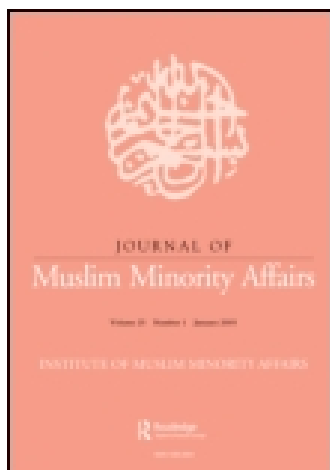


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Participation of Muslim Female Students in Sporting Activities in Australian Public High Schools: The Impact of Religion

ABEER AHMED ALAMRI

Abstract

This paper looks at the participation of Muslim female students in sporting activities in Australian public high schools. Specifically, the study examines how Muslim female students interpret their participation in school sporting activities and how their Islamic background influences the way they perceive their engagement within the school environment. This paper also argues that Muslim girls' participation in school sporting activities is influenced by the struggle between their identity as Muslims, Islamic dress codes and the sporting requirements. Initially, the paper will examine the importance of sporting activities in the general development of adolescent students, as well as shows how Muslim students view their Islamic identity and what implication this view may have on their engagement in sports. Furthermore, the paper will discuss the struggle between the Islamic identity of female Muslim students and Australian school sporting requirements in light of two important Islamic teachings: (i) dress code and (ii) mixing or interaction with the opposite sex.

Introduction

The global crises, such as wars and the economic and political movements, are some of the contemporary issues that have changed the demographic map of the world. Huge numbers of multi-ethnic individuals have migrated from their countries, chasing the media promises of Western freedom, equality, tolerance and wealth. Therefore, many developed countries have become culturally diverse due to higher rates of refugees and immigration.¹ According to an Australian Government publication “Muslim Youth Summits Report, 2007”, Australia is one of the young developed countries that is continually looking for skilled migrants, therefore, it has become well known for its multiculturalism that offers better opportunities for those who are seeking it.² Mansouri and Kamp argue that although this diversity may positively influence the economy of Australia, it creates great challenges to the Australian educational authorities to develop multicultural education systems and policies that effectively provide equivalent opportunities for the culturally diverse society.³ Yasmeen elaborates further on this idea, she states that it is difficult for minority students to adjust in a dominant education system that often discounts their historical background.⁴ As argued by a number of scholars, the ignorance of historical differences, such as colonisation, wars and religious discrimination, may lead to a lack of social engagement among minority students.⁵

Muslims, in particular, are the most culturally diverse religious group in Australia who come from many countries and primarily from Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey and Afghanistan, to improve the quality of their families' lives.⁶ A study by Mansouri and Kamp that

investigated the educational and social experiences of Arab-Australian youth points out that Muslims face great challenges in Australian society, for example, “Islamophobia” that causes hostility and anger towards them, especially after the tragedy of 9/11 in the USA.⁷ The Australian media concerning Muslims has widened the social gap between Muslims and other Australians.⁸ According to an Australian Government report “Muslim Youth Summits Report, 2007”, the Australian media has further alienated and marginalised the entire Muslim community.⁹ Such media influence in turn leads to misunderstanding and misleading assumptions about the religious needs of Muslims in Western societies, such as women’s dress code including the *hijab*.¹⁰

The Australian Government publication “Muslim Youth Summits Report, 2007” further indicates that educational research and practice in Australia have also contributed to this dilemma, not only by underestimating the effect of racism on young Muslims, especially after the 9/11 incident, but also by the limited understanding of cultural needs of Muslim students.¹¹ Therefore, as argued by Bigelow, it is difficult for Muslim students to be fully engaged in the Western public schooling environment.¹² Nevertheless, a Canadian study by Zine, investigating gendered Islamophobia and experiences of veiling among Muslim girls, revealed that female Muslim students in particular are facing greater challenges because their *hijab* increases their visibility as Muslims and this image is often associated with the “uneducated”, “oppressed” and “backward”.¹³ Consequently, it becomes difficult for Muslim girls to be socially engaged in Western public schools.¹⁴ Alongside these challenges, Muslim female students encounter additional issues when participating in school sporting activities, particularly as a result of their religious and cultural practices as indicated by Dagkas and Benn.¹⁵

