



THE  
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# UNDER COVER

IN DECEMBER 2013, CROSSFIT OFFERED ITS FIRST WOMEN-ONLY LEVEL 1 SEMINAR.  
IT WAS TWO DAYS IN DUBAI THAT HINTED AT REBELLION, EQUAL RIGHTS AND A MOVEMENT STILL AT ITS INFANCY.

ANDRÉA MARIA CECIL



**A**beer Al Khaja walked into the gym visibly excited. With a contained smile that nearly burst, she introduced herself to CrossFit Inc. Level 1 Seminar Staff and affectionately cradled her white paper Starbucks cup to her left cheek as if it were an infant.

It's a scene that plays out thousands of times inside CrossFit affiliates the world over: Level 1 attendees arrive eager to learn and even more eager to meet the trainers they've only seen in pictures and videos on the Internet. But at Reebok CrossFit LifeSpark in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, there were some distinct differences.

For starters, Al Khaja was wearing an abaya and a sheela—the former a long-sleeved, floor-length robe and the latter a headscarf that also covers the neck. A 10-ft.-long white curtain hung between the room where attendees sat for lectures and the larger space with a pull-up rig. Just to the left of the curtain was an 8½-by-11-in. piece of white paper that had “Ladies Only” written on it in red marker.

And when the 16 women divided into two breakout groups to practice movements, they were able to move into the larger room only because the windows were mirrored, all 10 doors were locked and, of course, no man they could possibly marry was able to lay eyes upon them when their heads, legs or arms were exposed.

Centuries of tradition call for Muslim women to cover their heads—and sometimes their faces—as well as their arms and legs with loose-fitting clothing to demonstrate modesty. Not all Muslim women follow these customs, which are largely dictated by their respective country's laws governing Muslims and by their own families. On a daily basis, they typically do not mingle with men who aren't family members, much less exercise in their presence. Women-only hair salons and gyms, for example, are normal in many Muslim countries. If the environment is filled only with women—Muslim or otherwise—Muslim women can uncover and even whittle down clothing to just a sports bra and shorts, or less.

The seminar was a first for CrossFit Inc. Until then, the company had never done a private, females-only Level 1 for covered women.

“I think it's rad,” said Dave Castro, CrossFit's Director of Training and Director of the CrossFit Games. “It really shows how strong CrossFit is globally, as a global brand.”

He added: “It's not an American thing, it's not a man thing, it's not a young-man thing. This is just another glaring example of that.”

Reebok CrossFit LifeSpark owner Candice Howe, a British citizen who grew up in the UAE, said the fact this Level 1 happened was “huge.”

“It's a testament to what the women want and what the women are craving.”

## A GROWING DEMAND

When Amnah Bin Bahar first put fingers to keyboard on Nov. 1, it was a shot in the dark.

She wrote “Crossfit Level 1 course for Covered Women” in the subject line and had to ambiguously address the correspondence to “Seminars Team.” Three days later, she received a response. Less than a week after that, Castro himself replied. And by Dec. 8, CrossFit had created a private registration hyperlink for the course so Bin Bahar could share it with any interested women. The course was scheduled for Dec. 22 to 23, 2013.

On the first day of the course, Bin Bahar stopped by to see the fruits of her labor. The women still were filing in. Bin Bahar had a huge smile on her face.

“There's a really great potential for courses in Dubai,” she said.

For her part, Bin Bahar does not cover in any traditional Muslim dress.

“My parents haven't really imposed it on me, and I just feel comfortable the way I am,” she later said via email.

Bin Bahar, who already has her Level 1 certificate after taking the course in late 2013, trains at CrossFit Utmost, also in Dubai. Her family doesn't know she works out with men.

“They think it's women only,” she explained.

“In Islam, men and women don't mix or socialize. Women who are covered would not want to be seen squatting or on the floor.”



The woman who wanted to be known simply as Sara arrived each day in sparkly sandals, while all the other women arrived in tennis shoes.

