Iranian Women’s Sports Fandom: Gender, Resistance, and Identity in the Football Movie Offside

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Abstract
As sport enters new global territories, attending to questions of cultural difference is increasingly important to studies of women’s sports fanship. This article draws on theories of transnational feminism and feminist sports scholarship to contemplate the cinematic portrayal of the non-Western female football supporter. Women sports fans rarely appear as film protagonists, with the notable exception of the 2006 movie Offside, which tells the story of Iranian women soccer fans attending a World Cup qualifying match. By focusing on the ways that women fans negotiate their marginal status in the sporting arena, I argue that the film unsettles cultural associations between masculinity and football in Iran, and confounds the oppositional construction of the “other” woman as a passive victim of, or freedom fighter against, Islam.

Keywords
Iran, women, fandom, film, sport, football, Islam

Introduction
This article examines the cinematic portrayal of the non-Western female football supporter. Women sports fan rarely appear as film protagonists, with the notable exception of the 2006 movie Offside, which tells the story of Iranian women soccer fans attending a World Cup qualifying match. In turning its attention toward the filmic depiction of the Iranian female sports fan, this study considers the ways in which

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Offside decenters the assumptions and biases that inhere around discourses of the non-Western woman in sport. In doing so, it contemplates the status of the film’s protagonists as female “others” inhabiting the male sporting domain. By focusing on the various ways that women negotiate their marginal status in the sporting arena I argue that the film unsettles cultural associations between masculinity and football in Iran and confounds ethnocentric and sexist conceptualizations of the “other” woman as a passive victim of, or freedom fighter against, Islam. In this regard, the movie demands a more complex consideration of women’s encounter with sports in the Middle East, which feminist sport scholar Jennifer Hargreaves notes necessitates taking into account the heterogeneity of women’s experiences and interpretations of Islam “within the particular political arrangements of specific countries” (2007, p. 74) as well as “within the broader context of local-global tensions and in relation to Western femininities and sexual politics” (Hargreaves, 2007, p. 74).

The analysis begins with an overview of how women are commonly depicted in films about sport, paying particular attention to the stereotyping of women in mainstream sports film and the invisibility of women’s experiences of sports fandom in cinematic accounts. It then proposes transnational feminism as a conceptual framework for analyzing the representation of Iranian female sports fans in Offside. What a transnational feminist approach brings to this critique is an illumination of the film’s potentialities for dismantling Western stereotypes about women and sport under Islam. In addition, transnational feminist theory exposes the dynamics of knowledge and power that underpin the formation of the “other” woman within Western sporting contexts. It is a dynamic that this author, as a White Australian feminist, simultaneously grapples with and seeks to expose, recognizing that defining the “non-Western” woman in this research potentially reinscribes the marginal status of the Iranian female sports fan that is being challenged. For this reason, the terms “non-Western” and “other” are not used unproblematically, but serve to illuminate the complex relations of power forged along gender, class, and ethnic lines that shape who speaks and how one speaks about the diverse sporting experiences of women.

After introducing transnational feminist theory, the article then offers some background on football in Iran to put the film in context and frame a detailed gender analysis of the film. The movie’s preoccupation with how its protagonists negotiate the masculine domain of the football stadium raises a number of salient themes with respect to gender inequalities in sport supporting practices. Themes addressed include the associations between authentic fandom and masculinity, the role of collective affinities in the gendered performance of fandom, and women’s use of humor and irony as forms of subversion and resistance to football’s masculine bias. Interwoven through these discussions is a critique of the common Western perception that women’s oppression in Iran is an inevitable consequence of Islamic doctrine.

The Female Sports Fan on Film

It is perhaps unsurprising that a gender analysis of the sport movie genre has predominantly focused on the masculine, given the majority of films about sport depict
White men’s experiences (Lindner, 2011, pp. 334-335; Poulton & Roderick, 2008). This appears to be changing in the new millennium with the release of a string of popular films about sporting females, including *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), *Blue Crush* (2002), *Girlfight* (2002), *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), and *Whip It* (2009). The accordant critical feminist focus on the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity as it pertains to the cinematic depiction of female athletes (Boyle, Millington, & Vertinsky, 2006; Cauldwell, 2008 & 2009; Giardina, 2003; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003) exposes the means by which fictional sportswomen negotiate, resist, and remake the male-dominated sporting domain. As a result, such analyses offer a critique of the long-standing associations between sport, heterosexuality, and masculinity.