Sporting Activities and Student Development in Schools

The context of school is considered an important social influence in the lives of young students.¹⁶ In their study “Extracurricular Activity and Ethnicity”, Brown and Evans found that a strong sense of connection between students and their school setting has been found to be highly related to school achievement, decreased problem behaviours and a decreased dropout rate.¹⁷ They further argue that although several factors may contribute to a student’s sense of attachment to his/her school, the engagement in school sporting activities has been argued as a reason for a greater connection to school being encouraged.¹⁸ Gilman, Meyers and Perez defined school sporting activities as “highly structured, collaborative activities that are under the guidance of a competent set of adults”.¹⁹

School activities in Canadian schools include outdoor sports, such as football, cross-country running, netball and swimming.²⁰ Such activities not only support the development of a student’s wellbeing but also encourage positive behaviour.²¹ As students approach adolescence, they need positive settings that provide the opportunity to build their important internal resources. Researchers have long suggested that participating in school sporting activities can provide a significant source of positive influence in the lives of students.²² Therefore, and as stated by Brown, rather than preventing students’ problematic behaviours, schools and parents need to work towards building their ability to resist negative outcomes, such as antisocial behaviours.²³ However, and despite the large amount of literature focusing on the context of youth development, Feldman and Jennifer note that little attention has been paid to the role of sporting activities in schools, which is a central setting for student development.²⁴ They further indicate that participation in school sporting activities is particularly important in high school

for several reasons: (i) engagement in school sporting activities for students in their early adolescence youth is associated with positive outcomes, such as aspiration and educational achievement;²⁵ (ii) students involved in school sporting activities have the opportunity to increase and develop a sense of belonging, relationships with diverse peers, students' motivation and self-esteem while promoting a positive attitude towards school during this period and (iii) engagement in school sporting activities reduces the dropout rate and problematic social behaviours, as well as lowers the negative emotional rate.²⁶

Brown and Evans argue that although the correlation between school sporting activities and students' positive development appears to be widely held, little discussion has focused on how this relationship may differ among ethnic groups in Western societies.²⁷ A number of scholars noted that the influence of different activities varies with different ethnicities and genders.²⁸ Female Muslim students in particular may experience some difficulty when participating in Western school sporting activities as a result of cultural differences and religious requirements.²⁹

The Influence of Islam on the Identity of Muslim Students

In this paper, it is important to address the issues related to Islamic religion and its effect on the identity of Muslim students in order to understand the level of influence that it has on female students engaged in school sporting activities. According to Shah, the formation of identity is a complex dynamic process, as well as a lifelong developmental one.³⁰ Britto takes it a step further, arguing that identity formation is multidimensional and consists of various aspects, such as cultural background, family structure, sex, race, education and occupation. He further asserts that identity is a crucial factor that emerges from the interaction between the individual and her/his environment.³¹ Shah defined identity as "the names we give to different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves".³²

In her study "Understanding Muslim Identities: From Perceived Relative Exclusion to Inclusion", Yasmeen highlights that the complexity of identity formation may seem greater for Muslims because they are not descended from one ethnic group but rather from diverse cultures and ethnicities.³³ However, many studies have revealed that Muslims strongly subscribe to their Islamic identity more than their ethnicity or cultural background. Although Muslim students are ethnically diverse and share different views and practices of Islam, their own identification as being Muslims is a marker of their cultural identity.³⁴ This is perhaps because the formation of Muslim identity is highly influenced by their religious background. A study by Shah investigating Muslim students in two secondary schools in England reports that Muslim students' narratives on how they define their identity as 'Muslim' clearly show the strong effect of their Islamic religion on their cultural identity:

I'm not that religious but I'm Muslim.³⁵

Muslims are one body ... religious element binds us all.³⁶

I'm Muslim before anything else. I would say I am a British, I would also say I am a Pakistani but it's less important than Muslim.³⁷

Indeed, and as stated by Yasmeen, Muslim identity plays an important role in the lives of Muslim students and there is a strong link between the issues of identity and their

experiences at school.³⁸ Shah's study "Muslim Learners in English Schools: A Challenge for School Leaders" reports that Muslims identity has become a sensitive issue in the Western educational setting because of its implications for educational inclusion.³⁹ Zine provides a proper explanation to Shah's finding as she states that the sensitivity of Muslims' identity in Western educational system is due to the complex relationship between the Islamic identity from one side and social differences from another.⁴⁰ The complexity of the situation between the issues of identity and schools' inclusion is very important, especially at the secondary school level because it is the age of shaping one's identity and more challenging to its constructions.⁴¹ Britto elaborates further on this idea and argues that the formation of a Muslim student's ethnic identity is challenging due to inherent complexities of being a minority in a dominant Western society. These challenges emerged from being often separated and isolated by their peers within an academic setting.⁴²

Moreover, a study by Zine investigating the politics and religious identity of young Muslims in Canadian schools highlights that Muslim students in Western society often face challenges, such as discrimination and racism, as a result of their Islamic identity even in schools that have a culturally diverse society.⁴³ They may also experience different degrees of marginalisation and exclusion from the wider society due to their Islamic identity and cultural misunderstandings, which may hinder their educational engagement and interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers in a school situation.⁴⁴ As a result, it may influence self-perception and self-esteem of students with implications for their performance and outcomes in their schools.⁴⁵ However, Dinh and Nguyen's study on South Asian families shows that if the cultural tradition of young people is incompatible with the norm of their host culture, students often struggle to negotiate two different cultures, which in turn will bring about great risks of ethno-cultural identity conflict. Such conflicts may lead to miscommunication, misunderstanding and clashes between the traditional values of minority group and the wider dominant society.⁴⁶

Williams, in his recent study of growing up Indian in New Zealand, has supported Dinh and Nguyen's argument as he claims that the conflict between cultural tradition and the value of the mainstream has been elaborated as the "problem of culture".⁴⁷ Zine illustrates how Muslim students negotiate their identity through struggling between their religious and ethnic identities and their needs for acceptance by Western society. A study by Zine investigating the politics and religious identity of young Muslims in Canadian school highlights how Muslim students were able to negotiate and maintain their religious identities within secular public schools. Using a case study of 10 Muslim students and their parents, the study reports that participants' narratives address the challenges of peer pressure, racism and Islamophobia. Their stories reveal how Muslim students are located at the nexus of social difference based on their race, gender and religious identity. The discussion further explores the dynamics through which these youth were able to negotiate the continuity of their Islamic identity and practices within schools despite the challenges that they faced. In addition, the study concludes that Muslim individuals negotiate their identity formation through three forces which are Islamic identity, ethnic identity and dominant culture acceptance. Such a view is reflected by a Muslim student as:

There's lots of challenges because I think it's natural to want to be accepted when you're growing up when you're young and you don't really have an identity. Because first of all you're Indian and then you're living in a white society and you're also trying to be accepted, but at the same time you want to be prac-

ting Islam. It's a big struggle until you get a very strong identity as a Muslim and it takes a lot of years to build up. Trying to fit in is a hard thing to get over, but once you get over it you're very strong.⁴⁸

