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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“MUSLIM ATHLETES SERIES” BY SHIRZANAN

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



Two years ago, I had a serious back surgery that left in my spine two metal rods and a few screws that I’m sometimes reminded of at the airports whilst traveling. What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger and six months later, I was surfing in a hijab in the south of my country as the first surfing Iranian woman ever. Ten months later I was standing on a podium with the sweetest gold medal I’ve ever won with my snowboard.



*"99 Pounds On the Waves" — Mona Seraji, age 33, Iran,
Snowboarder and Surfer*

When at the age of 15 my skis fell off of the roof rack of my sister's car, I had no clue this incident was going to change my life. I was left with broken skis and a season that was coming to an end.

That summer, I was out shopping for a pair of high-heels for a wedding party and ended up coming back home with a snowboard. I had seen it a few times on the snow and was very eager to try despite general disapproval. At the time snowboarding was not even allowed on the slopes and riders had to practice in the parking lots.

I've always been very lucky to receive full support from my family. My mom has been inclined to outdoor activities and transferred her love for adventure to us and it turned into a lifestyle.

Practicing sport is a challenge regardless of where you live. It may vary in different countries. To me, determination is the key to overcome any possible obstacle popping up on the way. The good thing about being outdoors especially in the mountains is that no matter what is happening and how hectic life is in the city (especially if you come from the Middle East) the hills are always waiting for you with open arms. Mother Nature is a university to me and challenging myself in hazardous places helps me to know myself better. A woman in Iran is not raised to be independent. To me, freedom is not about what you are wearing, it's about choosing what to do with your life.

AI feel that all I do is on behalf of other Iranian women. I am keen to change the negative image of Iran in the world. I have to work hard to pay for the costs of sports such as gears, travels and more. Also, I need to be willing to tolerate some ill treatment because I am a woman.

I receive loads of positive feedback and energy from my friends, family and loved ones. But I'm still not sure the police love a woman on a bike cruising around the city. I got pulled over by a cop telling me I'm not covering myself enough and the way I'm dressed in public is against Islamic rules. So I had to call the day off and ask my mom to come and pick me up as they didn't allow me to continue my training.

Sometimes, it can be all too much for a 99 pounds girl but I'm standing tall for the women of my country.



"Moving Beyond Hope: The IOC and Team Refugee" — Solmaz Abooli, USA via Iran, Traditional Karate

My family left our homeland, Iran, shortly after the Islamic Revolution in search of freedom and opportunities. **As refugees, we flew and walked thousands of miles through several countries. Imagine being captivated by the luxury of a slice of apple. Imagine also that the only friends you have are imaginary and made out of a pillow, named "Biggie."** This is only the visible tip of the iceberg of what it means to live as a refugee, with no help, no support, and only a will to realize your dreams.

In the United States, I laid down roots and began a life founded upon what my parents fought so hard to provide—freedom. This very concept enabled me to openly pursue my interest in martial arts, sparked by the 1980s movie, "American Ninja." As my interest in the martial arts grew, my size, frustratingly, did not. Despite the fact that there are no height or weight limits in traditional karate, a non-contact form of martial arts that focuses on the holistic development of the individual through consistent physical training, my petite stature is a rarity. During fighting, bigger athletes usually dominate smaller opponents using their reach and strength advantages. With so many people doubting my ability to successfully become a contender in this art my own belief in myself tarnished.

I learned from my past. My parents overcame obstacles and took responsibility to improve our lives. I realized that I needed to take responsibility for myself. **I decided to overcome the obstacles of size and wavering self-confidence and shouldered the responsibility to select and improve the actions, attitudes, and behaviors that drive my life. Where would I be if I were to let other people or structures control my fate?**

More difficult than rehashing the details of my past in moments of self-reflection is seeing and accepting my own strengths and weaknesses that came through during physical training. The idea behind traditional karate is not only to learn self-defense; it is to constantly and holistically improve oneself through a lifetime of training. This is not an easy feat, technically or philosophically.

And it is precisely this concept that makes traditional karate—as well as sports that seek greatness of ability – an effective vehicle for a woman to become her own best version of herself.

In my capacity as an athlete and aspiring scholar, this very point is what I impart to a cross-sectional audience during speeches and initiatives. **Most notably, I have implemented an innovative curriculum teaching conflict resolution skills through the practice of traditional karate to youth in public schools. Training in this manner essentially sets up a laboratory for exercising life skills. Kids who were once shy are shy no more, those who were followers are followers no more, and those who felt helpless are now empowered.** The beauty of it all is that they're embracing education without even knowing it—as if veggies are being snuck into a lasagna dish!

Striving to achieve my best self through sport and applying this same system into other aspects in life is what drives me. **Today, I am a PHD in conflict analysis and resolution, a 10-time US national champion and international medalist.** After my most recent tournament, I gifted my gold medal to a little girl in the audience named Grace. A few days later I received a thank-you letter from her, and the words, "I want to work very hard to become accomplished like you someday." I am proud that she took the initiative, but also that she recognized the value of hard work!