and exercise — but women face a special set of challenges in a culture of co-ed gyms and skimpy workout wear.

Many pious Muslim women in the United States, like Ms. Shearson, wear [hijab](#) in public, loose garments that cover their hair and body, which can hinder movement and add to discomfort during exercise. Women may show their hair, arms and legs up to the knees in front of other women.

Muslim women are often limited in their choice of activity, as well. Some believe that certain [yoga](#) chants, for example, are forbidden, as well as certain poses like sun salutations (Muslims are supposed to worship only Allah). For the sake of modesty, working out around men is discouraged.

That modesty can be a benefit and a liability. On the one hand, Muslim women are spared some of the body-image issues that other women face; on the other, that freedom can be a detriment to their physical well-being.

“We don’t have the external motivation that non-Muslim women have,” said Mubarakha Ibrahim, 33, a certified personal trainer and owner of Balance fitness in New Haven, a personal training studio catering to women. “There is no little black dress to fit into, no bathing suit. When you pass through a mirror or glass you’re not looking to see ‘Is my tummy tucked in? Do I look good in these jeans?’ You’re looking to see if you’re covered.”

After gaining 50 pounds while pregnant with her first child, Ms. Ibrahim studied exercise and [nutrition](#), and became certified through the Aerobics and Fitness Association of America. In 2006 she opened her studio, which offers a safe environment for women to exercise (she says she has more orthodox Jewish clients, who also adhere to rules of modesty).

Ms. Ibrahim said she would like to see exercise become as natural a part of a Muslim woman’s life as praying.

In July, about 120 women from around the country attended Ms. Ibrahim’s third annual Fit Muslimah Health

and Fitness Summit in New Haven. She offered yoga, kickboxing, water aerobics and core conditioning classes alongside workshops on weight loss, nutrition, [cancer](#) prevention and [diabetes](#) at the two-day, women-only event. She plans to hold another one in Atlanta in February.

“An important part of your spirituality is your health,” said Tayyibah Taylor, publisher of *Azizah*, a magazine for Muslim women, and co-sponsor of the summit meeting. “You can’t really consider yourself in good health if all parts of your being are not healthy — your body, your mind and your soul. It’s a complete package.”

This is especially true now, during Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting from dawn until sunset. “The Muslim prayer is the most physical prayer — the sitting, bowing, bending,” said Daisy Khan, executive director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement. “The physicality of our prayer forces us to create flexibility in our body.”

But how to mix one’s physical and spiritual needs with practicality? Some Muslim-Americans go to women-only gyms like Curves, which has thousands of branches across the country. And some gyms and [Y.M.C.A.](#)’s offer gender-segregated areas, hours or days.

Other women, like Umm Sahir Ameer, a 27-year-old student in Shaker Heights, Ohio, take matters into their own hands. Last year, Ms. Ameer started the Muslimah Strive Running-Walking Group so she and 12 of her friends could exercise together.

“I wanted to establish this group as a way to further unite Muslim women in my community while gaining physical endurance,” she said.

Those who do work out in co-ed gyms have learned to make accommodations in their clothing. Loretta Riggs, 40, an educational coach in Pittsburgh, started exercising two years ago after divorcing her husband. She wears a scarf made of spandex, long-sleeved Under Armour shirts and [Adidas](#) or Puma pants.

“Some women don’t think you should be working out in a co-ed gym,” she said, “but I’m around men all the time in my workplace, when I take my kids to the park, when I walk outside.”

She added: “Why would I deprive myself of being healthy because I am a Muslim and I choose to cover? It’s very important to take care of myself.”

Mariam Abdelgawad, 21, a math teacher in San Jose, Calif., said that in high school she played hockey, soccer and ran track and field, all while wearing hijab.

But today she works out at home, since there are no female-only gyms in her neighborhood. Her parents, with whom she lives, have a treadmill, elliptical machine and Pilates equipment, as well as weights. She exercises about three times a week, but said she missed the camaraderie of the gym.

Though working out at home is convenient, she said, it is also very easy to procrastinate and not do it. “I don’t have all the options that a gym would have,” she said.

Swimming also poses problems. Although some Muslim women have been known to hop in the water in their street clothes, this can be cumbersome for a workout. The burqini — a one-piece outfit that resembles a scuba wet suit — has received a lot of attention in recent months (most notably in France, where a young woman was banned from wearing one at a pool), but it tends to be too form-fitting for some women.

“I tried it once, and it sticks to your body,” said Marwa Abdelhaleem, a 26-year-old teacher in Toronto who started a female-only swimming group to avoid the burqini question. “It’s really fitted. I wouldn’t wear it in

public.”

Ms. Ibrahim, however, is more focused on the private.

“One of the ideas I promote is that when you are married and you take off your clothing, your husband should not be like, ‘You should put this back on,’” Ms. Ibrahim said. “Even if you wear a burqa, you should be bikini-ready. You should feel comfortable and sexy in your own skin.”

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