

Meanings and practices of the physical activity engaged in by Moroccan women in an Islamic urban environment: A quasi-ethnography

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Abstract

Aim: To understand the meanings and practices of the physical activity (PA) engaged in by Moroccan women in an Islamic urban environment.

Design: Quasi-ethnographical study.

Methods: 13 semi-structured interviews and 15 observation sessions of the PA engaged in by women.

Results: The concept of PA fits into the holistic approach of Islam. The social and cultural conditions of those who regularly practise PA are diverse. The community collaborates to overcome difficulties involved with this practice. The flexibility of issues such as gender segregation and clothing, Islam as a stimulus for PA, health as a value, the promotion of a rights and duty-based model for health care user, the community co-creation of the PA offer, and the power of organized civil society could inspire new strategies for the promotion of PA among Muslim women in other contexts.

KEYWORDS

co-creation, empowerment, health promotion, immigrants, islam, muslim people, physical activity, sport, women

1 | INTRODUCTION

The status of women as agents of health par excellence in the Muslim family places them at the top of the pyramid as a model in the promotion of healthy habits and lifestyles (Bermann & Lurbe, 2008; Jafari-Mianaei et al., 2017). The transformative power of women is not only limited to the field of health. Women are also recognized as active agents of change and promoters of social transformation, who are capable of changing both their own lives and that of society as a whole (Sen, 2000). It is, therefore, to be anticipated that the actions of women have an impact on their immediate family environment and on their immediate physical, cultural and social vicinity.

In addition to being recognized as a universal treatment by the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2011), engaging in PA contributes to individuals' emotional well-being, because of its intrinsic effects on mood and the symbolic value that empowerment in the management of one's own health represents (Eime et al., 2013; Fox, 2007). From the social point of view, some studies claim that engaging in PA could be a strategy for the social inclusion and empowerment of disadvantaged individuals and groups (Super et al., 2014; World Health Organization, 2013). In addition, PA provides opportunities to improve individual social capital and presents a model for healthy habits and lifestyle that appeals to individual responsibility in the maintenance and care of health (Abdulwasi et al., 2018).

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1.1 | Background

Numerous authors have considered the desirability of increasing the migrant Muslim women community's participation in physical and sports activities (Dagkas et al., 2011; Lenneis & Pfister, 2017; Snape & Binks, 2008). The need for a certain cultural adaptation, especially with regard to gender segregation and clothing, is identified as one of the factors that condition the type of sports activity immigrant Muslim women may choose to engage in (Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012; Langøien et al., 2017; Miles & Benn, 2016; Schulz et al., 2015). However, how and to what extent this adaptation should be addressed are important questions that still have no unequivocal response (Dagkas et al., 2011), since Islamic culture throughout the world is diverse (Bramon, 2016) and subject to processes of cultural hybridization (Arnold, 2016). On the other hand, the offer of PA in a migratory context often insists on a monolithic and prejudiced conception of Muslim women, ignoring their specific needs (Summers et al., 2018). In general, when it comes to identifying the constrictive elements of PA with regard to these women, the role of religion tends to be overestimated (Lenneis & Pfister, 2017) and the perception of discrimination is underestimated (Kloek et al., 2013).

If the importance of women as promoters of healthy habits and drivers of social change is accepted, the holistic benefit of PA is acknowledged, the universal right to good health is proclaimed and the need for immigrant Muslim women to practise more PA is confirmed, it is then evident that health professionals need to improve the activities promoting PA among Muslim women in migratory contexts.

The general aim of this research study is to analyse qualitatively the meanings and practices existing in the context of PA among women in a Muslim urban environment. The understanding of the relationship between gender, Islamic religiosity and physical activity could inspire actions to promote PA among Muslim women in other settings.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Design

Quasi-ethnography is the most suitable methodology to employ for a study of this kind because, with the minimal amount of time and a meticulous and systematic approach to a specific reality, it combines the rigour of the ethnographic method and the flexibility necessary for the study of a phenomenon that unfolds in various critical environments such as the one examined in this work (Murtagh, 2007).

2.2 | Study participants

Sampling was intentional, using the snowball technique. To meet the inclusion criteria, candidates had to be women, reside in the city of Meknes, be self-proclaimed practitioners of physical activity and

voluntarily agree to participate in the study. It was later deemed necessary to interview the two male instructors who participated in two of the observed scenarios. Initial access to informants and observation units was through people and situations accessible in the first instance to the principal investigator (PI), which in turn led to further contacts and situations to observe. Access to informants also took place by means of a direct approach while they were walking in a park. A total of 13 people were interviewed: 11 women, the descriptions of whom are presented in the results section, and two men.

