

# Body and Sartorial Paradox in Physical Education: A New Look at the Gender Interaction and Co-Educational System in Physical Education Class

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## Abstract

Since the Tunisian Revolution of 2010, two views (modernism and conservatism) conduct two opposite social projects for the Tunisian population, which affect, in first order, the school from primary to secondary level. The Tunisian educational system is based on co-education, contradicting the country's conservatism culture. The religious dress (veil/hijab) is accepted and tolerated in schools. Physical education, as an educational discipline, had to adapt to these changes, especially to the religion dress and gender interaction. The aim of this paper is to study, through the representations of physical education's (PE) teachers, the paradoxes observed between physical practice and religious dress (veil/Hijab) and the management of the co-educational system in PE classes. This is based on the opinion which indicates that this matter requires the student's body and physical ability to be independent from their gender, dress or motor skills. The results show a difference in opinion between females and male teachers regarding gender interaction and religious dress.

**Keywords:** body, co-education system, gender interaction, physical education

## 1. Introduction

Since the past century, the political sphere in Tunisia has been constructed by two large movements with very different ideological orientations (modernism and conservatism). One tends towards development, renovation, and progress, the other towards religion conservatism. The latter is represented by the fundamentalist movement that, takes up the torch of the old 'Zitounian conservatism' (1) of the colonial era, which opposed modern Sadikians (2) (Charfi, 1998, p. 38). Slogans are directed towards opposing the emancipation of women to the modernization of society, favoring the attachment to the Arab identity and demanding cultural shutdown. In a society representing a complete democratic transition following the January 2011 revolution, the promulgation of a new constitution, and the emergence of the 2nd republic with an economic and social crisis, schools are not spared.

In this line, the school institution is of interest to all those who aspire to political power because a school can be a space of influence, for fundamentalists, in order to bring back Tunisians to identity it has lost since the "Era of Bourguiba." Modernists, on the other hand, want to reform the school for more openness and autonomy in order to train the spirits for a true democracy, in which individual freedoms and tolerance will be inculcated from the young age.

Two views of the world and of the individual's place in society have been looking for co-habitation for 11 years, based on concessions that are difficult to reconcile, since they correspond to two diametrically opposing social projects. All these conditions have delayed the reforms that were to take place and affect the school institution.

### *1.1 Socio-Historical Preliminary to Co-Educational System in Tunisia*

Referring to "Souad Chater"(3), the beginnings of social mix can be linked to the arrival of the European population, which has provided a glimpse in the new lifestyle for the country. This was initiated with the political improvement of "Bourguiba" and based on the emancipation of women, which was finalized through the announcement of the Code of Personal Status (CSP), in order to destroy traditional social structures. It follows, then, the signing of the international conventions by Tunisia (Law of 4 November 1958), which aim to guarantee

'equal opportunities' and eliminate all types of discriminations against women. The reformist spirit has permeated all sectors, especially in education, which was open to all Tunisians without distinction between girls and boys. Co-educational system was opted immediately in primary, secondary, and higher education.

### *1.2 Co-Educational System in Physical Education (PE) and Gender Interaction*

At present and for some educational currents, the co-educational system is calling into question in other educational disciplines (especially French and English) because boys present relative failure compared to girls. Along the same lines, scientific research in education science and psychology are, at present, contradicting on this subject. In physical education (PE), the emphasis on the male model regarding what is taught characterizes the teaching process, focusing on what students 'need to learn,' while other educational currents continue to preserve co-education, teaching both sexes to know each other, to accept each other, and be prepared to live with each other. The school has to deal with the problem of stereotypes who question the co-educational system, and some teachers opt for separation between boys and girls in class, with a view to ensure best acquisition of knowledge for boys and girls (Verscheure et al., 2014).

Yet, the relationships between boys and girls are structured in the school, where social roles are established and strengthened. Lachhab (2012) indicates that teaching PE contributes towards the consolidation of gender interaction. This fact is manifested in the expression of male domination as being natural. It also reveals the model of reproduction and maintenance of the hierarchical order between the sexes, which remains the one of patriarchal societies, especially Tunisian society (Hamdi et al., 2017).

In retrospect, taking these genetic and cultural differences into consideration, develop them while being demanding in acquiring the skills of girls and boys. The emergence of these skills may be different for a majority of girls and boys but of equal value. Hence, the adoption of a differentiated pedagogy is based on the same educational content for both girls and boys but not necessarily with the same situations of learning (Vinson & Elandoulsi, 2014). It advocates treating gender interaction as a heterogeneity to manage and to behave fairly, aimed for a true equalization of knowledge in the future.

