Muslim women in sport – a minority within a minority

Introduction

Surveys have shown that Muslim women have lower rates of participation in sport than other groups. Why are they under-represented? What challenges do they face? What does their religion say about participation? These questions have been at the forefront of attempts to understand and increase participation in sport by Muslim women.

Islam, Muslim women and sport

There are a number of misconceptions regarding Muslim women participating in sport. In fact, Islam promotes good health and fitness for both men and women. However, there are guidelines in relation to personal conduct and modesty within which sports can be practised. For example, modesty is an important principle in Islam, which has implications for the notion of what types of activities and what sort of dress is appropriate for Muslim women participating in sport. But it is important to recognise that the perceptions of what is modest and appropriate for women to engage in varies between groups of Muslim women and men, as well as between individuals.

In effect, this means that while some Muslim women might engage in mixed sport events, others will not see this as appropriate. Some Muslim women will observe dress codes that consist of covering the hair and wearing modest clothing which covers the arms and legs, but others will not. The important issue is to ensure that all groups and individuals are catered for as far as possible and that they are consulted and respected in their choices.

Islam encourages building up an integrated personality. Islam stresses sports such as swimming, archery and horse-riding, encouraging both men and women to engage in physical activity in order to maintain healthy lifestyles.

In the UK, different national, cultural and ethnic traditions create considerable variety in the way Islam is practiced and interpreted. Due to religious misunderstanding and/or a lack of awareness in our society of how to cater for this varied group, many Muslim women have been prevented from participating in sport.

These issues contribute to the comparatively low participation rate of Muslim women. Other factors that contribute to this are the lack of single-sex provision, which can put women off sport and physical activity. This may also include early negative experiences of PE at school. The negative perceptions about physical activity can last into adulthood, making it more difficult for these women to engage in sport. Thus, environmental and cultural boundaries seem to be a determining factor in the attitude of young Muslim women towards sports and physical activity in this society.
Participation and health

There are no statistics that show physical activity participation by different religious groups, for instance Muslim men and women. With respect to Muslim participation rates, participation by ethnicity is the closest monitor that exists, as over 90% of people from Pakistan and Bangladesh are Muslims. However, this data has to be interpreted with caution as many people from other ethnic groups also follow Islam, and cultural traditions influence participation in sport.

Among ethnic minority communities, participation is below the national average. Only those within the ‘Mixed Race’ category take part more frequently than the ‘White’ group. The ‘Asian’ group has the lowest participation rates. 2

Ethnic minorities’ low levels of participation have negative health implications. Participation rates fall to as low as 18% for the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. Pakistani and Bangladeshi men and women reported worse general health than the general population. This group was more than five times as likely as the general population to have diabetes. 3

Muslim males and females in Great Britain have the highest rates of reported ill health. 13% of Muslim males and 16% of Muslim females were in states of ‘not good’ health. 4

Muslim women’s attitudes towards sport and physical activity

Research into Muslim women’s attitudes towards sport and physical education in Muslim countries has provided some interesting findings. A study in Jordan found that young Muslim female students hold positive attitudes towards participation in PE. Furthermore, they considered PE as having great significance and value in increasing leadership proficiency. 6

However, with regard to parental influence, it appeared that parents were less encouraging of their children taking up the option of PE in further education, with girls getting fewer opportunities due to social constraints.

This is interesting when compared to the views of young Muslim women in the UK, who seem to have negative views regarding PE in schools. Duvall, Sampson and Boote 7 indicated that for young Muslim girls, PE in school evoked negative feelings about physical activity and led to a decrease in participation at post-school age. Thus, environmental and cultural boundaries seem to be a determining factor in young Muslim women’s attitudes towards sport and physical activity.

Barriers facing Muslim women’s participation in sport

Asian women who participated in research carried out by the Women’s Sport and Fitness Foundation (WSFF) 8 said:

“If I did get the chance to go to the gym, I wouldn’t take that chance. I would rather use that free time to spend with my kids.” Bangladeshi, younger than 25.

“When you’ve done a swimming session you come out and you’re tired but it’s a nice tired. But with the kids at the end of the day you’re just so tired you don’t want to move – it’s completely different.” Bangladeshi, older than 25.

Culture – Many Muslim women are constrained by their ethnic backgrounds from participating in sport. For example, research conducted by the WSFF on Bangladeshi women found that they led sedentary lives with little priority given to exercise and physical activity, as it conflicted with their role as a mother and homemaker. 9 Asian cultural ideologies do not always promote exercise and physical activity for women, although many of the women in the research understood its significance for health.

