

Building cultural inclusion in sport

—
INSIGHTS FROM MUSLIM WOMEN IN
SPORT AND ACTIVE RECREATION

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Acknowledgments

Ngā mihi nui ki a koe to the 106 individuals from Aotearoa New Zealand's Muslim communities and sport sectors who shared their lived experiences and knowledge with us. Their voices provided insights into how those working in the sports sector can make a difference for Muslim women and the wider ethnic communities. Jazākom Allāhu Khayran, mihi koe koutou katoa.

Overview

This report is the first to explore how Muslim women access sport and active recreation in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the challenges in doing so. We recognize the importance of creating spaces for the voices and experiences of Muslim women themselves, as well as those involved in organizing sport and active recreation with Muslim women participants. This report highlights the key themes that emerged from the conversations with Muslim girls and women, and sports administrators, conducted in Auckland, Christchurch, Waikato and Wellington between June - December 2019.

Contents

Introduction	02
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Methods	03
Project 1: The North Island project	03
Project 2: The Christchurch project	04

The sample: Muslim women	05
---------------------------------	----

The sample: Sports facilitators	07
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Voices of Muslim women	08
Joys and pleasures of sport	09
Safe spaces: Why are they so important?	10
Feelings of exclusion	11
The family and community	12
Clothing	13
Cultural stereotypes and the gaze	14
Athletes	15
Cultural understanding: Why is it important?	16

Sports facilitators	17
Cultural understanding	17
Problematic cultural understanding	18
Challenges	19

Recommendations	20
How to create more inclusive sporting spaces	20
Reflective practice questions	21
Additional resources	22

Introduction

To date, very little research has explored Muslim women's sporting and active recreation participation in Aotearoa. The knowledge gap in Aotearoa is significant in both academic literature and the sporting sector more broadly, and time for this work is now. Thus, with a sense of urgency, the two studies that inform this report were underpinned by the goal of understanding how Muslim women access sport and active recreation in Aotearoa, and the challenges in doing so. This report is the first to explore these issues in Aotearoa. This report is based on two separate studies. The first was completed by researchers (Dr Nida Ahmad and Professor Holly Thorpe) at the University of Waikato in collaboration with researchers at Sport Waikato and Sport New Zealand. The second was completed by Haidee Scott from Perception in collaboration with Sport Canterbury, the Christchurch City Council, Canterbury Cricket and Mainland Football (the partners). The project was launched in response to the March 15, 2019 Christchurch Attack where the Canterbury sporting community wanted to support the Muslim community in its recovery and encourage inclusion in sport and active recreation environments.