Access to respondents by means of the snowball technique or direct proposal while doing physical activity did not allow determining the rejection rate of potential respondents since in the first case the PI gained access to respondents through pre-filtering by other respondents. With regard to direct recruitment during walks in the park, the characteristics of the space—an open space—and the practice—in groups—determined that it was only possible to include the number of respondents who agreed to participate in the study, while those who did not demonstrate this by means of response inhibition, but not by explicitly expressing their refusal. One of the volunteers who had offered to participate explicitly declined to act as a respondent when contacted to arrange an appointment for the interview. The woman preferred not to offer any reasons for her refusal.

The sample of observation scenarios was also intentional based on suggestions from the interviewees. Participant observation took place in the female area of a fitness club and specifically during the free activities in a machines room (2) and during a guided gymnastics session (2). We also participated in the dance activities of a charity fund-raising party for women (1) and in free walking activities in one of the city's parks (3). The external observation took place at a municipal swimming pool during swimming lessons for women (1), in a taekwondo club during training sessions for a mixed group of adults (3), and in outdoor gymnastics sessions led by a volunteer in a park in Meknes (3), the *Foret des Jeunes* de Meknes, every morning from Monday to Saturday.

2.3 | Data collection

The study was performed in the city of Meknes, in the region of Meknes-Tafilalet, in Morocco. The subject of study was PA among women in that city.

The data were collected from November 2016 to February 2017 by the PI of the project (first and correspondence author). The techniques used in the data collection were observation with varying degrees of participation, and interviews with significant individuals.

We conducted 13 semi-structured interviews. The subjects covered in the interviews with women engaging in PA were self-assessment of their level of PA, the meanings given to PA, the perceived effects of PA, and a reflection on the factors that are perceived as incentives or obstacles to PA among Moroccan women.

Table 1 allows consulting the structure and script of the interviews. The men interviewed were asked about the same subjects, except for the one referring to self-assessment of the level of PA. The IP conducted the interviews at the location and the time chosen by the interviewees.

All the interviews were audio-recorded, and the content was subsequently transcribed verbatim. Almost all of them took place in French, although some took place in Arabic with the help of a liaison interpreter. In the interviews with an interpreter, only the contents translated into French were transcribed, because they were actually the only contents of the interviewer and the interviewee's interaction. Before the transcription of these audios, a new Arabic native and bilingual translator revised the translation of the interviews and validated it. Prior to publication, all significant verbatim transcripts were translated from French to English by a team of professional translators. Subsequently, a member of the research team proficient in both languages reviewed and validated the translation.

With regard to the observations, no notes were taken during the activity to not intimidate the participants, but immediately after the session observed had concluded, the following details were written on a card: type of activity, date, time and location; description of the space, number and characteristics of participants, the participants' spatial distribution, variations in the spatial distribution throughout the activity, clothing, relationships between the participants, access to the body, general impression of the atmosphere, environment and other data that warranted recording in the investigators' opinion.

Following Mayan (2009) criteria on data saturation, data collection was maintained till the moment when it was considered that the available data provides a new and plausible explanation of the studied phenomenon.

2.4 | Analysis

Thematic content analysis method was conducted. The transcripts of the interviews and the observation notes were analysed in accordance with the objectives of the study. The first level of analysis was concurrent with the data collection and aimed to identify emerging themes to modify the sampling and data collection work. In the second level, the data were segmented and the reporting units were identified and coded using open coding. The categories that emerged were integrated into a higher level of organization based on the properties and dimensions of a single concept. The interpretation of the data sought to establish relationships between different levels of organization of the content, either between categories, between concepts or between categories and concepts.

To ensure the coding's reliability, four qualified researchers identified and codified, in pairs, the minimum units of significance that responded to the objectives of the study. As the analysis by pairs progressed, the four researchers would meet to agree on the significant segments and the coding assigned. The categories that emerged from these meetings were incorporated into a bank of categories that was kept throughout the period of analysis. The meetings also enabled researchers to discuss and establish the relationships between the various elements of the analysis.

2.5 | Ethics

The study protocol was authorized by the local institutional review board of the IRSES SPRINGARAB programme. All the individuals and institutions who participated in the recruitment of informants and in the data collection as informants in this study