Bréau and Lentillon-Kaestner (2017) present the concept of gender interaction as a system of gender norms that establishes social and psychological differentiation; this system gives rise to a hierarchy of gender, based on differentiation on biological and natural foundations in order to establish a symbolic legitimacy of male superiority. This system of gender norms translates to gender stereotypes that dictate our conduct in everyday life and especially in school life.

State policies try to adopt this concept for the construction of equality and the development of laws. Lachhab (2008) signals that the co-educational system has shown a remarkable growth in different sectors (media, politics, social), especially in school; it describes multiple realities, and this concept characterizes spaces where genders evolve and interaction between boys and girls take place.

Verscheure et al. (2014) explain that the main concern of teachers of PE is much more towards acquisition of motors skills by students than concerns regarding the social values. It is, therefore, not surprising that the thinking of the teachers of PE reveals a constant contradiction between the values of justice, fairness, objectivity, and reliability. They put forward many contingencies of an evolution judgment with students, which means students who are physically stronger are favored by teachers.

Caroll and Hollinshead (2017) affirm that the co-educational system, especially in PE, takes an important place in school, creates an interaction between boys and girls, helps them discover and recognize each other, and build identity. Additionally, co-education will create a positive influence on for both sexes on each other, with a collaboration of complementarity. The school co-educational system is the expression of progress in legal, political, and social equality between the sexes. Flintoff (2017) states that co-educational system is based on gender interaction, signifying a guarantee of equal rights for individuals, regardless of their gender.

The organization of classes of PE in Tunisia use, in the majority, the co-educational system; in some cases, the separation mode between girls and boys is incorporated. These different forms of organization are interesting in application, as these accommodations are very good models of behavior and thinking, and, at same time, there is a big contrast between the two models of education.

Contradicting the complete Tunisian educational system, PE constitutes an exception due to the absence of official texts, which organize the classes in PE. The organization of sessions is the responsibility of educational advisers and teachers, who choose the form of organization they prefer, without taking into account the students' capacities. Since the 80s, teachers of PE imposed an identical sporting gear (blue shorts and a white T-shirt) for all the students, but in the last 10 years (after evolution), we see the emergence of new veiled heads in different schools and also in

the sessions of PE.

### *1.3 Physical Education (PE), Body and Religious Dress (Veil/Hijab)*

Could the bodily gambling requested in PE explain the desire to cover the body, giving way to a certain modesty from the girl? The religious dress is not the real reason to encourage separation in physical activity classes. In this sense, the veil (Hijab) is perceived by Erraies (2005) and Lachhab (2012) as a regression and an interruption to the development of female in sports and physical activities. The research adds that the wearing of the veil (Hijab) is an affirmation of identity. Erraies (2005) and Lachhab (2012) states also that the wearing of the veil (Hijab) is used as a sign of difference rather than a sign of religion. In occidental societies, Muslim communities, who can't integrate the community, choose the religious dress as a symbol of different identity. For Mansouri (2007), the veil (Hijab) constitutes "a transgression of the principle of gender equality and dignity (...)" (p.690)." It encourages gender separation and prohibits social interaction between boys and girls.

Lachhab (2008) explains that "in most Muslim countries the right of access to education is now recognized, many countries continue to adopt strict separation between boys and girls in school,"(p.146) despite that the school is considered as a place of gender interaction. This choice is justified by the dangers of co-educational system to moral order. In Arab countries, where co-educational system is accepted (Tunisia, for example), the reason for wearing the veil (Hijab) by girls in sport and PE sessions seems to be the guarantee of "women's participation in public life, as veiled and modern" (Hamdi et al., 2017, p.690).

In fact, Tunisia has opted for the democratization of education and the principle of equal opportunities. Moreover, the nature the co-educational system in Tunisian schools has normally followed this desire for secularization, which is considered one of its foundations. In managing this gender interaction, the Tunisian school system involves equal opportunities and the guarantee of gender equality; it does not recognize their distinctive features and cannot abolish the evidence of gender-differentiated membership.