Methods

Project 1: The North Island study

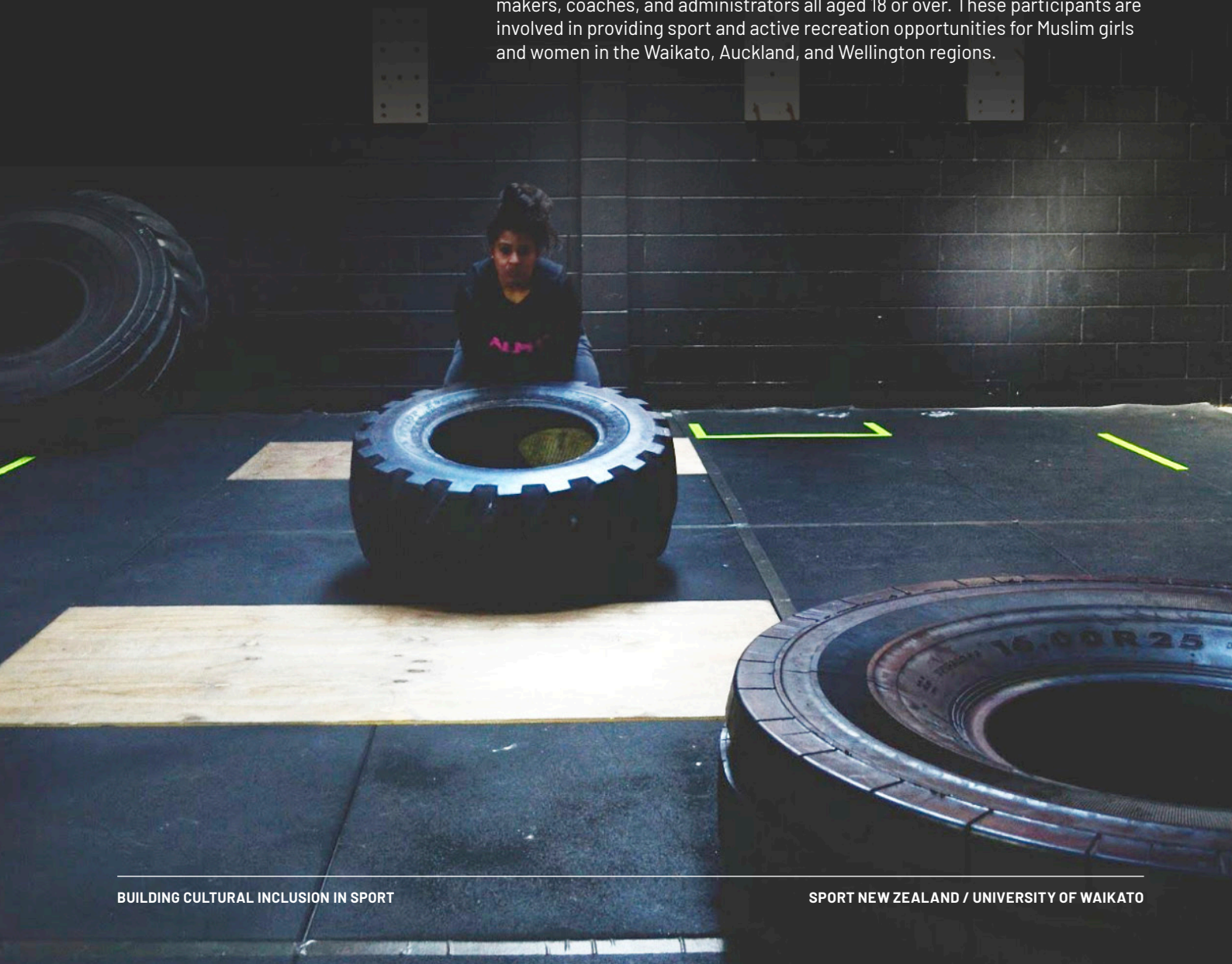
Culturally-sensitive methodology

While many non-Muslim academics around the world have done research on Muslim men and women's experiences of sport and physical activity, working in Aotearoa (and taking inspiration from Kaupapa Māori approaches) we considered it more culturally appropriate for the focus groups to be conducted by a Muslim woman herself. This was an important contributor to the community embrace of the project and larger than anticipated sample.

To capture the diverse experiences of Muslim girls and women and sports facilitators, the team applied targeted and snowball sampling to recruit participants.

A total of 50 individuals participated in the research.

- I. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with 38 Muslim women aged 16 or over in Waikato, Auckland, and Wellington.
- II. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with 12 sports policy makers, coaches, and administrators all aged 18 or over. These participants are involved in providing sport and active recreation opportunities for Muslim girls and women in the Waikato, Auckland, and Wellington regions.



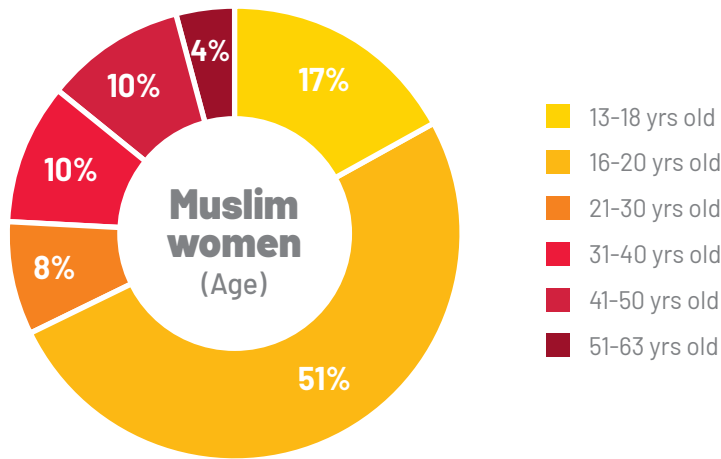
Project 2: The Christchurch study

Perception completed project two between mid to late 2019. Recognizing the importance of sport for community rebuilding following the terrorist shootings at two mosques on March 15, 2019, the project was funded by Sport New Zealand, Sport Canterbury and the Christchurch City Council, with advice from Canterbury Cricket and Mainland Football. This project focused on the experiences of Muslim youth in Christchurch. The experiences of young Muslim women were included in part of this broader study. The Perception team conducted three semi-structured focus groups with 13 young Muslim women aged 13-18 years old. While some focus group participants actively participated in sports, the majority did not. A survey was also shared with the community to which 26 young Muslim women responded. The team also conducted 17 semi-in-depth interviews with educators (i.e. school teachers, principals), sports facilitators, and Muslim community leaders.