TABLE 1 Interviews script and structure

Structure	Script
Formalities and introduction	<p>Researcher introduction</p> <p>Reminder of the objectives of the research (previously explained when signing consent).</p> <p>Checking over with the respondent their acceptance of the terms of the research and reminding them of their rights (confidentiality, anonymity, abandoning the study and the deletion of personal data)</p> <p>(If the interview is not previously arranged: request for and recording of verbal consent under the same terms as written consent)</p>
Personal details	Sex, age, marital status and educational level
Body of the interview	<p>Please could you tell me what you feel your relationship is with physical activity... Why?</p> <p>(if necessary, continue with the question: do you consider yourself an active person, moderately active, sedentary...?)</p> <p>What is physical activity for you? What role does it play in your life?</p> <p>Tell me... how do you feel when you do some physical activity? What do you put those effects down to?</p> <p>We would like to know what stimuli are present in the life of a woman of your characteristics that push them to do physical activity? Why do you feel that these circumstances encourage you to do physical activity?</p> <p>And about obstacles, what circumstances in your life hinder doing physical activity? Why do you feel that these circumstances hinder doing physical activity in your case?</p> <p>(if respondents express difficulty identifying obstacles or difficulties for doing physical activity, items such as family or religion, for example, maybe suggested neutrally for assessment)</p>
Additional remarks	Is there anything else you wish to add on the subject we have been talking about?
Farewell and thank you	Thank you very much for taking part. Your appraisal of the matter will be of great help to us.

agreed to the study protocol in advance and gave their consent to participate in it. In the events involving data collection that could be scheduled, the participants gave their written consent by signing an informed consent form. The spontaneous data collection initiatives which did not permit careful reading of the informed consent document were authorized by an oral recording of the informed consent.

3 | RESULTS

A total of 13 interviews were carried out. The details of the interviews and participants are shown in Table 2.

A total of eight participant observation sessions took place, and seven external observation sessions in the venues described in the methodology. The details of the observation sessions can be seen in Table 3.

The results have been presented by emerging themes and organized into three main groups: *Meanings and habits of PA among women in the area*, *Physical activity, health and well-being* and *Perception of obstacles to and incentives for PA*.

Table 4 presents the analysis matrix with the emerging categories and concepts.

The construction of the topics and subtopics has been elaborated indistinctly incorporating data from both the interviews and the observations. The data from interviews are accompanied by the corresponding verbatim transcripts, while the data from observation are presented in the form of narration of the facts concluded from the observation notes.

3.1 | Meanings and habits of PA among women in the area

There is agreement on recognising the holistic nature of PA, defined as a system in which the physical, social, psychological and spiritual dimensions are identified as interacting to produce overall effects in human beings:

When we finish, we shower, we have breakfast... We don't think about anything. Oh lala... This is mental... well-being. Mental and physical!.

(15)

Muslims always want to help, and I help myself because if I don't come 1 day it puts me in a bad mood. And I help these women who want to do gymnastics.

(13)

The concept of PA among the informants is a broad one that goes beyond simply sport. PA is generally related to movement and encompasses various levels of activity and formality.

The spontaneous activities with a minimum degree of formality include the gymnastics sessions that take place every morning in the public park *Foret des Jeunes*. The gymnastics sessions observed in this park take place in the early morning—between approximately half-past seven and half-past nine - in a small clearing among the pines, at a temperature of between 8°C and 10°C and with no infrastructure other than that voluntarily provided by the instructor, that is: a portable radio cassette player in the middle of the area, some mats for laying on the ground to do the exercises, some thick rough sticks to help strengthen the back, a battered abdominal bench on which those wishing to do extra exercises on their abdominal muscles take turns, a portable drinking fountain and a plastic cup for refreshment of the thirsty, and the branches of the pines which are used as clothes hangers, where outer garments that become bothersome as the body warms up are hung. Beyond the small esplanade in the park where these classes take place, it is possible to see a constant flow of men and women walking or running, alone or in groups, dressed in sportswear or a djellaba. This activity continues until about 10 a.m. After that time, the park is largely empty of people, with only some occasional walkers or a few men who continue doing gymnastics in the areas of the park designed as stations on an urban circuit for PA.

Dance is at an intermediate level of formality. Dance, in the context, observed—a charity fund-raising party for women only—was not the primary objective of the event. Nevertheless, it was an inevitable consequence of it.

We also observed other practices that involve a higher degree of formality and are engaged in for various purposes.

3.2 | Physical activity, health and well-being

The overall effect of PA in people who engage in it is constructed using expressions like *well-being*, *comfort*, *relief* and *satisfaction*. The main contribution to the physical sphere comes with the benefits of PA for the promotion and recovery of health, but there are also acknowledged contributions in terms of improved capacity and stamina when carrying out everyday tasks: "For health, for relaxing from the stress of work" (12).

The psychological dimension is nourished by an enhanced self-image: "I'm not very fat, but I'm fat enough to do a little sport, because people look at you, especially at fat people" (14), and the calming effects and disengagement from the problems and tensions of everyday life that have been associated with PA: "Moving makes me happy. If I move, I feel active. If I don't move, I feel sad and I think about everything bad in my life. If I move, I forget (11).

In the social dimension, PA is accepted as improving the quality and quantity of relationships: "We've got to know all these women [who come to the park to do gymnastics]. We laugh. We have fun... We've gone on outings with all these women in the surroundings of Meknes." (18).