In addition, Errais and Errais (1996) explain that the 1968 official instructions (4) emphasize female PE, which "prepare women for their job of acculturating future generations and conveying the taste of physical practice and its values." However, the PE presented in the same official instructions (4) is characterized by a "uniform and standardized trend for both sexes." There are no specific regulations on the organization to be followed or dress to be adopted at the PE session; there are no references to gender differences. Lachhab (2008) explains that "this teaching is intended for a singular and neutral human race (p.148)." In this sense, physical and sporting activities are considered as a social practice in schools to a neutral student.

Paradoxically, the physical and sports activities that evoke 'the body' exhort the beauty of the gesture and the performance, liberating the body; they provide occasions for the manifestation of the body's image, its visibility, its acceptance, and a certain esteem towards this body. Physical and sports activities are not neutral objects; they involve bodies, subjects and the "bodies' subjects." Intervention about bodies is never neutral, as it is guided by norms and values, and imbued with politics. Representations of the body are understood as an expressive form of the sociocultural codes that underpin the reproduction of the mechanisms of perception and appreciation of health built into the dynamics between the individual and society.

This study draws on the social representations of Tunisian teachers of PE regarding the co-educational system in the sessions of PE. This research will analyze the characteristics of gender interaction in Tunisian schools through an empirical study developed by a semi-structured interview.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Study Population*

The sample, choised for this study, was selected for hypothetical reasons related to the research objectif. We select participants who have a long experience (more than 15 years) in teaching physical education, with equal pourcentage for women and men. Our simple was constituted from Twelve volunteer teachers of PE (6 men and 6 women). They have experience, ranging from 22 to 29 years, in teaching PE, with an average experience for both genders of 26 years (M=26.01; ET=3.2).

### *2.2 Material and Procedure*

Through this qualitative study on the paradox observed between corporeity and the veil (hijab) and gender interaction, we will study the representations of PE teachers to decrypt the stakes of the interaction between girls and boys according to the psychosocial and sociopolitical perspectives. We use a semi-directional interview to determine the experience of teachers regarding gender interactions and the religions dress (veil/hijab). A semistructured, open-ended approach was adopted, based on Sparkes and Smith, (2014) recommendation, to give

the participant freedom to speak, explain, elaborate and develop areas related to our research subject, though permitting for specific probing questions where necessary to gain supplementary perception.

After presenting the objectives of this study to the participating teachers of our population and receiving their consent, we began recording interviews over an average of one hour each. The interview was structured in four principal axes. The first one concerns experiences of teachers as pupils—from primary to secondary school and then to high school and work experience. The researcher asks participants to describe their personal experiences regarding PE since primary to secondary school, specially the details of gender interaction, the educational system used. The second axis focusses on the content of the PE session transmitted to students, especially the methods of evaluation and the type of command to analyze the educational processes used and gender-differentiated adaptations by teachers of both sexes. We demand to participants to describe their educational approach in their PE class, advantages, disadvantages, how they manage their students specially withco-educational system and religious dress (Hijab). The third axis is about the reciprocal judgments made by teachers of their students in this professional engagement. We ask participants about thier perceptions of the PE teachers, and that of their students. The last axis is concerned with understanding how the teachers of PE grasp the paradox of body and religious dress when it comes to fully applying the body within the framework of the PE session and at the same time adopting an accessory that may limit this body's fullness. In this section, we demand to participants to describe their experience with the religious dress (Hijab), to specify the evolution of the appearance of this type of clothing in their classes based on their 20 years of experience, to talk about the problems of to this phenomenon, and especially to specify if they have changed their teaching methods or their teaching content according to the expansion of this phenomenon after the tunisian evolution of 2010.

### *2.3 Qualitative Analyses of Interview*

The approach adopted in this study is qualitative and is based on the analysis of the meaning of words from the speeches collected, to understand how the teachers of PE represent themselves in the co-educational system. We also opted for a global analysis of the interviews, given the similarity of the orientations of the teachers of both sexes on the subject.

Once transcribed, these interviews were submitted to various thematic analyses (Buznic-Bourgeacq & Terrisse, 2013), intended to bring out the significant representations of teaching discipline and the opinions and attitudes of teachers on the management of class and teaching content, especially on the issue related to gender interaction and the religious dress for girls (hijab), to understand judgments on the body paradox in physical activity practice.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

The educational experience of the population of our study took place according to the co-educational model in primary and secondary schools for the majority of men and contrary to women (separation between girls and boys). In universities, both have received instructions according to the co-educational system.