The sample: Muslim women

This graph shows the age group of Muslim women who participated in both studies.



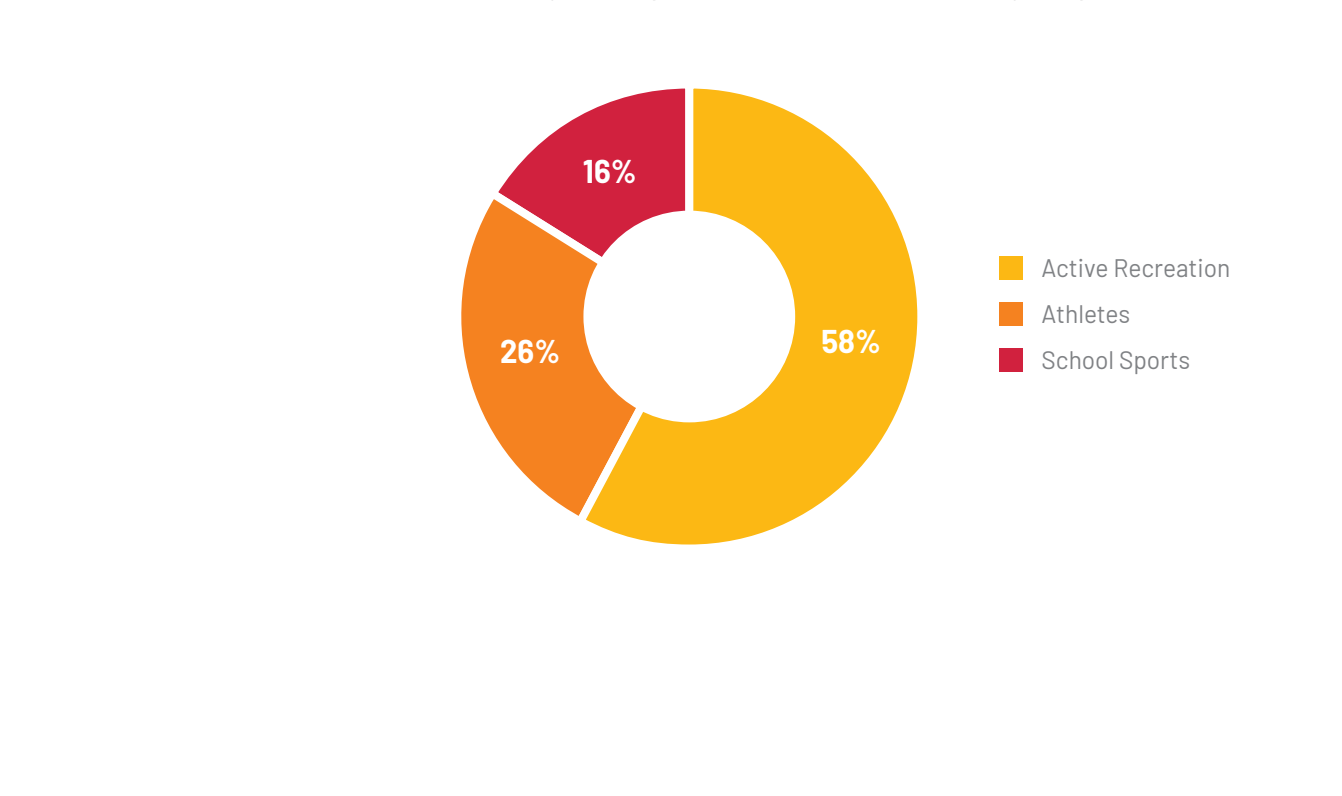
The Muslim women were racially and ethnically diverse and the following image represents the different ethnic groups which participated in the project.



This image highlights the various sports played by the participants. Swimming being one of the most popular activities followed by netball and football.



Approximately 58% of the Muslim women in the sample participate in active recreation sports, 26% of the group is playing school sports (i.e., netball), and 16% compete in regional, national and international sporting events.