In 2006, amid the mainstream explosion of films about women athletes, a film about female sports fans by Iranian director Jafar Panahi emerged. The movie in question—*Offside*—is unique among sports movies. It eschews the typical story of the White, male sporting hero to tell the tale of a group of Iranian women football (soccer) fans who attempt to gain entry into the 2006 men’s World Cup qualifying match between Iran and Bahrain held at Tehran’s Azadi stadium. While it could be argued that women fans regularly appear in films with a sporting theme, Hollywood cinema has typically indulged in stereotypes of the female sports supporter as the dutiful wife and/or nurturer of male sporting talent (*Raging Bull*, 1980; *Rocky*, 1976; *The Blind Side*, 2009), the sexual predator who threatens the male athlete (*Swimfan*, 2002), the groupie providing sexual gratification for the sportsman (*Bull Durham*, 1988), the cheerleader as eye candy and potential male love interest (*Bring it On*, 2000; *The Replacements*, 2000), and the female sports admirer who wishes to emulate her male sporting idols (*Bend it Like Beckham, Million Dollar Baby*). With the exception of *Offside*, no movie has featured female fandom as its central focus, despite the existence of a subgenre of sports films concerned with the fan experience, such as *Big Fan* (2009), *Fever Pitch* (1997), *Field of Dreams* (1989), and *The Fan* (1996).

*Offside* offers a different rendition of female sports fanship. Accordingly, the understanding of sports fandom used in this study is primarily concerned with sports spectating as a practice of social identification for women (see Guilianotti, 2002), which takes into account the varying forms and degrees of loyalty and solidarity to sporting clubs, teams, communities, and/or players that fandom entails. In making the trials and tribulations of the female football supporter the focus of the narrative *Offside* confronts the marginal status accorded to women sports fans, situating their plight relative to the limitations placed on women in postrevolutionary Iran. Unlike the female characters of Iranian new wave cinema who appear in domestic and rural settings (Lahiji, 2002, pp. 220-223), the women in *Offside* inhabit the contemporary urban space of the sport stadium—a space traditionally associated with masculinity, modernity, and global culture (Chehabi, 2006). Much of the film’s action occurs in a holding pen erected outside the stadium terraces, where six female fans are incarcerated upon capture by patrolling soldiers. The ensuing encounters between the women supporters and the soldiers who guard them, and among the women themselves, illuminate the cultural attitudes and values informing how gendered bodies are understood in the space of the sport stadium, and which bodies are seen as legitimate and illegitimate in this particular context.
The film’s narrative thus speaks to wider issues in the study of sport and society, interrogating the role of global sport in the formation of collective identities and communities, the politics of difference and power relations in sport, as well as addressing dynamics of resistance and agency by marginalized groups (such as women) within the traditionally male-defined sporting arena. It was with these broader concerns in mind that the specific themes addressed in this article—the gendered dimensions of fan authenticity, performance, and subversion—were identified and selected as relevant for a transnational feminist consideration of Iranian women’s experiences as followers of football in *Offside*. On an ontological level, the film provokes a critical consideration of the ways in which sport scholars might conceptualize and speak about varied modalities of female fandom that span geographical location, religion, ethnicity, class, and sexuality.

**Cultural Difference and Transnational Feminist Theory**

Attending to questions of cultural difference is increasingly important to studies of women’s sports participation. As sport (in particular, soccer) enters into new global territories such as the BRIC countries of Asia and South America, as well as Africa and the Middle East, the sporting experiences of diverse groups of female fans are beginning to come into view (Ben-Porat, 2009; Kim, 2004; Rodriguez, 2005). For Western sporting organizations such as FIFA, the IOC, and sport for development programs who seek to foster women’s sports involvement across the globe and on all levels (administrative, athletic, coaching, fandom etc), it seems there would be much to gain from transnational and cross-cultural feminist frames of thinking, which advocate recognizing and understanding the particular social, political, cultural, and economic circumstances informing women’s lived realities, and takes into account the specificities of gender difference as it intersects with ethnicity and class to shape women’s material conditions at specific temporal moments (see Ahmed, 1992; El Saadawi, 1997; Mohanty, 2003). Already with the 2010 announcement that Qatar will be the first Arab country to host the men’s soccer World Cup (in 2022) stereotypical generalizations about Islamic states as “oppressive to women” have begun to appear in Western news media outlets (James, 2010). Such rhetoric operates within Western discourses (including those of feminism and sport) to construct the “other” woman as powerless and victimized, hence sustaining the myth of an “enlightened” Western self and upholding Western power and privilege (Mohanty, 2003, p. 23). Moreover, as Egyptian feminist thinker Nawal el Saadawi notes, within countries where Islam predominates women’s oppression is commonly attributed to religion; a maneuver that homogenizes all women living under Islam as victimized and denies the economic and political factors, often manifest from patriarchal and colonialist worldviews, which contribute to women’s unequal status (El Saadawi, 1997, pp. 85-86).