TABLE 2 Interview and participant characteristics

Participant characteristics	Interview characteristics			
	Place	Duration	Language	Presence of non-participants
I1: Married woman, 46-years-old, secondary education	Home	37'	French	No
I2: Single woman, 23-years-old, higher education	Park & Gym	33' (11 + 22)	French	No
I3: Married man, 61-years-old, primary education, volunteer instructor	Park	39'	Arabic	Liaison interpreter
I4: Single woman, 50-years-old, higher education	Park	22'	French	No
I5: Married woman, 55-years-old, higher education	Park	19'	French	Physical activity companions
I6: Married woman, 54-years-old, secondary education).	Park	23'	French	Physical activity companions
I7: Married woman, 50-years-old, higher education)	Home	29'	French	No
I8: Widow woman, 50-years-old, higher education	Park	20'	French	Physical activity companions
I9: Married woman, 55-years-old, higher education	Park	13'	French	Physical activity companions
I10: Married woman, 48-years-old, higher education)	Municipal swimming pool	32'	French	No
I11: Single woman, 26-years-old, higher education	Municipal swimming pool	26	French	No
I12: Married woman, 39-years-old, primary education	Gym	29'	Arabic	Liaison interpreter
I13: Married man, 52-years-old, primary education, taekwondo instructor and gym owner	Gym	21'	Arabic	Liaison interpreter

TABLE 3 Details of observation sessions

Activity	Number of sessions	Type of observation	Approx. average duration of observations
Free activities in a machines room in a fitness club	2	Participant	45'
Guided gymnastics session in a fitness club	2	Participant	45'
Dance activities of a charity fundraising party for women	1	Participant	3 hr
Free walking activities in one of the city's parks	3	Participant	2 hr
Swimming lessons for women	1	External	1 hr
Training sessions for a mixed group of adults in a taekwondo club	3	External	1 hr 30'
Outdoor gymnastics sessions led by a volunteer in a park in Meknes	3	External	2 hr

In the spiritual sphere, PA is seen as an activity closely linked to religious practice: "Even in prayer. It is the gesture of prayer that makes you move even if you don't do sport" (I7), and valued as an

opportunity to connect with nature: Oh lala!!! Even if we have problems, this green in the open-air..." (I5). Some even say that PA is an incentive to take care of others:

TABLE 4 Categories and concepts emerging from the analysis

Category	Grouped concepts	Concepts	
Meanings: Interviewees explain what PA means to them.	Holistic nature of PA: PA has an impact on different dimension of the person		
	Related to movement		
Practices: Diversity in the expression of PA	Beyond simply sport		
	Level of formality	Formal PA: sport in clubs Intermediate level of formality: Dance & parties Informal: PA on the street and at home	
Health and well-being: The effects of PA on the various dimensions of health are identified	Social interclass activities		
	Overall	Promotion and recovery of health	
	Physical sphere	Carrying out everyday tasks	
	Mental and emotional well-being	Calming effects Happiness and good feelings Enhanced self-image	
	Improves quality and quantity of relationships		
	Affects spiritual sphere	Gratitude Connecting with nature Taking care of others Linked to religious practice	
	Obstacles and incentives: elements identified as having the power to encourage or hinder AP	Diversity versus segregation	Mixed activities
		Interaction between men and women	
		Segregated settings	
Men of the family		Grounding attitudes	
Family			Female domain setting Random domain setting Privacy In a natural way Accessing the body to instruct Usual segregated activities Married women's self-demands Good coexistence at home Feel proud Changes in Moroccan society Patriarchal structures remaining Prioritization of family care versus. own needs Value transmission Enjoy family life in a healthy activity
		Equipment and clothing	Indoor PA
			Outdoor PA
		Social and cultural status	Strategies to overcome access difficulties
		Proposals to overcome access difficulties	Low level of requirement for equipment Using public spaces Civil society collaboration Employers' involvement Public Involvement Volunteers' participation

(Continues)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Category	Grouped concepts	Concepts
	Islam	Grounding encouragement Misunderstandings
	Health	Grounding encouragement Role of health professionals Role of the state
		Prophet's recommendations Obligation to take care of the body Gender segregation Negative attitudes towards women's PA Improvement of specific diseases Unexpected discovery Recommendations of health professionals Limits

Abbreviation: PA, physical activity.

[While dancing] The married woman forgets her husband, forgets her children, students forget... and then, you give the best of yourself. For example, you feel like preparing a cake for the children or doing something for other people.