The sample: Sports facilitators

A total of 31 took part in the study of which the age range was from 23-53 years old. The participants were ethnically diverse: Europeans (some were NZ European/Pākehā), Indian-Fijian, Indian, Māori, Sri Lankan. Within the sample, some worked in the regional sports sector, others lead local and grassroots sports programs within their local communities, including physical educators, school principals, coaches, manager of a community sports clubs, and youth sports managers.



Voices of Muslim women

The following pages identify the key factors that influenced Muslim women's experiences in sport and active recreation in both positive and negative ways. This section also illustrates some of the strategies they developed to gain and maintain access to sport and active recreation despite some barriers. Exemplar quotes are offered under each theme to provide space for the women's voices and insights, and to reveal some of the nuances within each theme.

A key distinction between the projects is that Project One recruited Muslim women (16-69 years) who actively participate in sport and active recreation, Project Two focused on youth (13-18 years) and included Muslim young women who are no longer active participants. Recognizing the importance of both sets of experiences, this section of the report includes the voices and experiences of both active and non-active Muslim women (13-69 years).



Joys and pleasures of sport

Many of women participated in a wide range of activities and recognized the many social, physical and psychological benefits of regular participation:

- The women found much pleasure and joy in their sporting and active recreation participation, and valued it strongly as positive force in their lives.
- Sports and active recreation played a vital role in mental well being, and offered a temporary reprieve from their busy lives.
- Sports and active recreation was highly valued for its opportunities to build relationships with other women and family members.
- While many preferred indoor activities, those who participated outdoors found great inspiration and joy in the outdoor environment.

“

Sport helps me to overcome this feeling of being in a new country.”

BILQUIS

“

I love netball because I like the team work. I like how fast the game goes. It's a really exciting sport, it's so exciting.”

ZARA

“

I can't emphasise how beautiful it is to actually move your body... I feel there is a certain type of blessing that comes with it. Being outside and on the water, it's just one of the most beautiful experiences.”

JAZMIN

Safe spaces: Why are they so important?

The Muslim women discussed the importance of 'safe space'. However, the concept of safe space is multi layered with various interpretations. While most referred to 'safe space' as women-only environments, others mentioned the importance of finding facilities where they experienced cultural respect, understanding, and belonging.

- Women-only spaces allowed for a greater sense of privacy where the women felt comfortable participating in sports and active recreation.
- The women sought out sports facilities that were respectful and made efforts to build culturally-friendly environments (i.e., prayer spaces).
- 'Safe spaces' offered the women a sense of belonging and feeling welcomed by the community, facility, and sports administrators.
- A few of the Muslim women had set-up their own women-only programmes (i.e., boxing) to help other Muslim women to find 'safe' and supportive spaces for active recreation.

“

I created a women's only boxing class, to feel confident. You are dealing with Muslim women out there that don't have anything to do with men and some wear a niqab, and they need to come into an environment where no man is present.”

NOOR

“

So many other women, lots of girls and women wanting to go for women-only because...they don't feel comfortable with men staring at them.”

SHAKIRA



Feelings of exclusion

The women identified a number of challenges in accessing sport and active recreation:

- Many of the women discussed the challenges of appropriate access to facilities or resources (i.e., money, childcare, car) to participate in sports or active recreation.
- Cost and location were key considerations for their own and their children's sporting participation.
- Some experienced discouragement from family members and the Muslim community.
- Many had experienced feelings of exclusion and not being welcomed at particular sport and active recreation facilities, by both staff and other patrons.

“

One day, we were coming out of the pool...at busy time... and some people... were so angry. They said 'why do you have to go to the pool; we don't care... we are just coming in.' And the man came inside and that was really embarrassing for us because we are in a swimming suit.”

HAYA

“

Sometimes our own people are the ones that are causing our downfall like whispering, “What are you doing? That is haram. You shouldn't do that. Oh rock climbing, that is haram! Oh, sister, what are you doing?”

SABA

The family and community

Some of the women in our sample described encountering discouragement from family or community members. However, the majority had discussions with their family about their desire to participate in sport and/or active recreation. Through such conversations many had come to agreements in what was acceptable sporting participation. For many of the participants, they received active support and encouragement from their family (i.e., mothers, fathers, husbands) and friends. Some had also received support from community religious leaders (Imams).

