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28.04 / 09:30 | 50 ***Muslim athletic wear covers skin without cramping style***

LOS ANGELES. April 28, 2006. KAZINFORM - The design of most modern sportswear puts many Muslim women athletes in a curious bind: adhere to their faith and have their motions hampered or compromise their beliefs in the name of athletic performance?

The Koran requires women to cover everything except their faces, hands, and feet, says Tayyibah Taylor, editor-in-chief of Azizah Magazine, a publication geared toward Muslim-American women; KAZINFORM cites Jennifer Cutraro for National Geographic News.

"The idea is that your modesty in dress and behavior is a passport to public space," Taylor said. "It makes the statement that a Muslim woman's body is not a part of the public conversation."

Recently Muslim women living in a Somali refugee camp in Kenya were given unique new volleyball uniforms.

Designed through a partnership between Nike and the United Nations, the uniforms permit the women athletes to dig, spike, and set while covering their bodies and heads in a way that remains true to their faith.

But don't look for such specialized gear at your local mall or sporting-goods store just yet.

Nike spokesperson Alan Marks says the Beaverton, Oregon, company currently has no plans to commercialize the product. And most other major sportswear manufacturers have no lines specifically targeting Muslim women.

Today a scattering of small companies is the only commercial source of sportswear for the modest-minded.

Modest Yet Fashionable

Finding appropriate exercise wear is something that Muslim women have struggled with for years, says Laila Al-Marayati, spokesperson for the Los Angeles, California-based Muslim Women's League.

She says some women and girls choose to work out in long-sleeved shirts and sweatpants, but that is only a partial solution.

"Muslim women sometimes will prefer to go to all-female gyms or work out at home, so they can exercise comfortably and not be overwhelmed with heat exhaustion," Al-Marayati said.

An additional challenge is the need to keep the head covered with a hijab, a head scarf girls begin to wear in early adolescence (related photo: young Iraqi girl trying on a hijab).

"As an active Muslim girl, I found it difficult to participate in most sports, because of all the excess clothes we were wearing. And the veil—very unpractical when playing sports," Aheda Zanetti wrote in an email to National Geographic News.

Zanetti is the owner of Ahiida, an Australian company that designs women's sportswear.

"All of that excess fabric had to go, and that's when I introduced the Hijood—a hijab shaped like a hood," Zanetti wrote.

The Hijood is a close-fitting head covering made of a lightweight fabric.

A Danish company called Capsters produces a similar product. Designer Cindy van den Bremen says her goal was to develop a sportier hijab for girls to wear in school gym classes.

Zanetti also developed a line of swimwear for Muslim women, which incorporates a long-sleeved top, close-fitting hood, and long pants, all made of a stretchy, lightweight fabric.

Turkish clothing manufacturer Hasema likewise produces modest yet fashionable swimwear for women, men, and girls.

That's welcome news to girls like Zarina Jalal, a high school student who lives just outside of Albany, New York.

"If there was a way that I could do swimming without baring myself as much as I'm required to, then I'd definitely take up swimming more often," she said.

Jalal gave up soccer in middle school because of the requirement to wear shorts as part of the team uniform. She says clothing requirements can be a barrier for Muslim girls who want to play sports.

"The stereotypical clothing when you're doing anything athletic competitively is a very big turnoff for Muslim girls, in my opinion," she said.

To Market?

Taylor, of Azizah Magazine, sees great market potential for sportswear more appropriate for Muslim women.

"In another 15 years there's going to be a sizeable Muslim consumer market and lots of demand," she said. "I think we're where the Hispanic market was 20 years ago, and today the Hispanic market is a big consumer market."

Arun Jain, a marketing professor at the University of Buffalo in New York State, agrees.

He says, given the growth potential of the Muslim community in the United States, major sportswear manufacturers could be missing out on an opportunity to break into an emerging market.

"I believe it's a strategic blunder on their part," Jain said. "My feeling is that they don't think there's that much buying power, but I am certain that they're mistaken.

"If customers are given what they are looking for, they will be willing to pay, even at a higher price," he said.

That "strategic blunder" might pay off for the specialty shops that cater specifically to the needs of Muslim women in sports, he says.

Yuka Nakamura, a doctoral candidate in physical education and health at the University of Toronto in Canada, has studied Muslim women's participation in sports.

She says there's definitely a need for modest sportswear, even beyond Muslim communities.

She cites a program at a pool in Calgary, Canada, that tried to encourage more Muslim women to take up swimming by allowing them to wear T-shirts in the pool.

"It wasn't just Muslim women who wanted this," she said. "An increasing number of women felt more comfortable being covered up and even larger men who felt uncomfortable in a bathing suit and preferred to be in a T-shirt."

Azizah's Taylor agrees. "It's not only Muslim women who are making attempts to be modest when they go out," she said.

"There's also a contingency of Christian women and Jewish women and others who just don't feel that they need to show their bodies. Other women are striving to be modest as well."

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