(111)

The observations have shown some of the aspects recounted by the informants, and especially those related to the social and psychological benefits of PA. The general atmosphere during the sessions observed was one of happiness and camaraderie, despite the structural shortcomings observed in some of the scenarios, such as the morning gymnastics session in the *Foret des Jeunes*. Despite the limitations of the venue, the participants' faces are cheerful, the men and women arrive and leave when they want, rest in a corner if they have reached their limit, and greet each other with their eyes before entering or leaving. The gratitude to the volunteer instructor is readily apparent after the session ends with the tone of the farewell—in an Arabic that PI does not understand, and with a universal gesture, or when one of the women leaves the circle of the activity to go to the fountain, fills the cup with water and gives it to the instructor, who has not stopped moving since the class started. While the man drinks, she takes over singing the song that—we assume—are numbers in Arabic, so that everybody keeps up the pace. The participants applaud at the end of the class.

Observations in other less austere scenarios also convey the feeling of sharing a space of happiness, well-being and confidence. At the gym, where the taekwondo classes were observed, most of those involved were young men, aged between twenty and thirty, although there were four young women, none of whom seemed to be older than 30, and one or two older men. The atmosphere before the class started felt relaxed. People obviously knew each other well. They talked and laughed together. During the class, despite the shouts that accompany taekwondo, those involved appeared to be fully engaged in the activity and relaxed and satisfied at the same time. The atmosphere in the fitness room and at the women's party conveyed the same feelings of freedom, lack of inhibition, relaxation, happiness and joy.

3.3 | Perception of obstacles to and incentives for PA

3.3.1 | Diversity versus segregation

In the context studied, segregation is not a strict requirement for engaging in PA, as it was possible to attend both mixed and segregated PA sessions. The segregated sessions were observed in a typically Arab activity—the women's party—and at an event that could be described as Western, the machines and gymnastics sessions at the fitness club. The swimming pool activities are also segregated, and if it is necessary to share spaces, this is organized by giving men and women rights to use them on alternate days. Mixed activities were observed in more economically depressed environments, that is, in the gymnastics session in a public park and taekwondo classes in a small neighbourhood gym. In this context, the occupation of space in the activities in the park expresses the power of women over men. First, the numerical majority of women—around 90% of the participants in the class were women—determines how the space is distributed. The distribution of the space by gender emphasizes its definition as a female domain. Those attending the class are arranged in concentric circles around the instructor, who adopts a fixed position relative to the participants so that some of the latter follow the class while the instructor has his back to them. Men occupy this space. However, the women arrange themselves in different concentric circles based on the order of arrival—always facing the instructor. In turn, the instructor gives instructions to the people in front of him and only occasionally turns around to see how the male participants in the class are following him. The distribution of space in the taekwondo class is more egalitarian, despite the numerical inferiority of women. They remain in groups at the beginning of the training session and during the warm-up activities, but during activities that require movement around the room, the space is occupied by men and women to the same extent. During the training session, the instructor schedules activities for pairs in which one member of the pairs remains fixed and the other moves around him/her, meaning that the class dynamics

requires the formation of mixed pairs who differ widely in terms of age and physique in some cases. The interaction between men and women in this situation is perceived—from the outside—and experienced in a natural way.

As access to bodies by instructors, both the taekwondo coach and the gym instructor correct the men's and women's posture and execution of the exercise in the same way. Access to the body of others for instructive purposes and in the context of PA does not appear to create discomfort on the part of either of those involved.

3.3.2 | The men of the family: an ambivalent influence

Some informants talked about the role of men in the family context as a stimulus or barrier to PA. The opinions are not unanimous, and some said that men encourage PA among women in their family—particularly their wives—because they need to keep them in a good mood and relaxed: “Most husbands want their wives to do sport because when they're at home they want peace” (I7).

Others, however, mentioned the patriarchal structures in which women do not have control over their own life and their exclusive dedication to housework are seen as obstacles to PA, since in this situation the woman's life takes place in a limited and often borrowed space which does not anticipate the existence of the woman's own needs or strategies for independent satisfaction outside the restricted sphere of the home: “It is true that some men just want a woman to look after the house and the children and it doesn't matter if she feels not good” (I8). However, some informants said that Moroccan society is changing, that relations between men and women in the family are becoming more egalitarian, and that men are increasingly accepting more and more responsibilities in terms of care for the family and upbringing of children: “Have you been to the pool? Have you seen how the fathers take their children swimming?” (I5). The people who design activities for women in the swimming pool are well aware of this change in family relations, and approve of and promote it. To that end, they try to involve the husbands in women's sports activities, and do so by means of a closing party for the swimming lessons in which all participants receive trophies, which are presented by the men of the family: “Once they [the women] have learned to swim, we organize a party in which their own husbands give them the trophy. It's very exciting!” (I10).

Some informants said that while not being an obstacle to PA, their husband may determine the type of activity, by obliging them to undertake one that is segregated: “I used to practice taekwondo but since I got married, out of respect for my husband, I practice aerobics. Only girls” (I12).