Andréa Maria Cecil/CrossFit Journal

Since Bin Bahar started CrossFit in late June, an increasing number of her female friends—most of them covered Muslim women—have expressed interest in the training methodology. Unlike their American counterparts, most cannot do any more than train or coach in a females-only environment because they might have to remove their headscarves—or more—to participate in most competitions, such as those that involve swimming.

That's why Bin Bahar decided to write her email: “We might as well start somewhere.”

Al Khaja was thrilled at the opportunity. She had discovered CrossFit over the summer after doing some charity work in Dubai. During Ramadan, she volunteered to help the homeless. It was July, when average temperatures in the city range from 94 to 104 F.

“I couldn't last five minutes in the sun,” Al Khaja said.

She started going to the gym. She had heard of CrossFit and was intrigued, so she took to Instagram, of all places.

“That was a big eye-opener to get me to know about CrossFit,” Al Khaja said.

That same month, CrossFit Utmost began offering a women-only class.

“That's when I really started doing CrossFit,” she said. “I love the variety. A lot of the movements are ... a challenge.”

And once the Dubai Fitness Competition rolled around a couple of months later, Al Khaja found even more purpose for her training.



Muslim women arrive at Dubai's Grand Musalla mosque at the end of Ramadan in 2010.



Although some of the women are covered in this group photo from the women-only Level 1 Seminar, they all had workout gear on underneath.



"I decided (competing is) what I wanted to do," she said.

If she competes in this year's Dubai Fitness Competition, an annual event, she'll have to do so in a women-only venue.

As for the Level 1, it provided her with an opportunity to learn, said Al Khaja. She added that her family is "very supportive" of her athletic endeavors.

"I would like to train other people," she continued. "Being in the fitness industry is not common among women (in Dubai). ... Let's change that."

And the importance of this particular Level 1 wasn't lost on Al Khaja.

"I love it. I love that you guys are here. I love that you guys offered it," she said enthusiastically. "I'm so grateful. ... You guys believed in us."

For one 23-year-old, who asked simply to be known as Sara, CrossFit is about overcoming her fear of new things. Normally wearing an abaya and a sheela, Sara tried CrossFit in August in a mixed-sex class. She wore a hoodie, loose pants and long sleeves. It was there that she "fell in love."

**"I CAN LIFT MORE THAN MOST MEN HERE."**

**— SHAIKHA AL QASSEMI**

"Why not have more knowledge about the sport?" Sara said of taking the late-December Level 1 in Dubai.

Before the course, Sara had never done a pull-up. That changed.

"It was amazing," she said. "I'm good in cardio. Strength I'm not really good at. Yet. Hopefully I will be."

Sara added: "I have to conquer my fear. I really want to conquer my fear."

Although her mother knows she does CrossFit, she asked why Sara wanted to hang from bars "like a monkey" and lift weights like a man. Likewise, Sara doesn't frequently talk about it with her mother and not at all with the rest

of her family. Not much more is known about Sara. Like most attendees, she arrived wearing workout gear beneath her abaya—with two conspicuous differences. She was the only woman who arrived wearing sparkly sandals and accompanying earrings that dazzled. Before the seminar began both days, Sara changed into tennis shoes. And before leaving each day, she changed back into her sandals and re-did her makeup; the speculation was she took such action so as not to arouse suspicion of where she'd been.

Shaikha Al Qassemi, meanwhile, was much bolder.

Clearly the rebel of the group, Al Qassemi was outspoken and enjoyed the occasional off-color comment. She was a notable contrast to the rest of the group—even those who weren't covered. Each day, her hair was pulled up in a ponytail to reveal that the bottom half of her head had seen clippers. She was not covered, though she employed a hoodie at times, and wore tank tops that revealed defined muscles.

"I do not cover my hair in general unless I walk into a mall or a crowded place with men. Then I would cover. Or during prayer, then I wear a hijab," Al Qassemi later said via email.

The 25-year-old has "been doing fitness" since she was 16.

"Cardio, gym stuff, free weights," she explained.