Transnational feminist theory offers a conceptual framework for understanding the portrayal of the non-Western (in this case, Iranian) female sports fan that moves...
beyond ethnocentric and sexist characterizations. Emerging, in part, from feminist critiques of colonialism and modernity, transnational feminism attempts to respond to the particularities of gender injustice under the forces of globalization and neoliberalism. By questioning the priority given to Western feminist perspectives and agendas, proponents of transnational feminism seek to reframe “ongoing debates since the 1980s over questions of voice, authority, representation, and identity” that arise from feminist attempts to speak about and speak for women as a disenfranchised group (Nagar & Lock Swarr, 2010, p. 2). This process necessarily involves critically reflecting on the forms of knowledge production that shape global gender identities and investigating new ways to imagine forms of feminist solidarity across borders that decenter the dominance of Western modes of thought (Mohanty, 2003).

Mohanty (2003) observes that, as a method of analysis, a transnational feminist approach “must be attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes...to reveal how the particular is often universally significant—without using the universal to erase the particular” (p. 223). For the feminist sports scholar, thinking transnationally can generate new modes of imagining female sports fandom in ways that acknowledge women’s shared struggles with inequality in sport, while attending to the particularities of difference. It encourages the recognition of the differing situations and histories shaping the social realities of women in sport, in order to counter the homogenization of Third World and/or non-Western women. Moreover, by foregrounding the interrelationship between local and global processes, transnational feminist theory promotes a more complex understanding of the experiences of female sports fans in light of globalization and neocolonialism.

**Background and Context**

Until 1997 women were banned from attending football matches in Iran because of religious dictates concerning modesty and gender segregation (Pfister, 2003, p. 212). Although the law no longer prohibits Iranian women from attending football games, the extent to which injunctions are enforced is highly subjective and officials continue to bar female spectators from stadiums (Fozooni, 2007, p. 121). It is feared that women’s purity will be contaminated through overstimulation by the football spectacle, the bad language and rowdy behavior of male supporters, the voyeuristic gaze of the male spectator upon the female fan, as well as the female supporter’s gaze on the footballer’s insufficiently covered body (Chehabi, 2006, p. 248; Fozooni, 2007, p. 119). It is against this backdrop that the film’s director was struck by two particular events that motivated him to make the movie. At the macro level, the post match celebrations after Iran’s defeat of Australia in the 2001 World Cup qualifier where 5,000 women stormed Adazi (Freedom) stadium, and more personally, his daughter being refused entry to a football training session. Despite being barred from the stadium, she found a way in (Offside 2006, Extras, Production Notes). The film, a comedy in the neorealist style, was received positively by Western movie critics and audiences,
winning the Silver Bear at the 2006 Berlin Film Festival. Yet *Offside* was not certified for general release in Iran (Guillen, 2011)—likely censored for its subversive critique of the regime and for depicting women unveiled. The irony here, of course, is that “regressive” Iran, as seen in the eyes of the West, appears more interested in addressing the experiences and concerns of female sports fans than Hollywood, for whom women supporters of sport remain a marginal concern.

Feminist scholars have sought to counter the misconception that *all* women under Islam are banned from sports participation, preferring instead to acknowledge the range of attitudes informing women’s sporting experiences, which take on different cultural forms according to nation state and social context (Jawad, Al-Sinani, & Benn, 2011). For instance, in the context of Iran where *Offside* is set, Gertrud Pfister points out that “Iranian law and the Iranian state are based on the *sharia* and Islam governs everyday life, including the opportunities and possibilities women have to practice sport” (Pfister, 2003, p. 207). While sharia law invariably shapes the circumstances of Iranian women football fans, as the following analysis demonstrates, it is not the only factor that influences their encounters with the sporting sphere. Nor is it prevalent in all Muslim societies. Studies examining Muslim women’s engagements in physical activity in diasporic communities also reject an interpretation of Islamic femininity and sport as incompatible, preferring to focus on the means by which women and girls negotiate the inter-related dimensions of being Muslim and female within Western cultural and sporting contexts (see Kay, 2006; Palmer, 2009; Walseth, 2006). Central to these debates are restrictions on public contact between the sexes and issues of modest dress/the veil. In *Offside*, these kinds of anxieties are shown to extend to women sports fans, suggesting that concerns with the visibility of the female body in public spaces like the sports stadium frames the relationship between women and sport in Iran more generally. To this end, the analysis that follows does not focus on football in Iran per se, but attends to the specificities of gender relations in Iran in order to consider how the cinematic rendering of non-Western female sports fans in *Offside* might be understood beyond the reductive binary categories of “global victims” or “powerful women” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 239).

The film’s title makes explicit the status accorded to Iranian women football fans, alluding to their illegitimacy in the sporting sphere. Female supporters are “offside”, a footballing term for an illegal maneuver by a player who is in advance of the ball prior to its release by another player. Like the footballer who is offside, women supporters are too far forward in their contestation of the structural and cultural barriers to women’s sports participation in Iran. As the following analysis shows, however, being offside is not solely a metaphor for women’s transgression of, and marginalization within, the sporting domain, even though these themes are persistent and overt throughout the film (and serve as an analogy for women’s status in Iran more generally). In *Offside*, the subversiveness of the Iranian female sports fan is rendered as a process of grappling with, but perhaps more importantly *within*, a constellation of sociocultural values and religious beliefs that inform understandings of legitimate sports fandom and appropriate articulations of femininity—two subject positions that
research on female sports fanship note are commonly at odds with each other in Western contexts (Jones, 2008; Toffoletti & Mewett, 2012).