The family is seen as a key factor in the transmission of PA as a value. The informants say that positive attitudes towards PA on the part of their parents, when they were small, determined their profile as physically active adult women:

Well... before it wasn't easy. It wasn't easy. There were a lot of problems to let a girl do sports. Tradition didn't approve of it. Maybe I've been lucky because my parents have always liked sport—maybe it was an exception—but at the age of four I already knew how to swim and I have always done sport, especially swimming, thanks to my parents, of course.

(I10)

In addition, they say that doing PA as a family in outdoor outings or walks is a good opportunity to enjoy family life while engaging in a healthy activity: “And if I want to go for a walk, I take my son and my husband and we all go for a walk together” (I1).

None of the informants attributed the negative attitudes of some men towards the women's practice of sport as an imposition of Islam. Some of them made it explicit: “There are jealous and selfish husbands, but that doesn't have anything to do with Islam” (I6).

3.3.3 | Equipment and clothing

The clothing of the guests at the women's party was very luxurious and that those attending the fitness club practise gymnastics with specific equipment that is as modern as that which could currently be used in any European capital. Most women who go to the gymnastics sessions at the *Foret des Jeunes* wear sportswear, albeit less modern and expensive than that worn at the fitness club. From the waist down they wear loose trousers. From the waist up, they wear tracksuit jackets, a parka or an anorak. However, some women do gymnastics wearing a djellaba. In this case, beneath the djellaba, they wear long trousers, and outside the trousers, socks halfway up the leg. As for footwear, most of the women wear sports shoes, some wear lace-up shoes and some do gymnastics with closed slippers that are worn at home. Most women wear the Islamic headscarf, although some wear a cap that does not entirely cover their hair, others cover it with the hood of their tracksuit, while a few—two or three every day—do not wear any head covering.

In the taekwondo classes, everyone wears garments for that sport. This apparel has no apparent differences between men and women. Only one of the women wears street clothing: a long and loose garment above the waist to mid-thigh level, and loose knitted trousers below the waist. The same woman also wears a headscarf. The others do not.

3.3.4 | Social and cultural status

Belonging to the poorest social strata does not constitute an obstacle to engaging in PA. In this case, people use public collaboration and public spaces, such as walking in public spaces in the city and the gymnastics sessions in the *Foret des Jeunes*.

Although Arabic is always present, its use in the gymnastics sessions at the fitness club is limited. In this context, the classes are in

French and almost all participants are bilingual in French and Arabic, as are those attending the women's party. However, at the more modest venues—the gym, the municipal swimming pool and the taekwondo club—the activities are conducted exclusively in Arabic, and very few of the women also speak French.

The owner of the taekwondo club emphasizes the personal effort involved in maintaining affordable prices so that payment of fees is not a barrier to sport: "I have to make the effort to pay the monitors' salaries and set a price that these people can afford. I'm the one who encourages them to do sport!" (I13).

One of the informants suggested that the financial difficulties involved in doing sports activities could be overcome by the provision of public sports facilities with free access and the participation of volunteers as instructors in these facilities: "I'd like society to give us a place like this [referring to the swimming pool] so that we can teach women how to swim without paying. It's my dream! So all the women would come, and well... would be able to swim" (I10).

3.3.5 | Islam

All informants stated that Religion encourages PA. The obligation to care for the body advocated by Islam, and the Prophet's recommendations on PA are the arguments with which Islam is considered an encouragement for PA:

The prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, told us to do sport. He, by his example, told us that we should practice swimming, horseback riding and archery. We have to take care of ourselves. God has given us the body and it is a precious donation. We must take care of our bodies and we must protect them as best we can and it is through sport that we can protect them. (I11)

The informants did not identify any limitations on PA in Islam. Gender segregation is accepted as not an imposition of Islam: "In fact, Islam here is a tolerant Islam that lets us do whatever we want. Don't you see those veiled girls playing football with that boy? [in reference to a part of the park where young people are playing football]" (I6), provided that care is taken to preserve the privacy of men and women in mixed activities: "Especially married women. We must ensure their privacy and treat men and women with respect" (I2).

3.3.6 | Health

Health has been recognized as the main factor encouraging PA. Apart from the well-being that the informants attribute to PA, expectations for the improvement of specific diseases such as diabetes, obesity and depression are a major motivation for engaging in PA. This motivation is encouraged by the recommendations of health professionals on PA as treatment for some illnesses: "I'm diabetic

and the doctor told me, «I won't give you anything. Just walk»" (I4). In addition, in some cases, starting physical activity is experienced as a discovery of well-being: "Not like before... I used to think... what these people are talking about? [people who do sport] and now I feel it" [well-being] (I4).

