

University of Birmingham academics highlight the exclusion of Muslim sports women at the Olympics

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A new paper by academics from the University of Birmingham's School of Education argues that the policies of sports governing bodies are contributing to the limited participation of Muslim sports women in international sport.

With the upcoming 2012 London Olympics, the authors address the paradox between Olympic ideals for inclusion, and sport policies and politics that exclude Muslim women and provide recommendations on how to address this problem for the future.

The article *The Olympic Movement and Islamic culture: conflict or compromise for Muslim women?*, is published in the International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics a special issue on London 2012 and its legacies.

The authors point out that although the Olympic Charter is committed to universal human rights to participate in sport and be free from discrimination on the grounds of gender and religion, regulations in Olympic sport dress code can deny Muslim women's religious requirements of modesty in covering the body.

As well as analysing sports policies which have marginalised Muslim women at past international sports events, the research looked ahead to the 2012 London Olympics. The paper points out that dates for the 2012 London Olympics fall during Ramadan, which normally requires followers of Islam faith to fast between sunrise and sunset, falls in the middle of the event.

Lead author Professor Tansin Benn explains: "*Such policies are tantamount to excluding Muslim athletes and exacerbating the wider prejudice and discrimination that Muslim sports women can face.*"

Political, cultural and religious resistance to participation, as well as the potential threat of vilification and exile, can be reasons for Muslim women's inability to take part in international sports. However sport policies and practice also create unnecessary barriers for many.

Given that there are also political and religious barriers to Muslim women participating in international sport we would like to see a change in sport policy and practice to foster the wider inclusion agenda of Muslim women in the sporting arena."

The research recognises that participation of Muslim women has improved over recent years, with only Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait sending men-only teams to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, they argue that representation of Muslim women is still minimal and in a limited number of sports. They make recommendations to improve the situation for the future.

That people working in the sport and education systems Accept and Respect the diverse ways in which Muslim women and girls practice their religion and participate in sport and physical activity, for example, choices of activity, dress and gender grouping.

That international sport federations to show their commitment to inclusion by ensuring that their dress codes for competition embrace Islamic requirements, taking into account the principles of propriety, safety and integrity.

Dr Symeon Dagkas (co-author of the article) comments: "*With responsibility for sport policymaking lying predominantly in Western secular countries, it is perhaps not surprising that attention to religion and religious needs has been missing. In a multicultural, multi-faith England, on the eve of the 2012 Olympic Games, we cannot ignore the constant processes of societal and cultural change or the challenges and opportunities these bring.*"

The Olympic movement is based on the principle that sport should be accessible for all. With this in mind we would like to see the IOC and other sports governing bodies commit to removing barriers to Muslim women competing in elite sport to make what is already a celebration of sport even more inclusive."

ENDS

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Additional Information

This latest research follows Professor Tansin Benn's previous work in the field with Doctor Haifaa Jawad from the University of Birmingham's department of Theology and Religion. Both were involved in the first international study week focused on improving opportunities for Muslim women in sport, hosted by Sultan Quaboos University in Oman. Here the 'Accept and Respect' approach was also advocated, to ensure that sport providers respect the diverse ways in which women choose to participate in sport with regard to dress code, gender organisation and type of activity.

Prior to this study, Benn, Jawad and Dagkas worked with the Birmingham local education authority to address the increased parental withdrawal of Muslim girls from physical education in schools where religious requirements were not met. A citywide study took place, with a joint team of researchers from the University and City Education Authority, including national level consultation with the Muslim Council of Britain and the Association for Physical Education.

As a result of this study, a guidance document was produced for all schools to support greater knowledge and awareness of inclusion strategies. The research-to-practice study was then shared internationally through conferences and academic journal articles and has led to wider engagement of interested professionals in the subject.

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