

SOCIAL

Olympic Medal Encourages Female Egyptians to Take up Weightlifting



Egyptian female weightlifter Shaimaa Khalaf, 26, takes part in a training session at the Maadi Olympic centre in Cairo.

CAIRO - Her sinews stretched above the neckline of a long-sleeved training top, 20-year-old Egyptian Sara Samir propels a barbell with more than 90 kilos above her head, before the weights smash back to earth.

Even before this impressive lift, it's clear Samir has a commanding presence in the national team's weightlifting hall in Cairo.

She has become something of a trendsetter since winning bronze in the 69kg (152 pound) class at the 2016 Olympic Games - the first female Egyptian Olympian to win a medal on the podium.

"After I won the medal in Rio, girls started weightlifting in a big way in Ismailiya," she said with a beaming smile, referring to her home province.

"People would tell me things like 'oh, you weightlift? Can you carry me?'" she said of her experience aged 11, when she first began training.

On the back of her Olympic success, the number of girls competing seriously in weightlifting has surged nearly tenfold.

"Female participants in weightlifting championships were no more than 30 or 40 girls," said Mohamed Eldib, head coach of the national weightlifting team, after he supervised Samir and her peers in the southern Cairo.

Now more than 300 girls are registered with the Egyptian Weightlifting Federation, he said.

"Winning forms a strong motivation for female athletes... and gives hope in the possibility of accomplishing wins, whatever the difficulties," sports analyst Mohamed Seif said.

The challenges include a "lack of interest of the family which cares first about the boy" since girls are expected to stop practising sport when they get married, Seif said.

Girls are encouraged to take part in other sports such as swimming or gymnastics, he said, rather than weightlifting or athletics.

Teaching Morals to Egyptian Students Across Religious Divide

The textbook, to be used in the academic year beginning in September, focuses on teaching good behaviour and tolerance.



Students attend a class at the Talaat Harb government primary school in the popular district of Shubra in Cairo

A plan to use a new textbook to teach morals to Egyptian students at schools across the country, part of a broader effort to clamp down on religious extremism, has drawn the ire of Islamist conservatives.

The textbook, to be used in the academic year beginning in September, focuses on teaching good behaviour and tolerance to students regardless of their religious background.

Religious conservatives expressed fear that this is a step towards removing traditional Islamic religious studies classes from the curriculum.

"This is the reality: The government wants to eliminate the religion classes and they are paving the way for this by teaching this new textbook," Salafist preacher Sameh Abdel Hamid said. **"Do we really need the new book when religion books contain all the values and ideals contained in it?"**

The plan to use the new book was announced in April by the Ministry of Religious Endowments, which regulates the country's mosques and determines which Islamic studies courses are taught in schools.

The Ministry of Religious Endowments has been leading a campaign strongly backed by the rest of the government against religious extremism.

Following the ouster of Islamist President Muhammad Morsi in 2013 and the subsequent designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation, Cairo has promoted a more tolerant and moderate form of Islam.

This campaign is centred on Egypt's schools amid other attempts to protect students from extremist views.

The new textbook tries to teach that difference is not a sin, that non-Muslims are not infidels and that the world is made to have enough room for everybody, regardless of what one believes, Religious Endowments Minister Mohamed Mokhtar Gomaia said.

"We are badly in need of teaching such a book because we need to raise a new generation of Egyptians who share the same values and know how to respect each other's beliefs and way of thinking," Gomaia said.

Gomaia confirmed that the new book was approved by al-Azhar, the highest religious authority in Egypt, and the Coptic Orthodox Church, which is followed by most of Egypt's Christians.

However, religious conservatives reacted with anger towards the textbook and plans to have Muslims and Christians attend classes together. Egypt's Muslim and Christian students previously attended separate religious education classes.

"This is a system that has prevailed here for decades but the problem is that it is creating little room for tolerance," said Ahmed Zayed, a sociology professor at Cairo University. "The same system has failed to unite Egyptians around the same values and ideals."

Christians make up almost 10% of Egypt's population. For the most part, Muslims and Christians live peacefully together, although there have been cases of intolerance and Christians have complained about an inability to legally build churches in the country.