Our study population has not received any training oriented towards gender differences in their university education, despite that the differentiated pedagogy used by all teachers in mix classes recognizes age differences and motor capacity but ignores the gender. Teachers' representations of co-educational system show that the majority of male and female teachers are in favor of this system in primary schools and colleges. On the other hand, all teachers advocate separation system at secondary school, especially in third grade, because the preparation for the final exam of PE named "bac sport," which requires different preparation for girls and boys.

All participants agreed that the co-educational system in PE is "problematic," even those who apply it, as girls are different from boys; they are unable to keep up with the pace and the level of boys, which is always higher than the level of girls. Paradoxically, most teachers think that life is rich on gender interaction. S3 says, "It's normal, it's natural, boys and girls are called to collaborate in life and to work together, but for them, in PE, it's different. Boys want to show up to girls, and girls want to prove that they are not so limited as most teachers think."

According to male teachers, educational system creates problems, encouraging the separatist system. Some male teachers prefer working with boy students, as they are embarrassed to help their female students in gymnastics and would prefer a woman to do it. On the contrary, female teachers prefer working with boys more than girls because, apparently, boys are more disciplined, and they learn faster than girls. S5 says, "I'm unable to teach the girl, they are not organized like boy, and have many difficulty in gymnastic; they need a lot of effort from me to learn..."

The proposed teaching content, along with the differentiated approach adopted by PE teachers highlights a teaching content with different educational progression for girls and boys. The content is the same with changes in exercise intensity and repetition. The evaluation covers several aspects of a student's investment in the session (cognitive aspect, progression, attendance, participation, etc.); it is different and done according to the student's

education cycle and gender (college or high school only).

Boys are seen by teachers (female and male) as fast, talented, and coordinated, with better sporting qualities. They are described as strong, resilient, and motivated; they help the teacher in the course of the sessions and are virulent and predisposed to succeed better in all conditions. Additionally, all teachers agree that girls are not enduring, get tired quickly, can't keep pace, withdrawn, complicated, distracted, lagging behind, lack dynamism, have limited acquisition and capabilities, demand more demonstration and repetition, don't work, aren't motivated, and amorphous.

Regarding the pupils' perceptions of their teachers (according to the teachers), they are all perceived (female and male teachers) as teachers regardless of gender. The question of authority is also perceived as having no relation to gender. Learning, personality, and attitude are most important according to the teachers heard.

On the contrary, regarding sporting dress and religious dress (veil/hijab), teachers are divided and controversial. Four female teachers and two male teachers are outright against the "Hijab" in a PE session. However, two female teachers use self-censorship; they explain: "It's an offensive topic, and it's even tricky if you talk about it." The other male teachers believe that it is necessary to wear a proper outfit; they demand a proper outfit "without immodesty in one direction or the other, either wearing the veil (hijab) or wearing transparent outfits." They talk about the need "to follow certain hygiene rules, in the face of veiled girls who wear a lot of clothes that are not recommended in the PE sessions."

On the other hand, three male teachers who support the veil (hijab) prefer "not to speak when it has to do with personal convictions"; they support that "girl's dress should not disturb or hinder boys" Those who oppose religious dresses in PE session encourage veiled students to put on a cotton scarf. Teachers are much more interventionist on this issue; they are against wearing the veil, but they all prefer that this issue be resolved by a law that engages the whole school institution. We realize that the representations of male and female teachers are permeated by the performance model and the sports model that values standards that are rather masculine. The girl has to just play the second roles.

The analysis of the interviews shows what Bréau (2017) emphasized that the current co-educational system is not a complete realization of the egalitarian model and that, on the contrary, two models are found to coexist: a traditional patriarchal, unequal model and a progressive and equal model. Unconscious male and female teachers adopt a "double standard" towards their male and female students. These behaviors are evident both in performance and in the boys' indiscipline that is tolerated, viewed as an annoying but inevitable behavior, while it is stigmatized and sometimes violently rejected in girls whose docility is expected.

All teachers, even though they highlight the advantages of co-educational system (according to some, the mix allows positive representations to be made with respect to the other gender, guarantees openness and counteracts prejudice and gender interaction), are obsessed with the final examination and prefer the separatist model; they justify their choice as well by the final examination of "sport's bachelor" and the differences between girls' and boys' trials. However, Mansouri (2007) argues that the published manuals "present and analyze the technique of a sporting gesture, where the learning progresses never refer sexual differentiation (p150)."