“

Actually sitting your parents down and being like, 'Is this a cultural thing or is this a religious thing?' That's what you have to identify for me because I don't think our religion says women can't participate in sport and they can't do this, and they can't reach Olympic level, which we should have been doing a long time ago. It's cultural stuff, it's cultural bearing, it's the women's role because that's not Islamic, that's a cultural thing. As much as we try to put on Islam, at the end of the day it's not."

ZAYNAH

“

My mum is really supportive of it. She's the one that got me into football in the first place. She really wants me to just go for it, like anything that I'm like, "Oh, I would be kind of interested in that" she'd be like, "Go for it." Or like if she sees opportunities, she'll send it to me and she'll make sure I'm supported in doing."

LINA

“

I love sports. I'm a competitive person ... I don't feel restricted, and have never had any issues playing sports. My parents happily support me and have paid for all my fees to play sports at school."

ASMA

“

Before I do something, I do my research first because as a Muslim you have to find out things. I look at the fatwah [Islamic ruling] and also discuss it with the Sheikh/Iman if training in mixed martial arts with men is okay. The Sheikh asked about my intentions and why am I doing this and explained one of my reasons is from protection. According to him "Look, based on this, your intention, what you're going to do, go ahead." So, I continued with my training"

SABA

“

So, then I started putting a bit of muscle on and I'll come home, and I'll be like, "Mum, look at my arms, look at this" and she was like, "No, you just look like a guy now." I'm like, 'oh, but I'm not manly, like I'm not that big'. But my dad would encourage it and my dad's like, "No, this is good. Continue getting stronger and fitter."

AMIN

Clothing

The Muslim women identified challenges in sporting uniforms and some create sporting-specific clothing.

- All of the women identified the importance of dressing modestly when participating in sport. This meant some sports (i.e., gymnastics) became unavailable when Muslim girls become young women.
- Many participating in sport experienced challenges with uniform restrictions (i.e., netball skirts and shorts). When discussed with sports organizations, they had little success in negotiating alternatives.
- Some women had taken to designing and sewing their own clothing for the purposes of comfortable sport participation.

“

With netball the skirts are pretty short so my parents were really against that but then you couldn't really wear leggings.”

SADIYA

“

They told me off because of my hijab. They were saying, ‘You can't compete in that. I don't care whether it's your religion or not; safety comes first.’

KHADIJA

“

My mum sews a lot, so when I first started wearing the hijab she actually made me one because I used to play basketball. It's kind of cool, just showing off like, I'm successful but I'm also hijabi!”

LINA

Cultural stereotype and the gaze

Some of the women felt that people were always watching them because of their visible difference (i.e., hijab). For some women this made them feel very uncomfortable because they felt there was a sense of judgement with such gaze. Some also felt they were being read as 'the Other' or 'out of place' in sport and active recreation. For some of the younger Muslim women who no longer participate in school sports, the primary reasons were that they felt out of place and judged by others at schools. The young women expressed interest in taking part in activities that were offered in physical education classes.

A few developed their own strategies to navigate the gaze.

“

I know that these people have something in their minds for the hijabi, a certain image, being oppressed or whatever...I just smile and say okay and they go [away]. But sometimes I just want to be out of focus, to be comfortable. I feel tired, and sometimes I just want to relax [sic] without being judged and attacked because I'm wearing my hijab.”

BILQUIS

“

I feel like, when I wear hijab, I stand out from the rest and I'm being judged by non-Muslims.”

SANAA

“

I feel like people have really bad stereotypes of Muslims, especially women. So having more women participate in sports and getting out there and being more confident breaks a lot of stereotypes... because our religion actually encourages sports.”

AMINA



Athletes

Six of the Muslim women were competitive athletes, training for local, national and international competition in a range of sports. The women discussed how they are navigating culture and religion in high performance environments, including:

- The cultural importance of food in the lives of Muslim athletes and training around Ramadan and how they meal prepped for competitions.
- Relationships with coaches, with some finding coaches to be highly supportive of their cultural needs.
- Many of the participants have ambitious career aspirations in sport and are gaining inspiration from Muslim sportswomen overseas to drive their training and ambitious goals. Navigating limited number of opportunities to pursue a career path in sports.
- Many noted, they feel discouraged by the lack of visibility of Muslim sportswomen in New Zealand sports organizations and media coverage.

“

In Ramadan, I did train a lot. I trained after iftar. I tried to eat a lot of carbs, because obviously our main source of energy comes from carbs which kept me going.”