**Sport, Masculinity, and Authentic Fandom**

From its outset, the film establishes football in Iran as a site for the articulation and expression of masculinity, thus providing a lens through which to frame the actions and motivations of the female football fans it depicts. *Offside* opens with a scene of a worried father on his way to Azadi stadium to find his daughter who has skipped school to attend the game. He stops a minibus filled with raucous supporters, hoping to locate his child amid the clapping and cheering patriotic crowd. Other buses drive by. They, too, are filled with young men who hang out the windows holding Iranian flags and chanting, “long live Iran, down with Bahrain.” Their clothes speak of Western youth culture—blue jeans, sneakers, and football shirts from European teams. When juxtaposed against the national flags draped over the men’s shoulders, their dress alludes to the local, national, and global dimensions of spectator identification (Guilianotti, 2002). A fight breaks out on one of the buses; the close camera work capturing the frenetic and hostile jostling of male bodies as they lunge, grab, push, and pull each other in ways that mimic the behavior one might expect from a rowdy male sporting crowd. These early scenes reinforce the widely held notion in Iranian culture that the football ground is potentially violent and unsafe, hence an inappropriate place for women (Fozooni, 2007). After the fight is resolved a blind man on the bus tells the other fans that he prefers to attend live matches because “You shout, you sing, you go with the flow. But best of all, you can curse everything and everyone, say whatever you like, and no one bothers you.” When another fan jokes in response, “So you are not a real fan then?” the laughter he elicits implies that such qualities—shouting, cursing, and singing—are signs of authentic fandom. In the exchange between the blind man and the other supporters, the viewer is prompted to consider the im/possibility of female football fandom if the qualities of “real” fandom, as described by the men on the bus, are at odds with religious values of modesty and purity for Muslim women and culturally gendered notions of fan behavior.

Yet almost as soon as the film asserts football fandom as a male cultural practice it problematizes this equation. By demonstrating that an elderly blind man can be accepted as a “real fan,” *Offside* opens up the possibility for other marginal subjectivities, such as women, to claim this identity. Phallocentric views of fandom are contested and remade as suggested by the father who attends the qualifying match in order to search for his daughter who is a passionate football fan—a scenario that inverts the primacy of male sporting affiliations that position women as followers of men’s sporting interests, rather than autonomous fans in their own right (Farrell, Fink, & Fields, 2011). Later we are introduced to Samandar, a young male soldier from the provinces whose dislike of football is contrasted against the fanaticism of the women supporters he arrests—a distinction that counters the notion of a natural male affinity with sport (Messner & Sabo, 1990). Not only does *Offside* present women football followers as
knowledgeable and passionate about their sport, but it uses women’s expertise to undermine the notion that men are the authorities when it comes to all things sports related. In a lengthy discussion with a male soldier who is also a football follower, one of the women explains her passion for football as “more important than food to me.” She reveals to him that she plays football at a high level. Initially, the soldier is unconvinced of the appropriateness of women’s involvement in football, as either fans or players, but he listens with genuine interest to her story and defers to her expertise on football, asking questions about her playing experiences and whether male coaches of foreign teams can watch women’s games. Unlike accounts of male followers of sport who challenge women’s sporting knowledge as a means to undermine the status of female fans and maintain sport as a site of masculine privilege (Obel, 2012, p. 121; Pope & Williams, 2011, p. 304), this scene in Offside proposes an alternative gender dynamic. The exchange seems to resonate with the soldier, prompting him to reflect on his sexist assumptions about women’s sports participation. The film thus highlights the gender hierarchy that consolidates male primacy in sport while simultaneously generating critical moments through which sport’s gender order is dismantled.

It is in the film’s early scenes that we first encounter the female football fan. Two male supporters on the bus spot a woman disguised in long shirt sleeves, trousers, and a baseball cap. She sits alone quietly, looking out the window to avoid being identified. Her reserve is in stark contrast to two other women fans on a passing bus. They are also disguised as men, perhaps more convincingly so, and hang out the window, wildly screaming and cheering along with their male compatriots. As the film progresses we are introduced to more women fans, including a tough talking and chain smoking tomboy and a short haired woman disguised as a soldier, who successfully manages to watch half of the game from the prime seating section reserved for officials. The storyline reveals their backgrounds to be as diverse as their personalities. One has the privilege of secondary education, another plays football at a high level, and we find out that one of the film’s protagonists has spent time in the rural provinces. As young women, what they share is a passion for football and the fact that they remain unnamed (with one exception) throughout the film. It is made apparent throughout the movie that the six women it depicts are not random anomalies, but that women’s fandom in Iran constitutes a growing presence. Mention is made of 100 women in white scarves, who were granted access to the stadium by Iranian officials fearing retribution in the international press. The film also hints that many women at the match have successfully snuck into the ground.

