

*The Moving towards Justice Series*  
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**Mission Accomplished: Using sport to bring women together in the heart of the Middle East**

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**About the Series:** The purpose of this series is to add to the conversation and dialogues occurring in sport; thus, the National Association of Girls & Women in Sport has created this series to not only inform our members, but also the public about the various aspects of sport and physical activity that display the diversity as well as inclusivity of women's sport. With the goal to raise awareness, we hope that this addition to the conversation will indirectly lead to creating social justice and change in not only women's sport but sport as a whole.

**About the Authors:** Sarah J. Hillyer founded an international sport for development and peace organization in 1993, the name eventually became Sport 4 Peace. Since 1993, Sarah has taught various sports for girls and women throughout China (16 projects), Iran (8), Israel (6), Tunisia (3), Turkey (3), Mexico (2), Jordan (1), Oman (1), Morocco (1), Inner Mongolia (1), Brazil (1), and Iraq (1). Sarah has introduced and/or formed national softball teams in Iran, Israel, China, and Tunisia, including extensive work in 1995-1996 with the silver medal Chinese National Softball Team. Sarah holds a bachelor's degree from Liberty University in Sports Administration, a master's degree from Murray State University in Sport Psychology and is a third year doctoral student in Sports Studies at the University of Tennessee. Sarah's concentration is sport sociology and her research interests include: Muslim women in sport, sport as a tool for peace, women's sport as a tool for diplomacy, Iranian women and sport, and why sport is a unique tool in ongoing peace initiatives.

Ashleigh Huffman joined Sport 4 Peace in 2005 on a women's basketball project to Wuhan, China. The trip was designed to promote sport and solidarity between the United States and six Chinese universities. In 2006, Huffman assisted Hillyer in the formation of the first ever "Sport for Life Peace Camp (SFL)." SFL was created to promote sport and physical activity among Israeli and Palestinian girls and to encourage communication between the historically divided regions of Israel and Palestine. Huffman's research interests include sport as tool for peace and the intersections of sport, gender, and religion in the Middle East. Huffman earned her bachelor's degree in Physical Education from Eastern Kentucky University and her master's degree in Sport Management from the University of Tennessee. Huffman is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in Sports Studies with a specific emphasis in Sport Sociology.

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**Abstract:** This is a story about some of the most amazing women in the world, living in some of the most difficult conditions imaginable. As the creators of Sport 4 Peace, it is the retelling of our own personal journeys throughout the Middle East and how the incredible women in these countries have challenged our own ideas and perceptions regarding sport, religion, culture, and life. This account also reveals how the power of sport successfully brought together some of the world's most diametrically opposed groups. This is an inspiring story of how two young researchers with a simple mission have captured the voices of the silent and with a sense of duty are charged with telling their story.

**Key Words:** sport, gender, peace, identity, religion, Middle East

## **Positionality**

We open this article by stating our position in relation to this particular research project. Our stance or positionality as researchers and practitioners is immediately relevant to the reading of this piece, as is the understanding that we chose to submit a personal story. Moreover, it is integral to understand how our experiences have shaped who we are, what we do and why we research. We both represent white, middle-class, Christians from a traditional family style. Growing up, we were socialized to believe that sport is inherently good. We were the benefactors of a post-Title IX era. We both received full scholarships to compete as NCAA Division I athletes. We have achieved success in sport and have experienced all of the intangibles it has to offer. Because of those experiences, we believe that in some instances, sport has a unique ability to teach valuable life lessons and that within sport one can learn the discipline, communication, teamwork, and commitment necessary to make positive contributions to the larger society. However, we are not naive to the fact that sport has its pitfalls. We are aware of the increasing commodification of sport and the detrimental affects specialization is having on “sport for all.” We also acknowledge the exploitation of collegiate athletes and have experienced academic, social and sexual exploitation during our own college basketball tenure. The combined and unfortunate negative experiences of college basketball careers have challenged our deeply held values of sport. It was after our college playing days that we determined to use sport in unique and cutting-edge ways that would positively impact girls and women around the world. We deliberately chose regions where girls and women are traditionally marginalized, especially in sport. Our passion has become a compulsion. Our compulsion has become an obsession. Our obsession has become the greatest journey of our lives.

