

**SPEAKER 1:** Most evenings, you can find Amaiya Zafar at a boxing gym on St Paul's East side. She's just 15 years old and 106 pounds. But the most unusual part about seeing the Oakdale teen spar in the ring is that she wears the hijab, the Muslim head covering for women. Zafar was hoping to enter her first competitive bout tomorrow, but that day may have to wait. Reporter Laura Yuen has the story.

**LAURA YUEN:** Amaiya Zafar first got the idea to take up boxing two years ago when she and her father visited a friend's fencing competition. Their exchange sounded a lot like any conversation between a dad and his unimpressed teen daughter.

**AMAIYA ZAFAR:** And he's like why don't you start fencing? And I was like, no, I'm not. No. I was like I'll do boxing, but I will not fence.

**LAURA YUEN:** The next day she started training, first by watching videos, and then practicing her punches in the garage. She followed that with a visit to the gym and her own personal coach. She was hooked. Eventually, Amaiya knew she wanted to do more than just train. She wanted to compete. But Amaiya says she wants to do it on her own terms, fully covered according to her Islamic principles.

**AMAIYA ZAFAR:** Boxing is really important to me, but so is practicing my religion. And I don't want to compromise one for the other. I want to be able to practice my religion to my fullest extent and to be able to participate in my sport. And taking off my hijab isn't an option for me.

**LAURA YUEN:** But her sport hijab, which is a stretchy piece of fabric she made to wear under her protective headgear during competition isn't really the issue. It's the rest of her uniform that is causing consternation among the national governing body for amateur boxing.

Amaiya has proposed to the boxing authorities that she wear a long sleeved, under armour top, and leggings beneath her standard tank top and shorts. And that's a problem, says Michael Martino. He's executive director of USA Boxing.

**MICHAEL MARTINO:** There's a safety issue involved. So if you're covering up your arms, you're covering up your legs, could there be preexisting injury, wounds, cuts, and then if somebody got hurt during the event, the referee wouldn't be able to see it.

**LAURA YUEN:** Martino says his job is to follow the rules of the International Federation, including its strict dress code.

**MICHAEL MARTINO:** We have 30,000 amateur boxers in the United States, and they have hundreds of thousands in the world. So if you make allowances for one religious group, but if another one comes in and says we have a different type of uniform that we have to wear, so they have to draw a line someplace.

**LAURA YUEN:** Now the Council on American Islamic Relations is also getting involved. The Muslim civil rights group, also known as CAIR is pressuring USA Boxing to change the rules. The director of CAIR's Minnesota chapter Jaylani Hussein says the governing body needs to be more inclusive. He says Amaiya Zafar's request for permission to wear modest Islamic attire is reasonable and would follow similar accommodations for Muslim athletes in basketball and soccer.

**JAYLANI HUSSEIN:** I think it's important for them to recognize that, and to be able to accommodate her needs. And this would open a tremendous opportunity for other young Muslim girls who are interested in boxing.

**LAURA YUEN:** Amaiya Zafar was hoping to compete Friday in Duluth, but she never officially registered for the event. Meanwhile, she's getting criticism on the other side too. Some fellow Muslims have chimed in on CAIR's Facebook page to question why she'd even want to take up such a violent sport. Amaiya's mom, Sara O'Keefe-Zafar says she had her own concerns too. But she says in the case of her daughter, the benefits of the sport outweigh the risks.

**SARAH O'KEEFE-ZAFAR:** When she started this, she was 13 years old. And she was this tiny, little girl that didn't take up her own space in the world. And as a mom, I would tell her when you walk down the street, you have to walk with more confidence because you look so vulnerable when you're so tiny. And my words didn't help shift that, but boxing did. I watched her grow up from being this timid, small girl to being strong and confident.

**LAURA YUEN:** For her part, Amaiya says she was crushed to learn that she may not be able to fight any time soon.

**AMAIYA ZAFAR:** I've worked really, really hard for this. And I should be able to fight just like anyone else can. And we have to make a change so that I can.

**LAURA YUEN:** Amaiya says she's going to keep training for that first match, so she'll be ready when that day comes. Laura Yuen, Minnesota Public Radio News.