Nevertheless, Abdel Hamid said forcing Muslim and Christian students to attend the same classes and learn from the same curriculum will help erase sectarian divisions.

"Each religion has its own specificity and it is in nobody's interest to eliminate this specificity," he said.

Gomaia and others at the ministry removed extremist books, audio media from the libraries of Egypt's more than 100,000 mosques and cracked down on hard-line preachers.

The Ministry of Education, which designs the curriculum and prints textbooks, removed controversial material from books and added lessons on religious tolerance. Al-Azhar is said to be reviewing its books and making changes to curricula taught at its schools and colleges.

Gomaia said the new textbook would not substitute for religion classes at schools but would represent a major step forward in unifying the values and morals of Egyptians across the religious divide.

"We only want our children to agree on a certain set of morals, be averse to violence and tolerate differences," Gomaia said. **"These are all values important to spread as we fight this ferocious war against extremism."**

Danish Minister Says Ramadan Fasting Can be 'Dangerous'

Stojberg says she fears fasting among Danish Muslims could affect safety, productivity.

STOCKHOLM - A Danish minister known for her strong anti-immigration views called for Muslims to take time off work during the fasting period of Ramadan, saying the practice can be "dangerous for all of us".

The comments from immigration and integration minister Inger Stojberg, a member of the centre-right Liberal Party, come after Ramadan, one of Islam's most revered holidays in which Muslims around the world fast from dawn until dusk, began last month.

"I want to call on Muslims to take leave from work during the month of Ramadan to avoid negative consequences for the rest of Danish society," Stojberg wrote in a column for the BT tabloid.

"I wonder if a religious order commanding observance of a 1,400-year-old pillar of Islam is compatible with the society and labour market that we have in Denmark in 2018."

She said she feared the fasting could affect "safety and productivity," giving as an example bus drivers who have "neither had a drink nor eaten for more than 10 hours".

"This can be dangerous for all of us," she said. One of the strongest measures came into force



in 2016, allowing police to seize valuables from refugees. The government's guidelines exempted wedding and engagement rings after the measure prompted international outrage and drew comparisons to Nazi Germany. Stojberg also drew criticism by launching a series of adverts in Lebanese newspapers in 2015 warning would-be migrants of the difficulties of seeking asylum in Denmark. Over the past 15 years, the country has tightened its immigration policies, insisting that migrants learn the country's customs and language in order to adapt to the labour market.

Tunisia's Tourism Industry Undergoes 'Real Recovery'

Significant improvement in visit numbers, largely due to rising Russian and Chinese arrivals, since jihadist attacks in 2015.

Sector revenues hit \$357 million (305 million euros), up 31.8% year-on-year

TUNIS - Tunisia's tourism industry, hard hit by jihadist attacks in 2015, has undergone a "real recovery" with revenues up nearly a third so far this year, the sector's minister said Wednesday.

"There is a significant improvement," Tourism Minister Selma Elloumi Rekik told AFP, as visitor numbers bettered the first five months of 2014, largely due to rising Russian and Chinese arrivals.

The jihadist attacks of 2015 devastated Tunisia's tourism industry, including one at the National Bardo museum in Tunis and another targeting a beach resort in Sousse that together killed 59 foreign tourists and a Tunisian guard.

Visitor arrivals surpassed 2.3 million through to May 20, up 21.8% from the same period last year and 5.7% higher than for the same period in 2010.

Sector revenues hit \$357 million (305 million euros), up 31.8% year-on-year.

"This is the year of real recovery," said Elloumi, adding that all hotels in key tourist hotspots Djerba, Hammamet and Mahdia are full for the summer season.

The recovery is driven in part by the "traditional market", including France and Germany, up 45 percent and 42 percent respectively, the minister said.

Visitors from China and Russia surged 57 percent and 46 percent.

"In 2018, we will surpass eight million visitors

with growth from the Russian and Chinese markets as well as the traditional market," Elloumi said. "People are coming back to Tunisia because there is security ... we are at the same level (of security) as any European city," she said.

The return of tour operators including TUI

France and Britain's Thomas Cook, which pulled out after the 2015 attacks, has also helped buoy the figures.



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