## **Introduction**

As the directors of Sport 4 Peace (S4P), we have scaled the Great Wall of China, explored the ancient tombs of Persian Kings, discovered the complexities of the Holy Land, unearthed the mystery of Carthage, and traversed the majestic ruins of Petra. Since 1994, S4P has traveled over one million miles

to encourage girls and women to be physically active and to bring “opposing sides” together to promote peace through sport. In this paper, we record four very personal stories from two different countries. Pseudonyms have been used to protect their identities. Further, we describe some of our most intimate moments, reflections and struggles as we have listened to countless tales of inequity, exclusion, and social injustice.

## **Methodology**

“Experience happens narratively” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19). As practitioner-researchers, we have come to understand the experiences of these young women through the stories they have shared. Therefore, we approached narrative not only as “the phenomenon,” but also “the method.” The storied accounts are re-tellings or re-creations of interviews conducted with our participants.

Our purpose is not to make generalizations but to allow the participant’s own words and descriptions of events speak for themselves. The accounts of events are their truths and through the retelling of these stories, we will not attribute larger, more general implications. It is important to note that the inequities, exclusions and social injustices are not our evaluations of their experiences, but critiques in *their own words* of their own experiences. We refrain from attributing our western ideas of equity, inclusion and social justice. We conclude by sharing how their stories have affected us personally and how they have informed and encouraged our research and teaching.

### **Story I: Like mother, like daughter**

Sweat drips off the edge of my nose as I bend over to pick up my bag. I shuffle forward. My feet and back throb. A yawn forces its way out of my mouth. I taste the salty dirt on my lips. I look around only to see others wilting in the mid-August sun. The people in line have become voiceless silhouettes. The sun’s radiance illuminates their bodies. Its intensity drowns out their voices. Hypnotically, I move forward.

Sedated by the heat, I find myself slipping deeper into a dream. I climb the stairs and wait for the music to begin. A slow stream of tears falls from my eyes. I raise my hand in celebration, in triumph, in

the face of all odds. This is for me, for my family, and for my nation. I sing along to an anthem that is hardly recognized.

As they raise my nation's flag behind me, I proudly look into the eyes of the crowd. I find my mother. She blows me a kiss. She is the reason I swim. Her lost dream has become my opportunity. Her zeal has helped me overcome all doubt. She believes in me. She defends me. She understands my passion to swim. It represents independence and freedom. Freedom to achieve my dreams. Freedom to be who I want to be: an athlete. It is my mother's encouragement that has led me to this moment. I am a Palestinian champion.

I slowly open my eyes. It was only a dream but it felt so real. I look down at my watch. I am now two hours late for the qualifying meet in Jerusalem. I move forward. After four long hours in the sun, it is finally my turn. I approach the checkpoint. The Israeli guard searches my bag for bombs, weapons and illegal documents. He found only my swimsuit, goggles, and a dirty, old towel. He asks for my identification card. I quickly pull it out, indicating I am late for my meet. Casually, he returns to his post with my card to call in the information. Exhausted and impatient, I slump down onto my bag in disgust. I'm going to miss the meet.

The guard returns with my card. He asks for the name of my father.

"Ahmad Mustafa Sadaat," I reply.

"Troublemaker," he responds.

"No sir. He is not a troublemaker. "

"I was in the tower the day the fight broke out in front of your father's store. It was his fault. His store is full of dirty scum. Terrorists."

*Israeli guard spits at her feet.*

"The incident outside of his store was not his fault. This is not fair. My father cannot control who enters his store. He is a good man. He is not a terrorist. He is honest and hardworking. He has no problem with you, yet you have ruined his business, his life. Now we have nothing, he sits there all day, everyday hoping for customers but because of you no one will come to our shop. Now we can't eat or buy medicine."

“We are trained to respond. Why don’t you ask your father what the man in front of his store had strapped to his chest?”

“Okay, I’m not here to argue. Can you please just let me pass? I am very late for an important event.”

“An important event? (Guard says mockingly). That’s funny! You call girls splashing around in a pool an important event?”

“C’mon. I really need to go. This is my last chance to qualify for international competition. I can’t miss it!”

“You are lucky. Today we are letting you pass, but in the future your father better clean up his activities. We won’t tolerate you terrorists. Your bus is leaving now.”