It would be too simplistic to interpret women’s marginal fan status through ethnocentric frameworks that view all acts of resistance as forms of protest against Islam (El Saadawi, 1997, p. 91). The subversion that comes from being a woman follower of football emerges in response to a history of political, economic, and cultural factors shaping Iranian football, including modernity, youth culture, capitalism, and the globalization of sport (see Fozooni, 2004). As Chehabi explains,

For Iranian youth, Iranian participation at the World Cup meant that their pariah nation had rejoined the international community, and parallels were drawn
between *Jam-e jahani* (World Cup) and *Jame’eh-ye jahani* (world society). The integration of Iranians in world society was symbolically furthered when, in the aftermath of the 1998 World Cup, many top Iranian players started playing in foreign soccer teams, mostly in Germany, where long-time Iranian residents began acting as middlemen and agents. Soccer fans in Iran now had an emotional stake in the fortunes of European football teams. Conversely, some Iranian players abroad, like Khodadad Azizi, used their newly acquired wealth to fund projects at home. The soccer fever of the late 1990s undoubtedly gave a boost to national integration in Iran. Secular and religious Iranians, men and women, people from the capital and from the provinces, were all united in their support of the national team, and followed its uneven fortunes with joy and anxiety. This enthusiasm was even shared by members of the Iranian diaspora, whose relations with their home country have not always been free of tension (p. 251).

Viewed this way, the film appears less concerned with emphasizing the incompatibility of fandom and femininity in Iran, or the victimization of Muslim women, than it is with exploring the complexity of lived, gendered subjectivities as they manifest relationally and contingently around this particular sporting event. *Offside* thus alludes to the multiple socialities afforded through sporting encounters as gender experiences are recast through sport’s interconnected local, national, and global dimensions.

Fan socialities, or feelings of collective affinity, as Farred (2002) writes in his reflections on football fandom, rely just as much on imagined constructions of affiliation and connectedness as they do material encounters. As a black South African and lifelong fan of the Liverpool football club, Farred admits he never saw his team play until adulthood (due to geographical distance and a lack of requisite technology), yet his passion for football was fueled by the intensity of his imagined affinities with his club that went beyond geographical borders and moved across dimensions of race, class and culture—an experience he refers to as “long distance love,” or LDL. In Farred’s words:

> LDL is what happens when you overidentify, when loyalties are created in the absence of a physical but not a psychic spectacle. LDL is that unusual mode of fandom where loyalties and identification not only precede spectacle but construct imaginary contests without any conventional notion of spectacle. To love from another continent without seeing is to be a spectator sur generis – it is to reconfigure the historical confines of spectatorship through passion (p. 9).

For Iranian women football fans, “long distance love” is an apt metaphor for the manifestation and performance of their fan identities. As women, they are both structurally and culturally separated from the male fans that follow football in Iran. Yet this is no impediment to the depth and breadth of their football passion. In the film, the women never see the match, nor does the audience. Because women’s football fandom in Iran rarely takes the form of supporting from the terraces *Offside* instead focuses on
other indicators of fandom, beyond watching the game, to convey the singularity of women’s sport fanaticism. The women are shown recreating the match within the confines of the holding pen, using each other and the soldiers to stand in for various Iranian players, whose statistics, form, and history they know by heart. The women discuss the lineup and tactics of the national team with the soldiers, and in the process reveal themselves to be more knowledgeable about the players and the team than the male soldiers who are able to watch the game as it unfolds. The international careers of Iranian players are tracked and scrutinized, and female fans debate various aspects of the local competition amongst themselves. When Iran scores a goal, the female fans are ecstatic—they jump, yell, chant, and hug each other, their cries mingling with the revelry erupting from inside the stadium in a moment that suggests that, despite their physical and cultural separation from the spectacle and the other fans because of their gender, women fans can construct a sense of belonging to an imagined community of football followers. As football can be followed via mediated forms and the local goes global (as is the case with Iranian players moving to international clubs and Iran’s participation in the World Cup) women’s experiences of sports fandom extend across the interconnected local, national, and global aspects of the game. Such developments enable Iranian women to access an “authentic” fan identity beyond the space of the stadium from which they are excluded.

Fandom, Gender Subversion, and Resistance

For Fozooni (2007), female football fandom offers Iranian women, particularly those from the working class, an opportunity for the social contestation of gender inequality. While bourgeois feminists may articulate their grievances through formal avenues such as the law and education, he argues that working-class women have fewer opportunities to voice their opposition to gender oppression in the public domain, turning instead to popular cultural forms like football (Fozooni, 2007, p. 124). He attributes the appeal of football fandom for working-class women to its ambiguous status as an activity that is both sanctioned by the government (who recognize sport’s capacity as a tool for social conformity) as well as a site for resistance against the governing mullah-bourgeois (who are critical of football’s associations with the West). This ambivalence, he argues, allows working-class women to criticize gender injustice and connect the private and public spheres during moments of social disorder generated by the football crowd (Fozooni, 2007, p. 115). Following Bakhtin, Fozooni (2007) claims that the football carnival offers a temporary space for women to invert patriarchal mores and rebel against their social marginalization and segregation (p. 118).

