



### **BREAKING THE WAVES AND STEREOTYPES: FEMALE SURFING AS NOT ONLY SPORT BUT SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND INSULT TO CULTURES**

Abstract – The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the theoretical background for phenomena occurring in modern female surfing. It describes the barriers (not only religious or cultural) encountered by women wishing to surf today, which we know from the media. Female surfers not only break the waves but also many socio-cultural barriers and stereotypes. We characterize barriers that can also be found in regions where surfing is treated as a national good or as a good way for healthy lifestyle.

Keywords: surfing; women in sport; cultural barriers in sport; Islam; sport.

### **ROMPENDO AS ONDAS E OS ESTEREÓTIPOS: O SURF FEMININO NÃO É APENAS ESPORTE, MAS MOVIMENTO SOCIAL E INSULTO ÀS CULTURAS**

Resumo - O objetivo deste artigo é demonstrar os fundamentos teóricos dos fenômenos que ocorrem no surf feminino moderno. Ele descreve as barreiras (não apenas religiosas ou culturais) encontradas pelas mulheres que desejam surfar hoje, as quais conhecemos da mídia. As surfistas não apenas quebram as ondas, mas também muitas barreiras e estereótipos socioculturais. Nós caracterizamos barreiras que também podem ser encontradas em regiões onde o surf é tratado como um bem nacional ou como um bom caminho para um estilo de vida saudável.

Palavras-chave: surfe; mulheres no esporte; barreiras culturais no esporte; Islã; esporte.

### **ROMPIENDO LAS OLAS Y LOS ESTEREOTIPOS: EL SURF FEMENINO NO ES SOLO UN DEPORTE, SINO UN MOVIMIENTO SOCIAL Y UN INSULTO A LAS CULTURAS**

Resumen - El objetivo de este artículo es demostrar los fundamentos teóricos de los fenómenos que ocurren en el surf femenino moderno. Describe las barreras (no solo religiosas o culturales) que enfrentan las mujeres que desean surfear hoy, lo que sabemos por los medios de comunicación. Los surfistas no solo rompen las olas, sino también muchas barreras y estereotipos socioculturales. Caracterizamos las barreras que también se pueden encontrar en las regiones donde el surf es tratado como un activo nacional o un estilo de vida saludable.

Palabras-clave: surf; mujeres en el deporte; barreras culturales en el deporte; Islam; deporte.

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## **Introduction**

Surfing and surfing tourism are a rapidly growing sector. Surf tourism has also seen an increase in women's activity<sup>1</sup>. Surfing is seen as a way to overcome social and religious barriers related to gender<sup>2</sup>. Non-profit sporting organizations for girls and women from coastal communities are increasingly enabling safe places to surfing, considering that this male-dominated water sport can contribute to women's empowerment on many social issues<sup>3,4</sup>. Unfortunately, in many cultures, women on surfboards are still considered a provocation. The aim of this manuscript is to show the theoretical background for phenomena occurring in modern female surfing. It describes the barriers (not only religious or cultural) encountered by women wishing to surf today, which we know from the media.

## **Problematic development of women's surfing in areas culturally different from the Western civilization circle**

Moroccan beaches (although not yet discovered by many surfers) have very good conditions for surfing. Agadir Open competition has never been open to women during its several-year history. Recently, the situation of female surfers in Morocco is starting to change slightly for the better – they were allowed to take part in this sporting event. In addition, surfing tourism has developed dynamically in the Agadir region. Agadir Open competitors (7 women) emphasize that other athletes are very surprised when they ask them about their country of origin – there is a common opinion that in Morocco there are no female surfers at all. The female surfers, however, believe that with the support of sponsors they could compete internationally. Moroccan surfers, for example El Gardoum, say in interviews that Moroccan families usually have a very negative attitude towards this sport, which they associate primarily with drugs such as alcohol and the company of hippie men or crime. Of course, the problem is also the issue of too close-fitting surfing outfits. The fact that surfing women are admired by men on the beach is also unwelcome. For Moroccan families, letting daughters practice sport – especially something as modern for them as surfing – is a big, problematic challenge. El Gardoum adds that it is very difficult for girls to surf because of religion. She would like more women and girls in her country to practice this sport. She hopes that the negative stereotypes about this sport will disappear in the future<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, in some religions, water has the power to cleanse man

of sin. Therefore, in some cultures (for example in Africa) everything that is bad is believed to stay in this water. Therefore, water sports (e.g. surfing) are not associated positively with some African residents (many beliefs in African cultures are the result of mixing traditional African religions with Christianity)<sup>6</sup>. In Africa, an additional problem is thinking that surfing was for many years only for "white" people. A good example of fighting for freedom in African sport is Suthu Makiwane – the only black female surfer in South Africa.