A study in Norway showed that Muslim women who identified themselves in terms of their ethnicity were not interested in participating in sport as it challenged the boundaries of femininity and cultural identity. Those who regarded religion as a source of identification, viewed physical activity positively as it was in line with Islam’s stance on health. 10

2 Sporting Equals, (2005), Increasing Participation in Sport and Physical Activity by Black and Minority Ethnic Communities.
8 Women’s Sport and Fitness Foundation, (2003), Barriers that prevent mothers with young children participating in physical activity.
9 Women’s Sport and Fitness Foundation, (2005), Barriers that prevent mothers with young children participating in physical activity.
Religion – Islam is often cited as the reason why women cannot participate in sport. This is primarily due to a lack of understanding and awareness of the religion. In fact, ensuring good health and fitness for men and women is given paramount importance in Islam. Islam strongly promotes sport and physical activity within certain guidelines, as these are essential tools for sustaining healthy lives.

Mixed groups – This poses major problems for many Muslim women as gyms, swimming pools and sport facilities are not segregated by gender. For some Muslim women this is a violation of modesty; mixed venues, in effect, bar them from participating.

Dress code – The question of dress code has been an issue, as some schools have not catered for this essential need. In order to participate, Muslims might need to follow certain requirements in terms of attire.

Lack of positive role models – The low participation rates among Muslim women are influencing the lack of Muslim female role models. The lack of aspiration and guidance makes it difficult for young Muslim women to engage in sport.

Providing for Muslim women

Some young Muslim women have had negative experiences of PE in schools and this has deterred them from any form of exercise altogether. These situations may occur when schools are reluctant to respond positively to the dress requirements and other faith obligations for Muslim girls. Thus, it is important that schools and other sporting facilities are aware of the needs of this group of women and offer appropriate arrangements so they can practice their faith and participate in sport, without having to compromise on either.

It is important to ensure good practice in gyms and sports facilities, as negative experiences may lead to Muslim girls becoming disengaged from physical activity in the long run. If they repeatedly experience situations where physical activity is incompatible with their religious values, they may come to believe that such activity is inaccessible to them. This will then have significant implications for the women of this community.

A key and simple solution is allowing Muslim women to wear clothes that they feel comfortable in. For example, for swimming, they may wish to cover more than a conventional swimming costume would. This does not need to compromise safety guidelines, as many producers of swimwear cater for Muslim women.

In addition, sports facilities need to ensure that single-sex facilities are made available. This is crucial for Muslim women, as it is a requirement of their faith to not participate in mixed sports or events. It is important that Muslim women can participate in sport without concerns about male participants or coaches attending.

This is not an issue solely for Muslim women, as research shows that many non-Muslim women prefer to engage in sport and physical activity when these are conducted in female-only classes. To enable Muslim women to increase participation in sport and physical activity, it is vital to ensure that single-sex classes, women instructors and flexible dress requirements are in practice.

Resources for identifying good practice

Sisters Games – This initiative aims to make adequate provisions for Muslim women who want to participate in sport and physical activity but have found it difficult to do so. Sisters Games were launched in Birmingham in June 2006 to cater specifically for Muslim women. The website, www.sistersgames.com, has been set up to help organise and advertise sporting and social events for Muslim women in and around Birmingham. Particular attention is given to events that meet the needs of Muslim women, especially with respect to single-sex provision and other Islamic values.

Female Participation: Minority Ethnic Communities – A study by sportscotland examines social inclusion in sport for minority ethnic groups in Scotland and provides a list of key indicators of good practice and future research considerations.

Loughborough University – The University offers coaching courses exclusively for Muslim women. The programme is designed to develop skills as sport coaches and leaders and ensure a representative sample of women in coaching positions. This is an excellent opportunity for Muslim women to act as role models and encourage Muslim women to take up sport by highlighting the mental, physical and personal benefits that they can achieve.


The sportscotland group is made up of sportscotland, sportscotland Trust Company (National Centres) and the Scottish Institute of Sport.

Women’s Sport and Fitness Foundation
Third Floor
Victoria House
Bloomsbury Square
London
WC1B 4SE

Tel 020 7273 1740
Fax 020 7273 1981
info@wsff.org.uk
www.wsff.org.uk

Registered charity number 1060267

The work of the Women’s Sport and Fitness Foundation is motivated by our vision of a nation of active women, where sport and exercise is an integral part of everyday life.

sportscotland documents are available in a range of formats and languages. Please contact our communications team on 0131 317 7200 for more information.

© sportscotland 2008.
Published by sportscotland

ISBN: 978 1 85060 524 9
WSF1 1108 1M