According to the informants, the role of health professionals is limited to recommending PA: "Very good, very good! Doctors advise patients to be active and play sports, and also if we need it, they come to the club to talk about health issues" (I7), and none of them call for initiatives promoted and supported by professionals in health institutions. They say that the provision of public spaces for PA and mass awareness-raising of its benefits are sufficient: "Don't you see what a such beautiful parks the government gives us for sport? Do you think it's not enough?" (I8).

4 | DISCUSSION

The physical activities engaged in by Moroccan Muslim women are varied and involve different levels of formality. The varied social and cultural status of those engaging in PA regularly is apparent, as is collaboration among the community to overcome difficulties.

Improved health is seen as a stimulus for PA, which is associated with overall well-being—physical, psychological, social and spiritual.

Although there has been no debate on health as a motivation for PA, the role of professionals and institutions in this area is perceived as limited to advice on health and the provision of multi-purpose public spaces, which can also be used for PA. Given the importance of PA in the maintenance and care of health (World Health Organization, 2011) and the recognition of health as a fundamental human right (Royaume du Maroc. Ministère de la Santé, 2012), the Moroccan health system should be more actively involved in initiatives to promote PA and provide PA sessions promoted and maintained by healthcare institutions and professionals, as some volunteers have been doing. The users must understand that this is a responsibility of the health system and must, therefore, be demanded. Likewise, the encouragement to become a user with rights and responsibilities should also take place in a migration context (Rubio-Rico, 2014).

References to physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being associated with the practice of PA are consistent with the mind-body connection recognized in Islam (Sanjotis, 2018). Nurses should use this idea to promote the practice of PA among Muslim women. This recommendation gains even more weight with the knowledge that health behaviours have been shown to be influenced by religious behaviours (Hassan, 2015). Thus, the fact that physical activity fits into the holistic approach of Islam can help strengthen Muslim people's commitment to caring for their bodies and caring for their health while at the same time contributing to improved spiritual well-being.

The passivity of the system in terms of providing and supporting PA sessions has forced people to organize themselves. Once the population—women in this case—understood that action had to be taken, they took the decision to do so and organized themselves to

overcome the obstacles that prevent them from accessing it. They have obviously succeeded. This has had a twofold benefit. First, there is the benefit involved in engaging in PA itself. Second, it has been possible for them to experience the ability to successfully manage important aspects of their own lives.

With regard to family influence on the sporting activities of Muslim women, our results fully coincide with those of several previous studies which assert that this influence can either encourage or discourage PA (Kay, 2006; Nasri, 2014). Kay (2006) reports that it is the mother's opinion that most determine the attitudes of their daughters in this regard, which is why it is important to promote PA among the female adult population.

The woman who practices PA is an empowered woman in terms of health care, however, it has been noted that the family and the men of the family could condition this practice. This apparent contradiction could be justified by the fact that, although the current Moroccan family code intends to respond to the needs of a society that is considered "modern," the perception of marriage as the union of a man who is a provider and a woman who is a domestic caregiver is still widespread, which perpetuates a notion of inequality between the couple (Carvalho, 2020).

That Muslim women point to family obligations as a reason for abandoning or declining to take part in PA is well documented in the literature (Cross-Bardell et al., 2015; Miles & Benn, 2016; Nasri, 2014). However, as Cross-Bardell et al. have also suggested (Cross-Bardell et al., 2015) the informants in our study propose that an alternative is to do sports together as a family because and being a way to look after family members it affords an opportunity to enjoy a leisure activity that includes everyone. In addition, invite other family members—including men—to become actively involved in women's sport activities, as is done in swimming courses, could be a good way to provide social and cultural safety to women who want to get family and Community approval of their PA practices.

As regards the role that men play in relation to PA, the results of this study are consistent with those of Nasri (Nasri, 2014) in the study on sport among Maghrebi Muslim women. That study argues that the role of male relatives may be both a stimulus and a hindrance and is consistent with our informants' statements in that it recognizes health as an important stimulus for PA. For this reason, it makes more sense to recommend initiatives for the promotion of PA among Moroccan women to be based on expectations of improved health rather than any other reasons, since health offers a socio-cultural validation of PA.

Because of the influence of socio-historical variables on acculturation processes, the results of this study cannot be transferred directly from the urban Muslim context to the migratory context (Viruell-Fuentes et al., 2012). However, this study may be useful in encouraging PA among Maghrebi Muslim women in the context of migration. In this context, the starting point is often the barriers that affect Maghrebi Muslim women (Langøien et al., 2017; Valls de la Torre, 2013). Segregation as a prerequisite and restrictions on clothing fall between these barriers. These factors are not completely determinant and can be adapted to the specific nature

of the environment and the practitioners. A good way to adapt PA offer to the conditions of the participants would be to do so through co-creation by means of community action, which would provide a means of examining the needs of the target community and of negotiating a response to them (Bruner & Chad, 2013; El Masri et al., 2019; Snape & Binks, 2008).