Contradictorily, educational progression and evaluation are based on the gender of the student in parallel with other criteria. Indeed, different sports techniques are a major tool of the teaching content in PE. In this way, the teacher focuses on technical mastery (sports model), competition, as well as physical practice. Teachers' perceptions of their pupils are imbued with "the sporting body's model"; they describe their male students with reference to sporting qualities such as strength, dynamism, resistance, and speed. This model refers to teachers of both sexes.

Their negative perceptions and expectations of their girl students, as outlined by Bréau (2014), are the source of the disengagement of girls in school PE. They are described as incapable, cannot keep pace, and disturb boys in their progress. We realize that female teachers tend to adopt the masculine discourse of devaluing girl: "She is a handicap in PE session." They reject girls' classes and sometimes criticize girl students, describing them in very negative terms.

With regard to the choice of the gender of their pupils with separate educational model, while some male teachers prefer to have boys' classes mainly for gymnastics, female teachers also choose boys classes because "they work better with them." As reported by Verscheure et al. (2014), on the question of the preference of pupils' gender by female teachers, there is a conflict between preferential father identification, the elder brother, and their female identity. Such teachers who have strongly romanticized the paternal image express this idealization in their choice of boys' class, where they seek, by identification to their students, to forget their female identity. A consensus was

expressed on the question of authority, which teachers felt was independent of gender and in relation with personality, pedagogical attitude, and investment.

Overall, the results of this study confirm Marzouki (1999) comments about the education system in Tunisia, which she says “reproduces and perpetuates mindful mineralizing representations for women (p148).” These systems are evident through the speeches of teachers who consistently and unavoidably reveal that social frameworks not only replicate gender discrimination within them but also normalize them so that they are seen as part of the social order.

The research conducted by Tourcheure et al. (2017) on the same issue joins our concerns, confirming the results of the interviews, which show some questions related to the function of school towards the transformation of gender interaction culture. Finally, would it be possible for PE as practiced to carry out its socializing functions by preparing the men and women of tomorrow to different roles and status while respecting equality?

## 5. Conclusion

The relationships between boys and girls are structured in schools, where social roles are established and strengthened. The teaching of PE is an enabling factor for the consolidation of gender interaction. This deduction is reflected in the expression of male domination as a matter of nature. It also reveals the meaning of reproduction and the maintenance of hierarchical order between the sexes, which remains the essence of patriarchal of societies, particularly the Tunisian society.

Rather, in the context of co-education in PE, it is first necessary to draw the attention of teachers to the urgent need to reflect and devise a genuine equalization of knowledge, which can be expressed in different ways and which is not exclusively associated with male social models.

Everything remains to be done or redone if we do not reflect on this issue of gender equality, by taking into account genetic differences and the differentiated expression of motor skills. By developing co-education and promoting exchanges between pupils of both sexes, one could contribute to finding the way that would allow the modification of sexist and retrograde representations.

## 6. Limitation

This study focuses essentially, on physical education (PE) according to political and social changes after the 2010 revolutions. We have choised to explore this question using a qualitative study. The interview used focuses on the comparison between the experiences of PE teachers before and after the 2010 revolution with regard to religious dress (veil/hijab) in the physical education session. However, there may be some possible limitations in this study. The first, is the sampling method used to select our study population, we chose participants according to very specific criteria, but it is possible that by expanding study population and choosing younger PE teachers with less experience, they probably will give a different opinion from that obtained from our study population. The second limitation concerns the opinion of the pupils which are not considrate in this research, future studies may be interested with this point because it will certainly make a very interesting comparison between the views of teachers and those of students regarding the religious dress (veil/hijab).

An analysis of the "hidden curriculum" and of the signs and symbols that will be transmitted to students and not prescribed in the program in terms of roles and values justifying this inequality experienced in class and which has a gendered connotation

## Notes

- (1) Zitouna University, founded in 737, is the first Islamic university and the oldest educational institution in the Arab world since a Madrasah was founded in 737 within the Zitouna mosque.
- (2) Sadiki College was created on January 13, 1875. Its creation constitutes a revolution in Tunisian intellectual spheres because it introduces new subjects totally foreign to those taught at Zitouna University. The colonial authorities kept a close watch on this college and fear the development of nationalist ideas hostile to the colonial project.
- (3) Chater Souad. Changes in the condition of Tunisian women (1956-1994). In: Cahiers de la Méditerranée, n° 49, 1, 1994. Tunisia, a dynamic of change. pp. 37-60
- (4) The official instructions of physical education, 1968

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