Therefore, in order to overcome the struggles and challenges of identity formation for Muslim students who live in a Western culture, it is very important to understand their identity, as well as offer social support to assist them to maintain their identity as Muslims while accepting them in the society at large.⁴⁹ An American study by Merry, investigating the role of culture, identity and Islamic schooling, states that the more the students who can identify with the majority of cultures in a school setting, the more the chance of positive school outcomes for these students.⁵⁰ Continuing in the same direction, identity and social inclusion have been strongly linked.⁵¹ For example, students who develop and shape their identity within the dominant society in order to find inclusion in their schooling environment appear to be fully engaged with the various settings of the school and they integrate better with the wider community.⁵² However, it could be argued that students with a strong cultural identity, such as Muslims, may require a different sober approach that focuses on understanding their Islamic needs while introducing different aspects of the dominant Australian culture that do not conflict with their Islamic belief. Such a balanced approach may positively contribute to the richness of the Australian society at large and help to avoid cultural conflict. Therefore, Adibi argues that as a multicultural society, it is important for Australians to be aware and understand an individual's identity and cultural differences.⁵³ It is clear from the above argument Mansouri and Trembath claim that the Islamic identity has made a major impact on the educational and social engagement of Muslim students.⁵⁴ Such strong influence of the Islamic religion on the Muslim identity may lead Muslim female students to disengage in any activity that does not conform to their Islamic belief.

Muslim Girls, Islamic Dress Code and the *hijab*

According to an Australian Government report "Muslim Youth Summits Report, 2007", despite positive societal efforts by Australians to integrate minorities and immigrants into Western society,⁵⁵ immigrants still face subtle prejudice, racism and discrimination.⁵⁶ This is especially the case for Muslim girls who can be easily identified by the host Western society due to the highly visible attire of their Islamic dress code including the *hijab*.⁵⁷ Ragoonwala and Epinoza refer to *hijab* as "a scarf that Muslim women use to cover their hair".⁵⁸ According to Islamic teachings, women in Islam usually cover their hair, neck, ears and chest, and they are permitted to wear a variety of clothing styles although they must be loosely worn and modestly cover the legs and arms. Additionally, women in Islam avoid wearing makeup or any other adornment in public places. This is because a woman's beauty is for her spouse only, therefore, woman should be protected when venturing outside the home.⁵⁹ According to Zine, the Islamic dress code, such as *hijab* for Muslim girls, represents important political, cultural, religious and social meanings.⁶⁰ Such viewpoint is reflected in Subedi, Bashir-Ali and Gunel's study "Teachers and Students' Experiences in Working with Religious Issues in U.S. Schools". A female Muslim student who participated in the study reports that she feels pride in her cultural beliefs from wearing the *hijab* as she states that "wearing the *hijab* or wearing long, full sleeved, loose outfits represent honesty, integrity and responsibility to their communities and to their faith".⁶¹ Moreover, Zine defines the meaning of Islamic dress in societies as a symbol of social and religious values. She further argues that:

We can conceive of the body as a site of variable inscriptions that visually mark and code religious, cultural, and gendered norms or, conversely, resist and subvert these norms, such corporeal inscriptions, meanings inscribed upon the body silently, communicate social and political messages through specific forms and styles of dress.⁶²

In addition, Gunel argues that since there are several meanings associated with *hijab*, it is important to highlight how the decision of Muslim girls to wear the *hijab* can be different based on ethnic and cultural norms.⁶³ Bashir-Ali and Elnour have supported Gunel's argument, suggesting that while the appearance of Somali Muslim girls is very visible with long dresses that cover the whole body, Bosnian Muslim girls, however, tend to wear clothing that is very similar to what Western teenagers might wear, such as jeans and a T-shirt. Thus, the shape and degree of covering can be dissimilar depending on diverse cultural understandings and interpretations of Islamic teaching as well as the rules that related to Muslim girls in a specific country or culture.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Muslim girls in Western dominant schools usually face harassment and questions about why they wear the *hijab*.⁶⁵ Syed and Pio have also confirmed this point view as they point out that there is a strong link between the visible symbol of "difference", such as wearing the *hijab*, and experiences of prejudice and assault.⁶⁶ For instance, one female Muslim student reported, "There was a female teacher who ignored me because she disliked the *hijab* ... I was the only Muslim student in my class".⁶⁷ Such discrimination and negative stereotypes against Muslim girls who wear the *hijab* is coined by Zine as "gendered Islamophobia".⁶⁸ The term "gendered Islamophobia" refers to "a type of discrimination, which originates from ethnic, religious and racial differences and which are historically constructed negative stereotypes".⁶⁹