Entering adulthood, Sabah Abu Ghanim is one of the few surfers living in Gaza. In childhood, her dad taught her surfing. At the time, this situation was still reasonably accepted by the local community. Now, however, the surroundings believe that Sabah is already an adult, she will soon marry and her husband will decide about her future, and above all she should take care of the house/family and not play on the beach, which they believe is an unnecessary waste of time – only fun and recreation. Sabah has never left Gaza, although she dreams of traveling to meet athletes from surfing subcultures and improve her sports technique. Sabah said in media: "I wish I could go back to being a child. That's when I felt most free – surfing"<sup>7</sup>.

Scientific literature has analysed the impact of Islam on women's participation in sports, but researchers do not agree on the nature of this impact. Old traditions say that Muhammad raced with his wife Aisha and encouraged parents to teach their children swimming, horseback riding and archery so in early Islam there was a positive attitude towards sports<sup>8</sup>. Physical activity and sport can also be seen as important because Islam emphasizes the importance of being in good physical condition in case of war. Today, Islam does not prohibit women to practicing sport directly, but it imposes huge restrictions on their clothing and behavior. The problem is that Muslims themselves interpret religious messages differently, which translates into the formal participation of women in sports<sup>9</sup>. Despite the fact that Islam encourages Muslims to practice sport, there are low participation rates among Muslim women and girls in Muslim countries. The main problem is the use of the uncomfortable veil or the necessity of gender segregation. The consequences are that Muslim women have to do physical activities at home, or in gender-segregated places/beaches. The next problem is that according to Islam teachings, women should not do sport movements which could be sexually exciting for men who watched them. Women can create *fitna* (which means temptation) by participating in sport

activities where men can watch them<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, surfing cannot be seen well because is extreme sport. In Islam, extreme sports are not seen well because they are harmful to the body and health. One of the main tasks of Muslim is to take care of the life offered to him, and not to expose it to danger. That's why recently there have been incidents that Islamic police segregated men and women at popular ski resorts to stop immorality in Iran (because skiing is also seen as extreme and provocative sport).

The woman who pushes cultural boundaries in India is Ishita Malaviya – the first professional surfing athlete in the history of India, currently running surfing schools for girls in this country. For her, surfing is not only a sport, but above all a lifestyle. Malaviya points out that there are many cultural (not necessarily religious) barriers in India for women who are not allowed to surf. Among other things, parents of girls are afraid that their daughter's skin from the sun will get even darker – skin color is a big problem, because it's dark shade is not considered beautiful in this culture. In western countries, tan is admiring, but in India it may suddenly turn out that a woman is too tanned to be an attractive wife candidate<sup>11</sup>.

Today, modern Muslim surfers can practice surfing and swimming in burkini. Burkini combines a bikini with a hijab and covers the hair without hindering the women's movements while swimming. It consists of two parts: long leggings and a long sleeve blouse combined with a headgear. The only body parts that remain uncovered are the face, hands and feet. This swimsuit is made of polyester, so it dries quickly. Both the name of burkini and the look of the outfit were created entirely by a Muslim woman, born in Lebanon and living in Australia, Aheda Zanetti. According to the swimwear originator, in Australia sports and swimming are an important part of life from an early age, and she did not want anyone to lose the opportunity to practice it. When she tried to find out if there was something suitable for a young Muslim woman, she found nothing like that. The success of the Lebanese costume designer in the new edition encouraged so much to imitate the burkini that a veilkini was created in North America in 2006. The name was created by combining the word veil with the word bikini. Both burkini and the veilkini have evolved over the years. It would seem that both outfits are almost identical in form, as they consist of elements necessary in a Muslim wardrobe. However, subtle differences in fit, printout or colouring mean a lot to female consumers. Sports outfits for exercise have helped Muslims to engage in a healthy lifestyle. They were also given another

opportunity to present fashion trends and show ingenuity in the selection of sportswear elements<sup>12</sup>.