The women’s challenge to the gender restrictions limiting their access to the match is rarely presented as an act of outright revolt in the film. In the highly surveilled space of the football stadium, where CCTV and security patrols are commonplace, gender rebellion takes less overtly visible forms. Cinematically this translates to the use of humor and irony as strategies to subtly undermine and draw attention to a gender order that assumes masculine primacy and authority in both the sporting sphere and public
life more generally. We see this in the way the women fans mock the soldiers who keep them captive, thus ridiculing the power of the state that the young male soldiers are supposed to embody. For example, during the half time break a female fan disguised in a soldier’s uniform is brought to the holding pen. She brags about watching the first half of the game in the luxury of the officials’ stand before being caught sitting in the chief’s seat, her legs stretched out as if claiming her rightful place. While the other women express awe and admiration at her disguise and her tenacity, the soldiers are incredulous that the women show no signs of fear or remorse for their actions. It is as if “they don’t give a damn about getting caught” one soldier opines, and he expresses astonishment at the woman dressed as a soldier who dared make fun of him and tried to escape.

The female fans reject the role of the submissive and silent non-Western woman (Mohanty, 2003, p. 127), constantly questioning the grounds of their incarceration, and demanding to be released. The way the female supporters talk back, banter, and verbally spar with the male soldiers is the source of the film’s humor—a humor that enables the women to vocalize their displeasure in subversive ways. In one scene, the tomboy fan lights a cigarette and is told by a soldier to put it out. She retorts, “Is smoking a crime, too?” telling the soldier she would be happy to smoke her cigarette at home if he would care to let her go, knowing perfectly well that he won’t take her up on the offer. Another fan then pushes the point, insisting that smoking isn’t a crime, nor is going inside the stadium, thus challenging the soldier’s opinion that “a stadium is no place for women.” In another example, a female fan badgers the male soldiers to let her use the restrooms—a problematic demand give the lack of women’s facilities in the stadium. The absurdity that ensues when she is eventually accompanied by a soldier to the bathroom concludes with the soldier becoming utterly confused about the state of gender roles and relations in contemporary Iranian society. The seeming rigidity of the gender order is unsettled throughout this scene, as the woman fan attempts to pass as a man (wearing a ludicrous mask fashioned from a poster of a football star) and a male fan is mistaken for a woman. Amid this confusion the female fan manages to escape. The movie relies on such exchanges in order to provoke the audience to reconsider “absolute truths” about Islam, patriarchy, and women’s victimization that prevail in popular Western discourses concerning Islamic women and sport (Benn, Pfister, & Jawad, 2011, p. 2).

Tracts of dialogue also serve to illuminate the gender constraints experienced by both women and men in Iranian society. When the female fans articulate their frustrations at being barred from participating fully in their passion for sport, Samandar (the soldier put in charge of overseeing the women’s incarceration) shares his unhappiness at being required to undertake national service. He appears to resent the masculine role of duty foisted on him by the state, although at other times he uncritically adopts the role of protector of the women’s reputations. In these exchanges parallels are drawn between the respective gender restrictions for women and men under the regime. Just as the women are confined and plead with Samandar to let them go, he feels trapped by his responsibilities as a soldier, fearing the consequences of extended military
service if he frees them. While the male solider cannot wait for his mandatory duties to be over, the tomboy fan insists that “I’d love to be in the army. And be in your shoes as well as all your friends.” The young men and women’s shared anxieties of being “on the outer,” not fully in control of their destinies, is visually alluded to in the film. The soldiers occasionally appear, like the women, behind bars. They are framed by the camera trying to catch glimpses of the match through the gated exits of the terraces and pacing around the holding pens like the women they are watching over. The soldiers may be on the other side of the fence to the captured women, but they are not entirely free.