Moreover, Zine claims that because Muslim girls experience Islamophobia and racism in their Western dominated schools as a result of wearing the *hijab*, they feel marginalised by their student peers.⁷⁰ As stated by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, "verbal and physical assaults are commonly experienced by Australian female Muslim students".⁷¹ These findings were confirmed by an Australian Government report "Muslim Youth Summits Report, 2007", which revealed that negative attitudes on Muslims are still being practised and experienced.⁷² Consequently, it is very difficult for female Muslim students who observe the *hijab* to fully engage socially in Western public schools.⁷³

According to Dagkas, Benn and Jawad, participating in sporting activities is one of the social issues that Muslim female students who wear the *hijab* face in Western schools. While school sporting activities as such may not be problematic for Muslim girls, situational factors concerning the participating environments could be problematic.⁷⁴ Dress code, privacy in changing rooms, mixed sex activities and a lack of knowledge about Islam requirements from teachers are examples of the problems that Muslim girls face while participating in Western school sporting activities.⁷⁵ Therefore, due to misinterpretation and a lack of awareness regarding religious matters, many Muslim female students are prevented from participating in school sporting activities. For example, swimming is one of the commonly raised challenges that Muslim girls face in schools.⁷⁶ As reported by Dagkas et al. in their study "Multiple Voices: Improving Participation of Muslim Girls in Physical Education and School Sport", there are increasing numbers of Muslim parents who withdraw their daughters from sporting activities in Western schools. This is related to the school's lack of ability to meet Muslim cultural and religious requirements, such as modesty in dress code and sex separation in mixed sporting activities.⁷⁷ Islamic needs for

privacy and modesty are not met in the standard dressing requirements of school sporting activities, such as shorts, short skirts, singlets and T-shirts.⁷⁸ One teacher reported:

Parents have withdrawn Muslim girls from swimming ... even after discussion the school feels powerless to support children since the parents feel so strongly.⁷⁹

It is important to highlight that such statements are an example of how educators often encourage a directional transformation that attempts to change Muslims views and needs to match a dominant culture ideology rather than taking a sober approach that attempts to understand the Muslim point of view while introducing non-conflicting aspects of the dominant culture. Qureshi and Ghouri in their study “Muslim Female Athletes in Sports and Dress Code: Major Obstacle in International Competitions” support this argument, as they claim that encouraging and supporting Muslim female students in Western societies are often overlooked by educational authorities and discriminated against on the excuse that religion as a cultural barrier makes it difficult for Muslim girls to fully participate in school sporting activities. This is because girls often face a lack of understanding of their Islamic requirements; especially around the dress code.⁸⁰ Such views are reflected by Muslim parents, as in the following:

My daughter goes to a school where they force them to do physical education. The teachers make them take off their headscarves and they do not understand that we are not happy about that ... dress sense should be respected.⁸¹

Nevertheless, as stated by Shah wearing the *hijab* has increased overt hostility against Muslim girls and negatively affected their image within Western schools. There are increasing numbers of veiled students,⁸² which, as indicated by Coles, demonstrate that Islamic belief and symbols are part of Muslim identity that cannot be discounted regardless of any challenge a female Muslim student may experience.⁸³

It has been identified from the above discussion that sporting activities at school play an important role in the lives of students. Unfortunately, few Muslim girls are able to engage in these activities due to cultural differences and religious requirements. Therefore, Western schools and physical activity providers need to be aware of the religious differences that exist in order to provide well-balanced and well-structured activities that allow every student, including Muslim female students, to participate in. However, another barrier that makes it difficult for female Muslim students to fully engage in school sporting activities in Western societies is gender interaction. Muslim female students mixing with the opposite sex is limited within Islamic teachings.