DINA

“

The Football Ferns that’s definitely my goal to be the first Muslim hijabi in – It’d be really cool if I could do that. It’s like representing heaps of girls my age that want to do that kind of stuff.”

LINA

“

At one of the competitions I told my coach ‘I need to do my prayers.’ He said, ‘Oh, yeah, sure, where do you want to pray? Everybody, out, out, out. She wants to do her prayers. Out. Do you need something? A prayer mat? We’ll close the door. Just let us know what you need.”

SABA

Cultural understanding: Why is it important?

Many of the Muslim women identified their concerns around the lack of cultural understandings in the sport and active recreation sector.

Some expressed frustration with some sports providers and facilitators who repeated and reinforced stereotypical understandings of Muslim women.

Some also questioned the assumptions underpinning sports organizations claims to diversity.

Some Muslim women explicitly challenged those who voiced such stereotypical understandings.

“

Don't you dare try to tell me or define me.”

KHADIJA

“

It's a lack of effort. Sports facilitators don't want to put in the effort of learning. Just educate yourself, be aware that there are different people. Sport is a good way to have these conversations because you're participating with them, you're competing together, you're working together.”

ZAYNAH

“

They really focus on diversity. People really like seeing me in this kind of stuff because it's "diverse". It's kind of funny because in my women's team right now, my manager always talks about how he likes the diversity in our team. But everyone is Caucasian and then there's just me and this other girl. He's like, "So diverse" and I'm like, "Yeah, sure. Okay.”

LINA

Sports facilitators

Cultural understanding

The research also included interviews with 31 sports facilitators involved in organizing or supporting sport for Muslim girls and women. These sports facilitators were from a range of different cultural backgrounds, and hold a range of roles, including coaches, trainers, educators and regional sports and active recreation providers.

The sports facilitators spoke about their various efforts to accommodate culturally appropriate spaces for Muslim women and girls, but felt there was little support in their workplaces to facilitate their work with the Muslim community (i.e., a private room for prayers).

Others had gone to great lengths to educate themselves and create a sense of belonging (i.e., celebrating cultural/religious events such as Eid). All expressed a need for more support and education for those working with the Muslim community.

“

Everything is made sure so that it's just women only, Our school and principal, they make sure that it's Islamically culturally appropriate for us, so there's no men, food is halal, it's a nice private area and we still get the opportunities to do things and enjoy things that people would do without any of these restrictions.”

TALA
Non-Muslim physical fitness teacher

“

They are really for the program and they'll always make sure they listen to how the ladies feel. They're not going to make them feel uncomfortable. They will always talk through and explain and make it fun so they can enjoy it and so they want to come back.”

MAI
Non-Muslim sports facilitator working with migrant and refugee women

“

These people are just coming to New Zealand. They are bringing in their amazing diverse cultures. But if you don't extend your welcoming hands, how are they going to learn about you? That is my question. Through [my program] I want to give that welcoming hand so that they feel like they are connected.”

KAT
Non-Muslim sports facilitator



Problematic cultural understanding

Sports facilitators had varied understandings of family, cultural and religious issues around participating in sports. Some resorted to stereotypical understandings that did not reflect the diversity of the community.

Many of the sports facilitators suggested the main barriers for Muslim girls and women's participation was their families and cultural restrictions. This was in direct contrast to the voices of the Muslim women themselves who identified the lack of cultural understanding in the sector to be one of the main barriers.

“

If they [Muslim women] are migrating to this culture, they have to accept it.”

ALISHA
Non-Muslim sports facilitator working with migrant women

“

Middle aged women cover themselves in a full burqa and will be shy to come out by themselves and drive alone and talk to a male person. That is something that comes from their own culture with the male dominant society, with the background linked to inequalities between genders.”

JESSICA
Non-Muslim sports facilitator working with migrant women

Challenges

The sports facilitators expressed a range of frustrations and challenges they encountered:

- Lack of support and cultural understanding from national level sporting bodies
- Limited funding especially for community sports organizers
- Issues around facilities for women to play sport
- Transportation issues
- Not enough Muslim women coaches/sports leaders
- Issues of racism and discrimination not being addressed by sports administrators

“

Kiwis are scared that we'll get it wrong. If we had some guidelines and support resources that had been produced in conjunction with the Muslim community then you're going to feel a lot more empowered, more competent and capable to make the right calls.”