As evening descends and the match is drawing to a close, the army chief arrives to oversee the women’s transfer onto a bus so they can be taken to Vice Squad headquarters. Accompanying them is a young man arrested for being in possession of illegal firecrackers. As the bus pulls away, he yells out the window “Chief! You can arrest me. Fine. But don’t put me with the chicks. Imagine the shame if anyone sees me. It’s so degrading.” Yet rather than securing women’s status as secondary subjects within a patriarchal sporting economy, the boy’s encounter with the female fans provides another challenge to the seeming certainties of gender oppression in Iran. As the bus hurtles down the highway toward its destination, the fan wearing a soldier’s uniform begins to panic on realizing the gravity of her predicament, prompting the boy to ask an officer to turn on the radio so he may hear the final moments of the match. “I can’t stand these chicks blubbering and clucking,” he decries. This causes the tomboy fan to respond violently, head butting him in retaliation to his labeling of the women as “chicks.” The scene is tragicomic, with the fan’s violence against the young man undoing a gender order where women are usually considered the victims but rarely the perpetrators of violence. After hitting him, she yells “I’ll show him. He has to learn how to talk in front of ladies”—a comment which signals to the dual connotations (and dual insult) of the term “chick” as a derogatory word for “woman” and to suggest one is weak; a chicken. The play on gendered language continues as the soldier responds “You’re fighting like cocks,” after which the boy breaks down, confessing that he has been verbally and physically abused his entire life. The boy’s earlier insistence that being seen with the women is degrading takes on a more complex meaning on the revelation of his own degradation and victimization. The notion of absolute patriarchal authority is subtly displaced in this scene, prompting the viewer to reconsider reductive categorizations of male oppressor/female victim under Islam, while also calling into question the associations between sport, masculinity, and violence used to justify women’s exclusion from the terraces.

The film thus complicates the positioning of women as “othered” by situating the female fans relative to a range of “marginalized subjectivities” (Cauldwell, 2009, p. 259)—the old blind man on the bus, the young male soldiers, and the teenage boy—all of whom, in their particular ways, disrupt the certainty of gender scripts associating masculinity with power and authority in sporting and wider social structures. The point to be made here is not that Offside depicts women and men as “equally” oppressed, but that the film broadens the framework through which to understand
gendered subjectivities as situationally contingent and negotiated according to political, cultural, and social circumstances. At the same time, *Offside* explores the range and/or limits of such subjectivities in sporting contexts. For instance, even though the film’s rendering of its male characters implies a complex landscape of gender power relations, identities, and positionalities, the male soldiers can, nonetheless, become part of the spectating crowd by simply shedding their uniforms in a way that the women cannot by disguising themselves as men—a concept taken up in relation to the practice of women’s veiling in the following section.

**The Female Sports Fan Unveiled**

What comes across as the most visible and radical signifier of gender rebellion in *Offside* is the unveiled female fan. In the literature examining Muslim women and sport, veiling is primarily understood in terms of the potential physical restrictions it places on women attempting to undertake sport at both the recreational and elite levels (see Hargreaves, 2007; Jahromi, 2011; Pfister, 2003). For some women, as Jawad et al. (2011) acknowledge,

> there can be issues regarding the culture of sports participation environments and Islamic codes of conduct requiring modesty in dress and gender relations. Modesty, as a concept in Islam, relates to moral values of what is right and wrong with regard to personal conduct, particularly with regard to sexual relations outside marriage (p. 33).

The authors go on to note that while both men and women are expected to adhere to these values, “many Muslim women continue to shoulder the responsibilities of sexual propriety and family honor related to social conduct and heterosexual relationships” (Jawad et al., 2011, p. 33). What might it mean, then, to depict female sports fans unveiled? I pose this question in order to consider what the absence of the veil might signify in a Western visual context where female covering is often understood in monolithic terms (a question which acknowledges that the veil is not singularly “adopted” or “rejected” but that there are multiple types of veiling and their wearing).

When conceptualized within the framework of Western colonialist and imperialist history, MacDonald (2006) observes that the unveiled woman is commonly construed by Western media commentators as a helpless victim liberated from a brutal regime. Within this discursive schema, Western interventionism, as in the case of Afghanistan post 9/11, is mythologized as coming to the rescue of the non-Western woman (p. 11), whose veil signifies the forced suppression of her agency, identity, and rights, as well as the backwardness and inferiority of Islam (Ahmed, 1992, p. 152). Concomitantly, the unveiled woman is constructed within Western narrative texts as the radical freedom fighter who, in shedding the veil, denounces the Islamic religion whose values are deemed to be the root cause of women’s oppression (Jusová, 2008). *Offside*
cleverly addresses the ethnocentrism inherent in dominant Western interpretations of the veil. The irony of women masquerading as men is not lost on the film’s director. What the film makes apparent is that in order to pass as men the fans must de-emphasize their femaleness, thus subverting dress codes that mark the body as gendered “female.” By appropriating the signifiers of masculinity, the female fans exceed the boundaries of femininity in a gesture that aims to avoid drawing the gaze of the opposite sex. Their unveiling is, paradoxically, in keeping with Islamic values of modesty in dress. Although the women supporters shed the veil in order to disguise themselves as men, they go to great lengths to cover their bodies. Put another way, the female fans in *Offside* may be unveiled, but they are not uncovered. When considered from this perspective, the absence of the veil does not signal an act of individualized resistance against Islam by the female fan. These football fanatics are motivated by the desire to be part of an “imagined community” of football fans (Anderson, 2006), hence reject the veil in order to occupy a masculinized sporting sphere, rather than to flaunt Islamic traditions of body modesty. When read within the national sporting context, the absence of the veil can be understood as a strategy that enables female fans to participate in Iranian and world culture through football, as well as exposing the limits of such participation. *Offside* thus provokes critical scholars of sport to look beyond the veil to acknowledge the multiple forms of oppression (patriarchy, capitalism, the state) that women contend with, rather than interpreting the absence of the veil as a comprehensive rejection of Islam (Ahmed, 1992, p. 166).

