

Muslim Women in Sport

The world of sport is male dominated and women often come up against considerable challenges. In this fact sheet we address those issues faced by Muslim women and consider what their religion says about participation.

Islam, Muslim women and sport

For many Muslim women religious beliefs and values give meaning to the ways in which they structure and approach their life. Islam is a fundamental aspect of their identity and their approach to sport is often determined by religious, cultural and ethnic factors.

In general, Islam promotes good health and fitness and encourages both men and women to engage in physical activity to maintain healthy lifestyles. However, there are aspects of the religion which affect how sports can be practised, for example; women following their faith cannot engage in mixed gender sports and the environment and dress code also requires consideration.

Due to religious misinterpretations or simply a lack of awareness, many Muslim women have been prevented or not felt able to participate in sports. For many, apprehension about taking part stems from a fear of discrimination or of facing negative attitudes from service providers in relation to their religious and cultural needs.



Participation and health

There is currently little statistical data available that shows physical activity participation by different religious groups. With respect to Muslim participation rates, participation by ethnicity is often the closest monitor that exists e.g. over 90 per cent of people from Pakistan and Bangladesh are Muslims (Census2001). Obviously though people from other ethnic groups also follow Islam.

Among ethnic minority communities, participation is well below the national average. Only 12.5% of Asian women do enough exercise each week to benefit their health compared to 18.8% of White women (3 x 30 minutes – Active People Survey 2007). This clearly demonstrates that there is a need for specific interventions to be developed to ensure that Muslim women specifically have the opportunity to participate in sport and physical activity, and also to gain from the associated health benefits that being active brings.

Low levels of participation inevitably have negative health implications and the 2004 Health Survey for England confirmed greater levels of ill health were reported amongst ethnic minorities. Participation in sport is an excellent preventative measure for many diseases and can also play an important role in treatment. Fostering changes in participation habits at an early age and getting young girls to enjoy the sporting experience is crucial to ensuring participation into adulthood. Service providers should also consider using sport as a mechanism for promoting good health in communities.

Muslim women's attitudes towards sports and physical activity

In addition to sports providers considering how to design their services in order to appeal to Muslim women, the attitudes of Muslim women and girls towards sport and activity need to be sensitively developed in order to increase participation.

Comparisons between Muslim women's attitudes towards sport in different countries have provided interesting results. In traditional Muslim countries attitudes are actually far more positive towards PE than in the UK. Young Muslim women in the UK seem to have very negative views regarding PE in schools. Research conducted with Muslim girls in the school environment has demonstrated that the girls were put off participating in sporting activities to the point where some were skipping classes. This was due to a requirement to shower communally and wear clothing which was considered as 'inappropriate' to the children's cultural traditions and beliefs. The researchers (Carroll and Hollinshead) found that 'for the devout Muslims there is a real feeling of guilt and shame at exposing their bodies and legs which had not been fully appreciated by the teachers.'

This and similar studies help to demonstrate that young Muslim women's attitudes towards sport and fitness activities in the UK are heavily influenced by the way activities are delivered and whether due regard is given to cultural sensitivities.



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Muslim women's attitudes towards sport are also inevitably affected by a lack of visible role models. However, in recent years this has started to change, Muslim women athletes competed in and were involved with the organisation of the Beijing Olympic Games. Although none of these women were from the UK this can still be used to demonstrate to young Muslim women in this country that wearing the hijab (head scarf) is not an obstacle to excelling in life and sports. Celebrating and promoting these positive images is key to developing long term attitudinal change and increasing participation levels.

As well as a lack of role models, family expectations about the role of young women have an impact on participation. A study carried out by Loughborough University in 2006 revealed extensive parental influence on young women's involvement in sport and over their lives as a whole; It highlighted the extent to which young Muslim women 'navigated between their family identity and the experiences they were exposed to on a day-to-day basis'. Sports' deliverers should consider the importance of getting family "buy in" for female participation when developing programmes.