The range of practices identified the determination with which women confront their problems, and the originality of the solutions proposed may serve as an inspiration and a model for advocating Muslim women's empowerment in the management of personal, family and community health.

The triangulation of data sources has proven to be a valid strategy of rigour. The observations have corroborated and expanded the data obtained through interviews, especially in terms of the psychological and social well-being provided by the PA. Moreover, its contribution has been crucial to illustrate the variety of PA practices and strategies for overcoming access difficulties, and to discover mixed practice spaces of female dominance.

The experience of the PI in investigating issues related to Islam and health facilitated entry into the field and data collection. However, despite the researcher's familiarity with the subject matter, the great availability and willingness to cooperate shown by the participants towards a stranger surprised and even moved the PI. Moreover, remaining in the field for almost 4 months naturally led to the creation of affective bonds and gratitude between the PI and some participants. The researchers considered that this must influence the design of the study since failure to do so could lead to an emotional bias that might threaten the objectivity of the investigation. Hence, to keep a critical outlook on the study objective, a double pair analysis with subsequent discussion and consensus sessions among researchers was proposed.

The main contribution of this work consists in providing an alternative image of the PA practice of Muslim women which would be useful in challenging misunderstandings and inspiring more efficient actions to promote PA. Mainstream stereotypes present Muslim women as repressed and subordinate to their husbands (Bagley & Abubaker, 2017), and Islam as an obstacle to the practice of sport (Rozaitul et al., 2017). As a personal decision motivated by expectations of improving lives, the PA studied in this project is an example of empowerment in the management of health and well-being among Moroccan women in an Islamic urban environment.

4.1 | Potential study implications

Promoting physical activity as an integral health promotion strategy comes under the responsibilities of nursing (Ličen & Plazar, 2019). Low levels of physical activity among Muslim women in contexts of cultural diversity demonstrate the need to improve these strategies to reach levels similar to those practised by the rest of the population (Dagkas et al., 2011; Lenneis & Pfister, 2017; Snape & Binks, 2008). Among the causes of below-optimal performance of the promotion of physical activity among Muslim women, ignorance of the cultural and religious

influence of Islam in the practice of physical activity by women is pointed out, and even the survival of some prejudices that block or determine health promotion actions (Kloek et al., 2013; Leneis & Pfister, 2017; Summers et al., 2018.). A thorough understanding of the meanings and practices of physical activity by Muslim women could provide nurses with inspiring elements to improve the efficacy of and how actions to promote physical activity among this group fit in and, consequently, their satisfaction and participation in these activities. It is, therefore, necessary that nurses should be flexible in planning activities to promote physical activity for these women, avoid imagining their a priori limitations, include them in the design of activities and acknowledge the validity of their contributions. In the future, it would be interesting to assess the effectiveness of incorporating these principles into campaigns to promote physical activity among Muslim women in contexts different from those of the study.

4.2 | Study limitations

The use of French as the language for the interviews determined the profile of the informants, who had to be bilingual apart from the few occasions when an interpreter was available. This led to a sampling bias with an overrepresentation of women with a high level of education, to the detriment of those with less education. However, this aspect may be offset by the observations, which took place in all types of environments.

The relocation of transcription and analysis procedures, the coding of results by independent groups and consensus meetings among researchers, greatly lengthened the data analysis process, and so participants were not given the opportunity to review the contents thereof. It cannot be ruled out that returning the data and the analysis to the respondents might have enabled repairing any existing errors and contributed new, useful insights to the research. Therefore, this should be considered a limitation of the study. As a strategy for improving subsequent research of similar characteristics, we suggest streamlining the analysis and results processes and extending the presence of the researcher in the field, at least until the end of these procedures.

Finally, the deferred record of observations, though not strictly a limitation, calls for debate on the benefits and drawbacks of note-taking during observations, or what amounts to the same, assessing the pre-eminence of the reliability of the data collected in respect of the potential interference caused by the presence of the researcher in the field.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

The flexibility of issues such as gender segregation and clothing, Islam as a stimulus for PA, health as a value, the promotion of a rights and duty-based model for healthcare user, the community co-creation of the PA offer, and the power of organized civil society could inspire new strategies for the promotion of PA among Muslim women in other contexts. [Correction added on 19 March 2021 after

online publication: The preceding sentence was incomplete and has been corrected in this version.]

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Lourdes Rubio-Rico, Inmaculada de Molina-Fernández, Isabel Font-Jiménez and Alba Roca-Biosca, as authors of this paper, certify that we have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

LR-R designed the study and performed the fieldwork. All authors analysed the data and contributed substantially to the final version of the manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data set generated during the study is not publicly available as such opportunity was not stipulated in the study protocol.

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