The transgressive behavior of the women fans, while suggestive of the political rebellion that Fozooni characterizes in terms of the carnivalesque, is represented in far more ambiguous and sophisticated ways in *Offside* than his thesis implies. His interpretation of the football carnival as a site for riotous transgression, I argue, risks reducing the women’s motivations solely to acts of resistance against the religious dictates promulgated by state. In Fozooni’s words, women’s participation in football “has fostered a combative collective identity that is jealously guarded by Iranian women (especially proletarian and petty bourgeois women) who see themselves as the champions of freedom against Islamic tyranny” (Fozooni, 2007, p. 124). I question his construction of the Iranian woman as seeking freedom from the tyranny of Islam through sport, in that it potentially reinscribes “the mapping on to Muslim women’s bodies of narratives of either ‘resistance’ against, or ‘liberation’ from extreme versions of Islam” (MacDonald, 2006, p. 14). Moreover, if women’s football support is understood in terms of exceptional moments of social disorder outside of life’s daily routines, then the nature of football support as a practice grounded in the everyday is obscured. *Offside* explores the possibilities that women’s actions as fans may generate for the construction of more complex, embedded subjective identities that mobilize ambivalence, ambiguity, and uncertainty to forge new forms of sporting engagement and solidarity across gender, nation, and the global. The ambiguities and ironies that inhere around the depiction of authority, the veil and gender relations in *Offside* thus complicate a reading of women’s fandom solely as a gesture of political rebellion.
Conclusion

The sport film, as Rowe (2008) has observed, moves beyond “the field of play or the locker room. Crucially, it always deals in some way with the relationship between the domain of sport and the greater world of which it is a part, interrogating both the uniqueness of sport that sets it apart from quotidian experience, and the ways in which it impinges on the social world, and, inevitably, is impinged upon by it” (p. 31). In light of Rowe’s take on the sport film, what might we surmise about Iranian women’s experiences of sports fandom as they are portrayed in *Offside*? By making women its central focus *Offside* challenges the marginalization of women sports fans in cinematic portrayals and the stereotyping of the Muslim woman in visual representation. In the movie, female football fandom is understood as a vehicle to subvert regulatory mechanisms informing gender articulations in contemporary Iran. Humor is used throughout the film to unsettle rigid categorizations of power and authority along gendered lines. This is also achieved through lengthy sequences of dialogue between the women fans and the soldiers, which draws connections between the gender restrictions of the regime and their impacts on both men and women in post-revolution Iran.

While the cultural and structural impediments to women’s sports fandom in Iran are a persistent feature of the film’s narrative, *Offside* avoids characterizing women as passive victims under Islam. Nor are women depicted in outright rebellion of the religious state, with the film preferring to focus on the ways in which women negotiate multiple vectors of inequality from within the set of specific conditions they find themselves in. This analysis thus rejects a binary reading of Iranian women as either repressed by or liberated from Islam, which has been identified as the dominant Western mode of interpreting representations of Muslim women. As it is imagined in *Offside*, women’s football fandom is less a consequence of rejecting religious protocols than it is a negotiation between the cultural intersections of the local and global spheres the female sports follower inhabits. *Offside* thus opens up alternative conceptualizations of women’s engagement in sporting rituals under Islam beyond the dualisms of victimization and freedom, Muslim and secular, bourgeois and proletarian, alluding to the multiple possibilities of a broader sociality evoked through the construction of sporting community. In keeping with a transnational feminist approach, such complexities gesture toward the particulars of Iranian women’s sports fandom, while also responding to the marginal status attributed to women in sport more generally, both within Iran and across the globe.

As commercialized sport pushes into new territories across the globe, the value of transnational feminism for attending to questions of gender and cultural difference in sporting contexts is rendered apparent by the filmic analysis offered here. Adopting the philosophies of transnational feminist theory enables the complex situatedness of Iranian female sports fans to be acknowledged, thus facilitating a deeper understanding of the local and global circumstances shaping their encounters with football. As a mode of analysis, transnational feminism offers sport scholars a counternarrative
through which to interpret Iranian women’s sport support beyond Western imperialist frameworks, drawing attention to the importance of addressing the particularities of gendered struggle in differing geopolitical and sociocultural contexts. Moreover, using a transnational feminist approach to critique and expose universalizing stereotypes of women under Islam in *Offside* highlights the potential of such an approach for conducting future empirical research with Iranian women sports fans—the next logical step in offering a gendered account of the experiences of sports fandom for Iranian women.

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