My name is Laila Khalil Sadaat. I missed all of my events that day. A concrete wall and two nations at war stood in the way of my Olympic dreams. I am 16 years old from the town of Bethlehem. As an athlete, I am limited. For a girl, it is culturally hard. You may have talent but when you reach a certain age, there is no opportunities to further develop...you are not encouraged to become a sports person. My freedom to compete is also limited. I can’t travel to other places because of the checkpoint...I am 16. As a Palestinian, I am not issued an identity card so I have to obtain special permission to enter into the Israeli state. Permission to swim for a Palestinian girl is not high priority on the special request list.

I have trained for a very long time, under terrible conditions for my Olympic dreams and now for nothing. The story above sums up my athletic experience; however, I am luckier than most Palestinians. Both my mother and father support me. They are proud of me. Although they have their own worries and many kids, they encourage me to pursue my talents. My mother says a girl that plays sports builds very strong character. I know this to be true because I am not easily swayed. My mind wanders of too fewer things and boys know that I am respectable with a sweet spirit.

You also asked me about my experience at the Sport for Life Peace Camp and I would simply say it’s the best camp I have ever been to. The best part of the camp is the relations we have rooted between us. Everyone said what she had wanted to say, but never could. Sport helped us to [get to this point] because we had to depend on the other person [on our team]. Sport says what is inside of you. It is

a good way to get to know each other better. It got us closer...the personal stories that we shared about family and friends relate to each of us. That is something I will take with me forever.

Even though my dreams of competing as an Olympic athlete have been taken from me by corrupt governments who refuse to get along, I am better for having the chance to train, to meet new friends through this peace camp and for even having a dream. I am the lucky one. Most of my friends have lost their ability to dream. They have accepted our destiny. They have accepted our fate. I only hope they can find a reason to stop the violence. I have. By meeting Israelis, I know there are many prejudices on both sides that are not reality. But I also know that through sports, it is possible to stop the hate. I have seen it for myself and I will tell everyone I know.

## **Story II: Introduction: Welcome to Iraq**

There were five of us, all women. We were former collegiate basketball players who volunteered for two weeks. We arrived on schedule. It was 3:00am. The air was warm and humid. It smelled like a mix of a fresh mountain breeze and a lingering rotten egg. The hazy night sky reflected the moon like a melted midnight blue crayola. Two locals picked us up in a white mini-bus with two green stripes down the side. It looked like a throw back bus from the early 1980s. The 20-seater was perfect. Even though there were only five of us, we needed the space. Our host boarded the bus and made her way to the backseat. She slid the two large sliding glass windows open. The opening was just big enough for us to load the large supply bags and carry-on pieces. Once we had everything in place, we climbed aboard, exhausted from the three day journey but excited about what the coming days would bring. We all sat near one another in the front of the bus.

*Host (in broken English): Welcome and thank you for coming. It will take us between four and six hours to reach the city. It depends on checkpoints. The night is the most dangerous time to travel because we never know if the checkpoints are real or fake. If a checkpoint is fake, the bad guys will take all of our belongings, money, passports and maybe even take us hostage for a large ransom. There is a shorter route but it is not as safe. We should take the longer way around the mountains. We will be less likely to run into danger and there should be less complications if we go the long way. Ok, let's go.*

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We arrived in the northern city of Sulymania, Iraq almost four hours after landing in Erbil. We came to train players and coaches at the first-ever girls and women's basketball training camp. We also came to deliver supplies: New basketballs, nets, ball pumps, shirts, and shoes. We spent the next six days coaching young women from Erbil, Mosul, Dohuk, and Sulymania. What follows is *word for word* what three different young women shared during their interviews.

### **Story III: My country**

“What can I tell you, uhm, the situation is really, really bad here. You see us like [this]; we are happy, of course. We cannot lose the hope and just sit home and never do anything...[we can't] stop going to school, stop playing; we can't do that, life doesn't go on like that. We have to play. We have to have hope and tomorrow we'll die. Who knows what is going to happen? So just live your life and be happy, that's our destiny. That's how it is. My country is not such a good place to live in, you know. But we are happy for who we are and we will never live it down. This is who we are and we cannot change it, but I hope someone can help prevent those mean people [insurgents] from this country because we don't deserve it. I don't think it's too much to ask for, just a peace in our country, just like all the other countries. That's it.”