### **When not only distant cultures are a problem – the example of silver surfers in Western countries**

The number of older athletes is increasing with the aging of populations across the developed world. Contemporary seniors are not content only with not very demanding Nordic walking, swimming, or dancing, but they are choosing increasingly demanding disciplines in terms of endurance and technology, such as surfing or participation in a marathon. According to Pfister, sport is an area in which masculinity and youth along with their achievements are celebrated and rewarded<sup>13</sup>. Thus, ageing women face a double barrier when they wish to participate in a competitive sport. Age can be perceived by society as a big barrier for women who are interested in surfing, long-distance running or climbing. As indicated by Wheaton, images of surfing in Western culture usually reflect the fascination of consumer culture with youth, while reinforcing the myth that participants are reckless risk-seeking hedonists<sup>14</sup>. This picture, however, is questioned by the growing number of senior recreational surfers, both men and women. According to Wheaton, recreational surfing in the UK plays an important role in the life and identity of older surfers (called silver surfers) in the aging process<sup>14</sup>. Surfing is used as a way to extend middle age and in the process of negotiating the fear of aging. Tulle observes the same phenomena in contemporary older runners<sup>15,16</sup>. The oldest female surfer in Europe is Gwyn Haslock – 71-year-old woman known in media as the ‘Godmother of Surf’. Haslock was the very first British competitive female surfer back in the 1960s, and still makes sure to hit the beach at least three times a week. She represented Great Britain in competitions that had never before featured female participants. She said in media that she is more than happy to inspire other surfers of all ages to try the sport.

However, young female surfers were also banned from taking part in competition for big wave surfers (Mavericks in California). Women didn’t accept this ban and this situation was called as fight for gender equality in one of the most dangerous sport in the world. Female surfers fought the stereotype of a slim blonde with a board at hand that has no strength to fight on an equal level with men.

### **Gender equality, stereotypes, and social inequality – the example of surfing in Brazil**

In 2018, World Surf League (WSL) announced equal pay for men and women in all League events, reinforcing the respect and appreciation for female athletes who struggle to remain in a male-dominated sport<sup>17</sup>. The Brazilian Surfing Confederation (CBSurf) also caught this wave and in 2019, women gained the opportunity to have more financial support from competing. However, although Brazil has gained visibility on the World Tour in the last decade with the male surfers, known as ‘Brazilian Storm’, the women still have to deal with many barriers to start or stay in competitive surfing.

Professional female surfing has a different reality from the men’s, where even, one of the greatest reference of the sport, Silvana Lima (vice world champion in 2008 and 2009), remained in the sport with a few or without sponsorship while competing in the World Championship Tour (WCT). According to Knijnik, Horton and Cruz<sup>18</sup>, sponsorship in the Brazilian surfing is a very controversial issue, mainly because the sport is yet “under-represented in and explored by the media, which means sponsorship money does not follow the sport”, at least not for some women (p.1179)<sup>18</sup>. The media is the main producer in the construction of the athlete’s image, including the ‘embodiment of racialized and gendered sporting bodies’ and, therefore affecting who gets the sponsorships<sup>18,19</sup>.

Smith and Bissell<sup>20</sup> points that the attributes that marks traditional gender representation, like attractiveness, emotionality, femininity, and heterosexuality, emphasized by the media coverage of female athletes could have the effect on the viewers that these athletes are more noted by those characteristics than by their athleticism<sup>20</sup>. According to Booth<sup>21</sup> “the lines between athleticism, sexuality and eroticism are extremely fine and even finer in the context of a male-dominated culture where any presentation of the female body as a sexual object merely reinforces negative stereotypes of women (p. 102)”. As in others western cultures, the Brazilian media promotes the stereotype of the female in action sports as a young, white, heterosexual, athletic femininity, with ‘other’ women remaining largely invisible<sup>22</sup>.

According IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), in Brazil 56% of the population self-declare as non-white and 26% are women and Brazilian coastline has an extension over seven thousand kilometers, making surfing one of the most popular sports practice<sup>23</sup>. If these numbers are significant, where are these athletes in the surfing

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elite, overall black women? A former surfer and journalist, Érica Prado said in media: “There is no black women in the world elite. The surf universe is a reflection of our racist society and there is no equity when it is about black and northeast surfers”<sup>24</sup>. This illustrates another issue in Brazil, the social inequality. The south and southeast are the wealthiest regions and where the majority of the population is white (74,1% and 51% respectively, according IBGE)<sup>23</sup>. In these regions, the most prestigious championships take place, and athletes from the Northeast have to travel to compete and try to gain visibility to attract possible sponsors. But the travel distance is not the only barrier for female surfer, as it is extremely difficult for women outside the south or southeast region and that do not fit the ‘standardized femininity’ stereotype to get sponsorships and remain exclusively being an athlete.

In her research, Wheaton<sup>25</sup> also points out the difficulty of aspiring athletes who do not fit the ‘blonde image’ of becoming professional surfers. And an important factor is the low media coverage of these aspiring athletes, which is vital for them to get sponsorships. Often these women are sidelined by the surf industry, even with sometimes a better result or performance<sup>25</sup>. When ask about her difficulty of getting a sponsorship, Silvana Lima (a northeast surfer from Ceará) said in media

I find myself asking God: why have I been through all this? Why do I score a 10 in Australia (Gold Coast) and nothing happens? And I know I only go on because I am tough, my life has never been easy. I see the support that men have with big sponsors. It is such a good structure that they only think about surfing, improving their technique. I have to think about the credit card bill that will arrive at the end of the month and how I am going to buy the plane tickets for the next event, but I had bigger concerns, I already woke up worried because I had nothing to eat before going to school. I know how to fight<sup>26</sup>.

As pointed by Knijnik, Horton and Cruz<sup>18</sup>, there are intersections in the surf and the beach in Brazil as socially class, race, and gender, just as is the wider society. According to the authors: “[...] female surfers are still stuck in a web of body and identity that is a central element of the dominant masculine hegemony that pervades Brazilian society (p.1180)”<sup>18</sup>. This male hegemony also prevailed in the competitions, as the

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women are left aside in the events and surfing in the worst sea conditions, interfering in their performance. In Brazilian female surfing there was also a 4-year gap without regular championships in the country. This made Wiggolly Dantas, a male elite surfer to create a championship in 2015 exclusive for women called Brazilian Championship of Female Surf. This event became very prestigious and gathers aspiring surfers from ages of 10 to 16 years old, pro-junior and professional athletes; and also amateurs and longboarders. The 2019 event reunited more than 130 girls and women on the competition.

Dantas's sister, Suelen Naraísa, is also a professional surfer and 2 times national champion (2009 and 2010). Like other black women in Brazilian surf, Suelen is dedicated to the sport and teaches children and adults, especially girls and women, how to catch the first waves. Brother and sister, along with the support of the rest of the family have an important role in Ubatuba-SP city and region, and especially in Brazilian female surfing. Along with that, other black and northeast surfers and especially former surfers also became supporters of the cause. In November of 2019 in Rio de Janeiro happened the first National Meeting of Black and Northeast Females Surfers. The event gathered professional and amateurs surfers to discuss feminism, racism, female body, and surfing. Nuala Costa talked about her 22-year career in surfing:

There are two battles to be fought: for being a woman, men put themselves in a superior position; and for being black, where things are much more difficult and you have to prove that you are good. I believe that this event served to strengthen us and I hope that talking about my surfing history have encouraged other women<sup>24</sup>.

Even though there are still many barriers for Brazilian surfers, the new generation of athletes can count on the effort and support of former surfers, non-profit organizations, volunteers and surf enthusiasts who are developing women's surfing from inspiring new athletes to the organization of events and awareness of the issues surrounding the sport.

## Summary

As was shown in this manuscript, despite the fact that surfing is a sport equated with freedom, unfortunately for some people in the world this freedom ends on the shore. Modern women, both young and old, face a number of barriers when they want to surf.

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This is not only in remote culturally different areas, but also in Europe or North and South America. Today's surfing icons change the course of history. Thanks to them and other sports and voluntary organizations, surfing in the world today is becoming increasingly accessible in different socio-cultural spheres.

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