Girl Not Allowed to Play Soccer while Wearing Hijab

On February 25, Asmahan Mansour (an 11 year old girl from Napean, Ontario) was told by a referee in Laval, Quebec, that she could not play soccer while wearing her hijab. Five teams (including Mansour's) withdrew from the tournament in protest. The Quebec Soccer Federation (QSF) has a ban on headscarves to protect children from accidental strangulation. The referee in Laval, himself a Muslim, said the scarf was a safety concern. Some reports say that Mansour's team was aware of the rule ahead of time, but did not expect it to be enforced. Mansour has never had any difficulty while playing in Ontario because the Ontario Soccer Association allows headgear, as long as it is safely tucked in and secured.

The International Football Association Board (IFAB) is the branch of Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) that deals with rules. IFAB discussed the matter at a meeting in England the following week and decided that the existing rules should not be changed. They state that wearing a hijab is covered by FIFA Law 4 which deals with equipment: "A player must not use equipment or wear anything that is dangerous to himself or another player." Quebec Liberal Leader Jean Charest also commented on the situation, stating that he supports the referee's decision to order Mansour off the field. It seems both FIFA and Charest share the view that soccer should have universal rules that apply to everyone and it is the referee's job to determine what is safe.

Minority accommodation is currently a big issue in Quebec and the debate made recent international news after the village of Hérouxville published a code of conduct for new immigrants. In Canada, our principles of multiculturalism and equality (protected by section 15 and 28 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms) do not permit universal rules that indirectly discriminate unless they can be justified. A rule that prohibits headwear means that Muslim girls who wear the hijab are effectively excluded from organized soccer. Such a rule would likely be open to review under provincial human rights legislation. As a practical matter, FIFA considers certain kinds of headwear safe, and sport hijabs are available. Since FIFA allows safe headgear, there does seem to be a legitimate reason why the QSF should also. But currently, whether a hijab or other headgear is safe seems to be open to a referee's interpretation of the rules.

Sources

- "Laws of the Game 2006" FIFA
- "Muslim girl ejected from tournament for wearing hijab" CBC News (25 February 2007)
- "Rule against hijab stands: world soccer body" CBC News (03 March 2007)

- “International soccer body to discuss Quebec hijab ban” CBC News (28 February 2007)
- “Your View: Muslim girl ejected from tournament for wearing hijab” CBC News (26 February 2007)
- “Ontario, Quebec differ over soccer head scarf ban” CBC News (26 February 2007)
- “Muslim Liberals decry Charest's stand on soccer hijab” CBC News (27 February 2007)
- Nelson Wyatt, “Rules forbid hijab, says Quebec Soccer Federation” The Toronto Star (26 February 2007)
- “Criteria set down for goal-line technology experiments” FIFA

Further Reading

- Adrienne Arsenault, “Football’s Big Flub: How soccer’s governors dodged the question and punted the hijab issue” CBC News (06 March 2007)
- “Quebec town adopts controversial social code of conduct for newcomers”