### **Story IV: My honor**

“You know, we have been playing since we were small children, but only in school, physical education and in our local clubs. Our clubs are not like yours. Our club is primarily used by the boys and the men, and there are very few hours for us to train. We have to train outside, under the hot sun or in the cold air. We have to train in the dark sometimes because some boys will throw things at us and taunt us if they see us playing on the courts outside the club. They call us names and tell us that we should go home where we belong. It's difficult for us to get to and from practices too. We don't have a team bus and we can't afford to take a taxi. Our parents are too busy working. We walk or take a city bus, but it's dangerous for us to be outside our homes after dark. We are women and everyone looks at

us like we are bad people. We risk bringing dishonor to our families. There is a high price to pay in my country for dishonor. But all we want to do is play. Just play basketball. What's so wrong about that?"

### **Story V: My dream**

"My name is Karin and I'm 17 years old and I've been playing basketball for almost 2 years and basketball is everything to me because I have learned a lot of things. I mean I have learned how to respect people, how to communicate, teamwork, it is almost everything. Since we were small [young] we have had this in mind. You know we have been playing since we were very small and playing basketball gives us a good relation with other people and to become good friends with people who we don't know. For these four days, I have been with my friends and like the American coach said, 'Be a good friend first and then play basketball.' I love it when you say that. Basketball has made a great difference in my life especially when you're a Muslim and you come to a team of all Christians. There are great differences here in Iraq. There is a great difference between us, but of course we don't feel a difference here [in basketball]. I have a dream, you know? We all have a dream. We want to go to the United States and play basketball. We want to watch a NBA and WNBA game. We want to learn to be the best players in the world. We've lost almost everything here, but we haven't lost our dreams."

### **Discussion – Lessons Learned & Characteristics Gained**

We never return from abroad unaffected. We have met girls and women in Iran, Israel, Iraq, Turkey, Oman, Jordan, Morocco and China who continue to challenge our worldview and confirm our privilege in a world where equity, inclusion and social justice carry very different connotations. For this reason, we will leave you with three ideas that have emerged during our travels. We hope that the "lessons" listed below will challenge each of you to think differently and will also motivate you to use your talents to make a difference.

The first lesson learned is it is not okay to assume that all Middle Eastern women have experienced the same struggles or a similar grand narrative. Although it is true that many girls and women living in the Middle East have been marginalized, silenced, and denied the opportunity to participate in sport,

their stories are unique and their sport experiences vary greatly. Simply put, they are not a homogenous group. The sport structures within each country are very different and support or opposition to female sport is often based on a continuum of cultural, political, and/or religious reasons. For example, some women have been able to use religion as justification to participate in sport (i.e. Iran and the hadiths of Mohammad), while others have been denied sporting opportunities based on a different interpretation of the same religion (i.e. Beaudoins in the deserts of Jordan). Unfortunately, women's participation in sport is often based on male subjectivity and patriarchal societal norms, but it doesn't change the fact that they each have a unique voice.

Second, it is not okay to act as if the terms equality, inclusivity, and social justice have standard definitions, especially for girls and women in the Middle East. Again, not all Middle Eastern women experience sport in the same way, nor do their goals for "justice" or "inclusivity" always align. Even within a country, ideas of equality and justice vary. In the political realm, equality to an Israeli Arab may mean equal citizenship and civil rights, rather than second-class status within their own country. For a Palestinian, however, equality may mean access to the most primary human rights: the right to find work, the right to buy medicine, etc. In sport, "social justice" carries many different meanings for women of the Middle East. In Iran, women have developed their own sport infrastructure that is completely organized and operated by females only. In Israel, after-school programs and recreation centers are often integrated, males and females. Social justice to Israeli females could mean equal access to facilities and equal opportunity to play, while in Iran it quite possibly means the ability to develop their own league with their own rules. Just as the U.S. women's movement of the early 1960s has been considered ethnocentric by many of its critics, it is important not to impose our Western definitions of social justice, inclusivity, and equality upon the girls and women of the Middle East. It just perpetuates the hegemony that currently exists.

Lastly, it is not okay to keep the stories of these strong and courageous women to ourselves. By listening to their stories, we can't help but feel a sense of gratitude towards the women who came before

us and who so bravely pushed for the passage of Title IX. While we have reaped many benefits of Title IX, we now look to the women in the Middle East who are forging their own ways to pursue access to sporting opportunities. We also feel personally responsible to share their stories so that each of you will be motivated by their strength and challenged by their willingness to “risk it all” just to play. It is also our hope that these stories will help you to reflect on your own experiences and how those events have shaped you. As researchers, professors, clinicians, and practitioners, we have the tools to make a difference. How will these stories change the way you invest your talent and time?

## References

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