PAUL
Non-Muslim Sports Educator

“

Racism is everyday and in different forms. People are quite biased when they're in the [top] position...especially when one's 'skin colour does not match with their colour'.”

ARJUN
Non-Muslim male working with young athletes

“

We need to know what the current status of racism or discrimination is like before we can manage it and do something about it. We need to know what it looks like in its different forms and being open and honest about that, and then doing something about it. At the moment things are just being pushed to the side or people are covering their eyes when things happen.”

TAIKA
Non-Muslim male sports manager

Recommendations

How to create more inclusive sporting spaces

01

To build more culturally inclusive sporting spaces, sport and active recreation organizations should begin by:

- Revisiting sporting policies with the aim for eliminating statements that could be limiting to Muslim girls and women (e.g., modest uniform options should be available to all).
- It is helpful to investigate sporting policies alongside the practices: Initiate and invest in a widespread cultural education program, such that staff across all levels of an organization are empowered with knowledge that will improve their relations with the Muslim community. This will likely need to begin with brave conversations around what staff do and do not know. It is only from here that progress can be made.

02

Sports facilitators and coaches working directly with Muslim women and girls need support to become familiar with the different cultural practices.

03

Sports organizations could hire and/or consult with cultural facilitators to improve staff understandings and everyday practices.

04

The sector should work towards cultural safety training as available throughout the sector, as it is in other sectors, with a cultural capability team available to support staff.

05

The Muslim community is diverse and all efforts should be made to include voices of multiple Muslim women when creating programmes and/or policies that will impact their communities. Rather than simply inviting the 'token' Muslim woman into the conversation, work hard to invite multiple women from the community.

06

Women-only spaces should be prioritised and respected within sports organizations and active recreation facilities. Such spaces help to address the cultural and religious needs of Muslim women and their families. In such cases, Muslim women should be consulted in the co-design phase of such initiatives.

07

Muslim women should be supported to fill leadership positions in sport and active recreation (i.e., coaching, board members of sporting organizations).

08

Increase the visibility of Muslim women in sports (i.e., articles featuring Muslim women as athletes, coaches, community organizers; inviting Muslim women to be guest writers on sports columns).

Reflective practice questions

For all working in the sport and active recreation sector, there is a commitment to working towards upholding the dignity, values and beliefs of people and their diverse cultural identities. Below are some reflective questions to consider. It is only from such reflection and critical questioning that best practice can emerge:

- How might I reflect on and challenge my assumptions regarding Muslim women and girls participation in sport and active recreation?
- How do I mitigate the impact of my own values, culture and beliefs on Muslim girls and women's ability to participate in sports?
- Who do I need around me to ensure I respect cultural and other traditions while also making sure the patterns of discrimination are broken?
- How do I challenge my own beliefs and values around ethnicity, race, religion, culture and diversity?
- Is my cultural knowledge acceptable and of a standard to offer improvement to people's situation? Do I know when I need to draw on the expertise of others?
- How do I regularly reflect on my level of cultural knowledge and develop my cross-cultural literacy and fluency?
- What networks are available in my community that could support me/ my organisation to increase our knowledge of Islamic culture, our Muslim community in Aotearoa and develop cultural competency?
- How might you adapt your offerings to ensure your facilities and support staff create a respectful and culturally friendly environment where Muslim women and girls feel safe and supported to participate?
- How can you incorporate co-design into your initiative/s to ensure facilities and programmes are culturally inclusive and supportive?
- How might you champion role models to increase visibility of Muslim women and girls participating in sport and active recreation?
- How might you adapt your uniform policies to reduce barriers experienced by Muslim women and girls?
- What bicultural, multicultural and cultural responsiveness training is provided for staff? And for a manager or practice supervisor? What training and support is available for my staff who are working with the Muslim community?
- As a sports organization how do we improve our cultural effectiveness, cultural knowledge and the availability of culturally appropriate responses?
- What ongoing professional development and education in the areas of culture and leadership have I sought?

Additional resources

Muslim women and sport literature

Benn, T. (1996). Muslim women and physical education in initial teacher training. *Sport, Education and Society*, 1(1), 5-21.

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Building cultural inclusion in sports

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Cultural safety and cultural competence

The Ministerial Group on Family Violence and Sexual Violence has provided a detailed report on cultural competence guidelines which have been adopted by various sectors in Aotearoa and the same can be applied to sporting sector.

<https://www.justice.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Publications/family-violence-workforce-capability-framework.pdf>

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