Al Qassemi also has tried BodyPump, kickboxing, body-building and started doing circuit training about a year ago. Early last year, a friend told her about CrossFit.

She tried some workouts under the supervision of her personal trainer and for the next two months watched videos.

"All I did was watch the CrossFit Games (and progression videos)," said Al Qassemi, whose family rules Sharjah. The emirate—one of seven—is about 40 miles north of Dubai.

Since then, she's participated in local competitions and even won a throwdown at Dunes CrossFit in Dubai on the evening after the first day of the Level 1 course.

"I'm pushing myself as much as I can for (the 2014) Open," she said.

If she qualifies for the CrossFit Games Asia Regional, she would not be the first Emirati woman to do so. In 2012, [Amna Al Haddad](#) competed on the Reebok CrossFit LifeS-park team.

Taking the Level 1 was a chance to learn, Al Qassemi said.

"I want to open a gym in the future, teach others."



And while Al Qassemi likes the idea of “people throwing stuff at me and saying, ‘Just do it,’” her parents don’t agree.

“You look like a man,” they’ve told her.

Her response: “I don’t care because I can lift more than most men here.”

## CHANGES AFOOT

By some observers’ accounts, native women’s roles in the UAE are akin to what females in Western countries experienced in the 1800s. Others liken it to being a woman in medieval times.

“In the UAE, a far greater priority is placed on the traditional women’s roles,” Howe explained of native Emirati women.

However, that’s been changing.

“In recent years, their role is rapidly and exponentially expanding in all areas of society,” Howe said.

In 2013, the UAE—with a large expatriate population—ranked 40th among all countries in the [Human Development Report’s Gender Inequality Index](#). In the Arab world, only Libya ranked higher—at 36. By comparison, the United States ranked 42nd; the Netherlands was first. Of the countries ranked on the index, Yemen was at the bottom of the list at 145.

In terms of education, 77 percent of Emirati women continue from high school to higher education—24 percent more than their male counterparts, according to the country’s Washington, D.C., embassy. The country trains women as muftis, Sunni Muslim scholars who interpret Islamic law—a move that is considered progressive in the Muslim world.

Change, Howe said, also is coming from “the top down.”

Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the UAE’s prime minister and vice president, has 14 daughters, two of whom represent the country in horse riding and taekwondo.

Majid bin Mohammed bin Rashed Al Maktoum, one of the sheikh’s nine sons, is chairman of the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority. In that capacity, he’s brought about two iterations of the summer Dubai Fitness Competition, where such top CrossFit athletes as Frederik Aegidius, Ryan Fischer, Kenneth Leverich, Annie Thórisdóttir and Lindsey Valenzuela competed last year.

Still, Emirati women who wanted to compete had to do



Juria Maree was one of two CrossFit Level 1 Seminar Staff members who instructed the women-only seminar in Dubai.

so a month later in October at the Dubai Ladies Club and Dubai Women’s College—women-only environments.

In the UAE, multiple facilities offer women-only classes. Sharjah Ladies Club, EMD Fitness and CrossFit Utmost are three of them.

“So nothing really can stop a Muslim woman from (pursuing) her fitness goals,” wrote Lamia, who declined to give her last name, via email.

The mother of three teenagers began CrossFit in September after reading an article about Howe in a local magazine. At the time, Reebok CrossFit LifeSpark offered a women-only class. After that dissolved, Lamia came to the affiliate with her sister for private classes. She also took the women-only Level 1 in December.

A month before that, she participated in the Dubai Women’s Run, an outdoor event covering 5 and 10 km.

“The participants were all women of course, but their husbands and family were also there,” she explained. “So I ran covered with appropriate clothing.”



Lamia (left) and Abeer Al Khaja, pray during a break in the seminar.

## THE QUESTION OF OPPRESSION

Lisa Ray of CrossFit Flagstaff in Arizona has instructed hundreds of CrossFit Level 1 seminars over the course of nearly eight years.

This time, she sounded different.

