

Women, Islam and sport. Towards ‘inclusive’ strategies to guarantee the equal right to sport

21 October 2024

Women - Islam - sports practice - equal opportunities - right to religious freedom - Unione Italiana Sport per Tutti (UISP) - swimming course for women - Municipality of Figline Valdarno

In a note dated 14 October 2024, the *Unione Italiana Sport per Tutti* (UISP) - an association for sports and social promotion founded in 1948 with the main aim of promoting the educational and recreational purposes of sport in both individual and collective growth - announced the scheduling of a ‘women’s’ swimming course at the Figline Valdarno municipal swimming pool.

The initiative arose in particular from the express request of a group of Muslim women to be able to access the municipal pool and practice swimming in compliance with the dictates prescribed by their religious beliefs.

In response to the need expressed, the Florence Uisp territorial committee, as the managing body of the sports facility, in full synergy with the municipality of Figline Valdarno, has thus established that every Tuesday, from 8.30 to 9.30 a.m., the pool will be dedicated exclusively to the practice of swimming by the women of the Islamic faith taking part, in the presence of qualified female technical staff only.

Probably also as a result of the opinions expressed by political exponents - in whose view the ‘women’s’ swimming course is to be considered a project of marginalisation rather than integration of the Islamic community - the Florence Uisp territorial committee published a further communiqué completing the information already contained in the first note. In particular, it specified that the swimming activity is open to all women of all cultures, creeds and ethnic groups who wish to attend the Figline Valdarno municipal swimming pool in an environment dedicated to them. The Committee also specified that «the time slot chosen for this activity is currently available, as the pool is usually open at other times and does not take away space from other swimming activities held within the facility. On the contrary, it broadens the range of sports on offer».

It seems, therefore, difficult to agree with those who consider the project potentially susceptible to configure forms of ‘reverse’ discrimination. The access ‘reserved’ for women only is, in fact, permitted within a circumscribed time frame, which is why it does not seem to have ‘unremediable’ implications in terms of the exercise of the right to sport by other users.

The *Unione Italiana Sport per Tutti*, on the other hand, promotes an organisational practice of unquestionable relevance in the face of the complexity posed by the protection of women’s participation in sport, when the latter needs to be guaranteed together with women’s religious identity. This is not, moreover, an absolute novelty, but the project is part of a series of initiatives that the Union has been carrying out for some time with the intention of allowing women who, for personal, religious or cultural

reasons, need an all-female space to participate in sport. Already in 2009, for example, the UISP promoted a swimming course reserved only for women, so as to make it possible for women of the Islamic faith to participate as well, at the City of Turin swimming pool, in Via Faa' di Bruno, every Sunday morning.

The decision of the *Unione Italiana Sport per Tutti* reflects, therefore, the sensitive and progressive opening of the world of sport to the identity expression of every athlete and attests how the role played by sports promotion bodies is to be considered central in this process. Through cooperation with the institutions of the reference territory, these associations actively contribute to the effective protection of the equal right to sport at the various levels of participation, from amateur to professional.

On the other hand, the Union's initiative emphasises and enhances the *social* function of sport in building an effectively inclusive society. Through participation in 'dedicated' sporting activities, which are also an opportunity for women of different cultural backgrounds to meet and build social networks, participants of the Islamic religion can embark, as a side effect, on paths of integration into the local social fabric with a view to strengthening their rights, including the right to sport under conditions of equality and equal opportunities.

It is therefore to be hoped that this 'women's' sports inclusion project will be an inspiration for the planning and development of further similar *best-practices*, aimed at promoting sport - not only as a 'right of all', of course, but also as a tool through which a culture of inclusion can be promoted and policies of social integration and intercultural dialogue can be concretely implemented to counter discrimination and intolerance.

Caterina Gagliardi

Fonte: <https://www.uisp.it/toscana/pagina/a-figline-valdarno-un-corso-di-nuoto-per-donne-musulmane>