There is also a recognised need for further research in this area as many studies around Muslim women date back to the 1990's. Generational change accompanied with immigration trends mean further understanding around communities and cultural issues like country of origin is required.

Barriers facing Muslim women's participation in sport

The barriers to participation for Muslim women are not hugely different from those faced by many women. The table below illustrates the most common reasons given for non participation and engagement in sport and physical activity.

Dress code
Sports facilities/ teams/ clubs do not always appreciate the need for modest dress.
Facilities
Facilities need to be clean and water available to thoroughly wash after using the wc. Provision of a prayer room or quiet area is required as most Muslim women will observe payer during specified times in the day.
Lack of Role Models
The visibility of British BME women in sport will help to break barriers and make the environment more inclusive.
Parental Approval
This is especially important for young women whose parents need to understand the benefits of sport to allow them to encourage out of school activities and feel comfortable that the environment will be safe.
Transport
It is often more appropriate for women to access services locally as most will not have access to transport and will be reluctant to use public transport in the evening if they are on their own.
Social Side
The traditional social side of sport does not link in with the religious requirements of Muslim women who do not drink alcohol and will not partake in activity which may be consider in appropriate and incompatible with their beliefs.

Communication
Language is often a barrier as being unable to communicate causes anxiety and uncertainty around how to approach and access services.
Lack of women only sessions
Most Muslim women will only play sport in a female only environment.
Childcare
Traditionally the sole responsibility of women. Although attitudes are changing provision of crèche facilities will allow greater access for women with children.
Socio-economic differences
Statistically BME people earn less than their white counterparts which limits access particularly for women who often give financial priority to their families.
Time
Other commitments such as childcare and running the home take priority and sports organisations should consult with the community regarding the timetabling of events.
Employment
More needs to be done to encourage young women to access employment within the sector to help break down barriers and act as a resource to equip other staff with knowledge about the communities they serve. This includes the admin side of sport.
Environment
Safety, lighting and security are important to prevent racially motivated incidents.
Information
Information should be made available in other languages and services marketed in appropriate places such as schools and mosques to ensure women become aware of what's on offer.

Designing programmes for Muslim women

Sport and physical activity providers need to respect religious difference. This is especially important for Muslim women as they are often overlooked by providers and discriminated against on the grounds of religion and belief. Religious and cultural barriers make it difficult for Muslim women to participate in sport as people are often lacking sensitivity or understanding of their requirement around clothing, privacy and single sex provision.

The Muslim faith itself should not be seen as a barrier to participation as Islam presents a positive outlook towards health and well being. However, Islam does require that certain practices and procedures are followed. The guidelines below can help providers to ensure that their activities are more accessible to Muslim women.

- Arrange special women-only coaching sessions.
- Have experienced women available to help beginners
- Highlight the fact that certain sessions are intended to provide supportive environments for women users.
- Use positive imagery in promoting your sport.
- Allow a wide range of clothing choices, for example in swimming women may wish to wear more than what conventional swimming costumes may allow.
- Try to identify role models within the community who can break down barriers with parents.
- Provide opportunities for social interaction as many women enjoy doing sport as it provides social opportunities.
- Advertise in places such as playgroups, schools and doctors surgeries to attract Muslim women with children who may not otherwise hear about sessions.
- Assist mothers by providing crèche facilities.
- Provide interpretation services if necessary.

- Develop Positive Action initiatives to increase your workforce profile to reflect the community it serves.
- Encourage volunteers from within Muslim communities.
- Ensure action is taken in the face of discrimination or stereotyping.
- Ensure male participants or coaches can't attend or accidentally walk in.

Facilities

- Make sure the changing rooms, showering and WC facilities are safe, private environments which cannot be overlooked.
- If windows can be peered into they should be covered up or blacked out.
- Signs should be put on doors when female sessions are in practice.
- Cameras should be turned off when sessions take place.
- Ensure that female staff are on duty only and female lifeguards etc. are provided

This fact sheet has been produced by the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation and Sporting Equals. Should you require further information please contact either info@wsff.org.uk or info@sportingequals.org.uk

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