



**Facts and figures about women and girls in sport**

# Muslim women in sport: A minority within a minority?

The world of sports is male dominated but women are becoming more visible. There are challenging issues about the visibility of Muslim women in sport. 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 this debate and WSF attempt to address some of these questions.

## Islam, Muslim women and sport

There are several misconceptions regarding Muslim women participating in sport. Women of Islam are represented as oppressed and unable to engage with society and in sports. In fact Islam promotes good health and fitness for both men and women. However there are guidelines within which sports can be practiced; this entails women following their faith by not engaging in mixed gender sports and by observing a dress code. This consists of covering the hair and wearing modest clothing by covering the arms and legs.

Islam encourages building up an integrated personality and 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. The practice and interpretation of Islam are affected

by national, cultural and ethnic factors. Due to religious misinterpretations or simply a lack of awareness, many Muslim women have been prevented from participating in sports.

These contribute to Muslim women's comparatively lower participation rate. Other factors which contribute to this are the lack of single sex provisions which can put young women off sport and physical activity. This may also include early negative experiences of P.E. 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 young Muslim women's attitudes towards sports and physical activity in this society.

### Participation and health

*Note: There are no statistics that show physical activity participation by differ-*

*ent 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 per cent of people from Pakistan and Bangladesh are Muslims (Census 2001). However this data has to be interpreted with caution as many people from other ethnic groups also follow Islam.*

Ethnic minorities' low levels of participation have negative health implications. This is perhaps due to variables such as diet, housing, low activity levels and exercise etc.

Among ethnic minority communities, participation is below the national average. Only those within the 'Mixed Race' category take part more frequently than 'White', with 'Asian' group having the lowest participation rates. (Sporting Equals, 2005).

Participation rates fall to as low as 18 per cent for the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. Pakistani and Bangladeshi men

and women reported worse general health than the general population (Office for National Statistics, 2002).

Pakistanis and Bangladeshis of both sexes were more than five times as likely as the general population to have diabetes (Health Survey for England, 1999).

Muslim males and females in Great Britain have the highest rates of reported ill health. 13 per cent for Muslim males and 16 per cent for Muslim females were in rates of 'not good' health (Office for National Statistics, 2001).

### **Muslim women's attitudes towards sports and physical activity**

Research into Muslim women's attitudes towards sports 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 (Abu-Dalbou, 1997). 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 the schools. Duvall, Sampson and Boote (2004) 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**

Quotes from Asian women who participated in WSF research:

*"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, <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, >25.

**Culture** - Many Muslim women are constrained by their ethnic backgrounds from participating in sport. For example, research conducted by WSF 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 home-keeper (WSF, 2005). Asian cultural ideologies do not always promote exercise and physical activity in women, although many of the women in the research understood its significance. There is research to support such a view. A study in Norway shows 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 regard religion as a source of identification, viewed physical activity positively as it was in line with Islam's stance on health (Walseth, 2006).

**Religion** - Islam is often cited as the reason why women cannot participate in sport. This is primarily due to a lack of under-

standing and awareness of the religion as 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 health lives.

**Mixed-groups** - This poses major problems as many Muslim women are put off the idea of playing sport as gyms and sport facilities are not segregated in terms of gender.

**Dress code** - The question of dress code has been an issue, as some schools have not catered for this essential need (Duval et al. 2004). In order to participate, Muslims 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/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 what a conventional swimming costume may allow.

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.

### Evidence of 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 was launched in Birmingham in June 2006 to cater specifically for Muslim women. The website, 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 which meet the

needs of Muslim women, especially with respect to single-sex provision and other Islamic values.

**Female Participation - British Minority Ethnic Groups** – This study by sportscotland, (2000) 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.

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The Women's Sports Foundation has a vision of a society which celebrates the diversity of women and girls, and enables them to benefit from, excel at and fulfil their potential through the sport of their choice.

### Supporting women's sport

The Women's Sports Foundation is the only organisation that works solely to increase opportunities for women and girls. We are a small team of seven people, campaigning for women's sport. These fact files are provided to you free of charge to help raise awareness of the issues – and empower you to advocate for change. However, if you would like to make a contribution to cover admin costs, and to support women's sport, please visit our website and follow the links to the 'make a donation' section.