Interacting with the Opposite Sex

Interactions with the opposite sex is another commonly raised challenge that Muslim female students may face during their participation in school sporting activities in Western societies as a result of their cultural and religious needs.⁸⁴ A study by Dagkas and Benn investigating Islam and physical education experiences of young Muslim women revealed that some teachers in secondary schools make no concession to the strict rules applied to wearing sporting attire. As a result, Muslim girls find “coping strategies”, for example, one student “pull our socks up and skirts down to cover our legs”.⁸⁵ According to Rangoonwala et al., modesty is an important rule for both genders as a preventative measure to keep Muslims away from proscribed social interaction between opposite sexes.⁸⁶ Zain Al-Dien highlights that modesty in Islam influences not only the

Muslim student dress code, but also their attitude to issues, such as pornographic films, books and videos. The use of such sexual material is clearly incompatible with the Islamic principle. Staring at people of the opposite sex or watching kissing scenes on TV or in the street is also offensive. Thus, the relationship between males and females is guided by Islamic teachings, as specified in the Qur'an.⁸⁷

According to Islamic rules and practice, males and females are not permitted to intermingle, date, touch or have intimate relationships or sexual intercourse with individuals of the opposite sex outside an Islamic marriage in order to keep sexuality out of the public sphere.⁸⁸ A study by Bashir-Ali and Elnour focusing on teaching Muslim girls in American schools found that there are three issues that may shape the relationship between female Muslim students and their peers from the opposite sex in schools. Firstly, according to Islamic teachings, females are restricted from any physical interaction with individuals of the opposite sex, that is, to be touched by a male stranger.⁸⁹ A study by Rothe et al. has confirmed this point of view, revealing that most Muslim families have a concern about their daughters' interaction with male peers or teachers. Muslim families also feel that their daughters should not mix with male students or participate in any school sporting activities that boys are part of.⁹⁰ Such view is reflected by a female Muslim student in Dagkas, Benn and Jawad's study as follows:

We have a problem with swimming because the pool can't guarantee an all-female environment and sometimes they have a male pool teacher ... this is an issue.⁹¹

Secondly, according to cultural norms and social practices, and as stated by Bashir-Ali and Elnour, Muslim girls may avoid certain social activities in order to avoid direct contact with the opposite sex or speaking softly in front of male peers. They may even avoid any interaction at all with them in their school setting. Cultural beliefs and norms concerning avoiding direct eye contact, speaking loudly and not touching or shaking hands with the opposite sex can be misunderstood, not only by male teachers, but also by non-Muslims in the Western society. Muslim girls may be uncomfortable to interact or sit with their male peers in the classroom.⁹² Subedi et al. elaborate further and point out that the encounter may conflict with home and Western school values, leading female students to either prefer to be taught by female teachers or a male teacher who understands and respects Muslim values.⁹³

Conclusion

In conclusion, the researcher argues that factors, such as cultural differences and religious requirements, may prevent Muslim female students from fully engaging in some school sporting activities. For Muslim female students, the strong attachment to an Islamic identity and the inflexible rules and policies of school sporting activities make it challenging for them to participate. The Islamic dress code and limits on interaction with the opposite sex are two important barriers for Muslim female students that are noteworthy when discussing Muslim girls' participation in school sporting activities. Therefore, this paper suggests that it is important for schools in multicultural societies to take a sober approach when considering and understanding religious needs and cultural differences, in particular, the Islamic dress code for girls and the limits placed on interaction with boys resulting from Muslim female students' adherence to cultural norms and practices and religious teachings.

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