As she gave the opening lecture focused on defining CrossFit, her words were marked with a noticeable intensity.

CrossFit, she explained to the 16 women, teaches you how to be quick, strong and ready for life. It gives you the ability to think, “I’ve done stuff harder than this in the gym. I’m gonna be all right,” she told the class. “Psychologically, we help you be more tolerant. We help you to be more unafraid.”

Shortly afterward, during the first break, Ray said she was struggling to find the most appropriate words for her audience. She wanted to be careful not to project an “American view that if they’re not like us, they’re wrong.” She wanted to be sure she wasn’t expressing “sympathy that is misplaced.”

What Ray stepped into was a dramatically complicated and endlessly debated issue concerning whether Muslim women are oppressed.

Like most religions, there are followers who are at either end of the spectrum and those who fall everywhere in between. Likewise, generalizing won’t necessarily provide enlightenment.

The reality is that there are countries whose laws force women to cover in some manner. The situation can be as extreme as Saudi Arabia, where Muslim women can be seen wearing burkas that cover the entire body, including the face and eyes. Or it can be as relaxed as Turkey, where many feel that even just the hijab—a veil that covers only the head and chest—is oppressive.

**“YOU SHOULD NOT IGNORE YOUR BODY. YOU SHOULD TAKE CARE OF IT.”**

**—SALWA EISSA**

That notion of a federally mandated dress code for any sex is nearly impossible for Westerners to comprehend.

Salwa Eissa explained that the attire is about modesty.

The 23-year-old grew up in Egypt and lives in San Jose, Calif., with her husband, Ahmad Ibrahim. While Ibrahim goes to CrossFit Silicon Valley, Eissa goes to Total Woman, where she can remove her hijab and work out with women only.

She noted that the notion of Muslim women either exercising or choosing to be covered—but not both—is one not only held by Westerners but by Muslims themselves. Likewise, Muslim women have not emphasized physical activity, she said.

But that’s changing.

More Muslims are beginning to understand that Islam says “your body has a right on you” and “the strong believer is better and more beloved to Allah than the weak believer,” Eissa said.





Dubai's modern architecture stands in contrast to centuries of tradition.

"You should not ignore your body. You should take care of it," she continued. "More people are becoming aware of this."

Abeer Amiri, who does not cover, explained it a bit differently.

"This whole covering, it's very personal. It's not seen as something that you're supposed to do," the 24-year-old said.

Amiri took the women-only Level 1 course in Dubai after not being able to get into other CrossFit Level 1 courses in the Middle East because they were sold out.

It's traditional wear—just like the sari in India, explained Amiri, a native of Abu Dhabi.

"No one is really forced into it," she said.

The question of covering came up frequently when she

attended Penn State in State College, Pa. And it still does when she finds herself in the U.S.

"Whenever I tell someone I'm Arab, I see their jaws drop and (they) ask, 'Why aren't you covered?'" she recounted. She added, "We're normal just like everyone else."

## EXPECTING THE EXPECTED

Twenty-four hours before the women-only Level 1, Ray and Juria Maree didn't know what to expect. Once it got underway, they still didn't.

The interactions were different, said Maree, another member of CrossFit's Level 1 Seminar Staff. She owns Reebok CrossFit Enduro in Singapore but is a native of South Africa.

When it came time for a tactile cue, she would stop short and ask, "Can I touch you?"

At first, Ray kept testing the waters.

"After the first breakout on squats, I felt much more comfortable," she said.

Then Ray realized the women were just like any other Level 1 participants—receptive and eager to learn.

Then she thought, "OK, I'm making it weird."

For Maree—who has an ability to quickly connect with people through a quirky-yet-confident style—it was about effective communication.

"At the end of the day, you're using movement as a language," she said. "And that's a leveler."

The needs are simple, Howe explained.

"The demand here is huge," she said. "It's definitely the start of a movement. All they want to do is just do CrossFit. It just takes a little bit more work to create an environment where they can." ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andréa Maria Cecil is a *CrossFit Journal* staff writer.



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