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To cite this article: Aisha Ahmad (2011) British football: where are the Muslim female footballers? Exploring the connections between gender, ethnicity and Islam, Soccer & Society, 12:3, 443-456, DOI: [10.1080/14660970.2011.568110](https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2011.568110)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2011.568110>



Published online: 10 Jun 2011.



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British football: where are the Muslim female footballers? Exploring the connections between gender, ethnicity and Islam

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This research article explores the ways in which self-recognition as a footballer, in terms of ethnicity, along with cultural values and religious adherence have impacted on the identities of members of the British Muslim Women's Football Team and their choice to compete at the Women's Islamic Games (WIG) in Iran in 2005. The article offers new information on an emerging research area, highlighting issues previously missing from accounts of girls and women's football in the UK. The article adopts a social constructionist framework in unravelling the experiences and perceptions of the British Muslim Women's Football Team and explores how identities are shaped and reinforced through playing football. The research findings of this study are based on five years of participant observation and 16 semi-structured interviews with members of the British Muslim Women's Football Team. Through a focus on interview transcript material this article seeks to entangle the complexity of gender, ethnicity and Islam and the ways in which these factors impact on the football identities of Muslim women in Britain. The experiences and perceptions of the players in the British Muslim Women's Football Team are located within British football, and importantly, the article investigates whether there is room for the hijab in British football.

Introduction

Weiss¹ states that because sport is a culturally specific and clearly visible activity the 'role adoption in sport enables actors to realize and confirm their identities ... as sport takes place unequivocally within the context of society's significant symbols, it can have an impact on the actor's self-perception, self-esteem and self-worth'.² Therefore, in this article, I discuss the ways in which football has shaped and reinforced the identities of members of the 2005 British Muslim Women's Football Team (BMWFT). Discussion explores the ways in which self-recognition as a footballer, in terms of ethnicity, along with cultural values and religious adherence influence members of the BMWFT and their choice to compete at the Women's Islamic Games (WIG) in 2005. In doing so, discussions adopt a social constructionist framework because of its concern with the power relations that shape the experiences and perceptions of the BMWFT and the individual women who play for the team.³

The article focuses on specific research findings from a larger doctoral study that investigated the experiences and perceptions of Muslim women participating in football.⁴ The participants of this study were self-declared British Muslim women, with the exception of the British non-Muslim female coach. Demographics of the team ranged in terms of age (18–26 years old), ethnic origin (the majority were of South

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Asian heritage), educational credentials (majority educated to degree level) and level of religious commitment (comprising both hijab and non-hijab wearers).

British football: locating the Muslim female

Ethnicity and sport has been a topic of debate for some time⁵ and discussion usually concentrates on the under-representation of black and minority ethnic groups in sport. More specifically, within British football, research has predominantly focused on the experiences of black men and issues of racism therein as is highlighted by Scraton, Caudwell, and Holland⁶ and Carrington.⁷ The first step towards an active recognition of racism within football marked the launch of 'Lets Kick Racism Out Of Football' campaign in 1993, which aimed to challenge racism in football. Kick It Out continue to have a yearly 'week of action' – in 2009 the week lasted between 15 and 27 October – designed to engage the community in football and celebrate diversity within communities through organizing football events throughout the country. The initial launch of the campaign and its continuing yearly endeavours illustrate a concern with the under-representation of black and minority ethnic groups in football. However, little progress has been made since the 'Asians Can't Play Football' report in 1996, which listed development plans and recommendations to make football more inclusive for Asian men.⁸

The Cabinet Office, in 2000, reported on the situation of black and minority ethnic people in the UK, placing ethnicity as an overarching inequality over and above gender or social class. The focus of this article on British Muslim women signifies that this group are more likely to suffer from the worst form of inequality, that of racial discrimination. A large percentage of Muslims in the UK constitute black and minority ethnic communities⁹ and British football can be viewed as an ideal arena where the 'multi-culturalism' of Britain can be most visible. Overall statistics on sport participation indicate that both minority ethnic men and women compete at a lower rate than the national average¹⁰ and there are several studies that highlight the extent of racism experienced by South Asian men in football.¹¹ Although, within earlier football reports¹² and more broadly within studies of ethnicity and football, the Asian woman's voice is unheard. However, more recent research has investigated the experiences of South Asian women in football and the connections and complexities between 'race', ethnicity and gender.¹³ Within such studies, British Muslim women's experiences of football and the connections between Islam, gender and ethnicity remain relatively under theorized. This highlights the importance of the present article in locating the football experiences of British Muslim women within discussions on ethnicity, gender and religion.

To contextualize the discussions on British Muslim female footballers it is important to offer some brief information about British Muslims as a group of people. Within the UK, there are approximately 1.5 million Muslims, a population that is rapidly increasing.¹⁴ These British Muslims are predominantly of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage, following the immigration of South Asian workers in the 1950s.¹⁵ More recent immigration patterns have seen a rise in European and Middle Eastern Muslim refugees and asylum seekers, from countries such as Afghanistan, Bosnia and Somalia.¹⁶ Clearly the diverse heritages of these British Muslims sustain different community cultures and it is important to acknowledge this difference amongst British Muslims. This acknowledgement helps in understanding the experiences of the BMWFT; they are a diverse group of British Muslim women.

Studies investigating the participation of Muslim girls and women in sport have been conducted in different countries across the globe, for example, Morocco, Egypt,

Iran, Iraq, Malaysia and Zanzibar.¹⁷ In the West, there has been a focus on the struggles and clash between East/West cultures and Muslim females in Australia and Western Europe.¹⁸ Research on Muslim women and sport in the West has tended to focus on the struggles between Islamic requirements concerning dress codes of Muslim females and Westernized ideals of sporting attire. Studies have overlooked the overt and covert restrictions that discriminate against Muslim women (for example, discriminatory dress code rules, institutionalized racism and Islamophobia) and suggest that the restrictions lie in cultural and Islamic practices that fail to conform to the Western way of life. As Ratna makes the point, 'many of those involved in the organization of women's sport especially argue that if British Asian females want to play, they must seek to address the problematic nature of their own South Asian communities'.¹⁹

For the purpose of this article, it is important to clarify that contrary to the assumption that Islamic requirements restrict Muslim women from competing in football, both the Qur'an and Hadith not only support the participation of women in sport but actively encourage them to do so.²⁰ The discussion on Muslim women and sport today is centred on issues of the hijab and sex segregation, although there is no explicit mention of sex segregation within Islamic *foundational* texts, and only minimal reference to the hijab within these texts.²¹ It is interesting to note that the same source material is used for both gender segregation and the hijab, where the concept of separation is an extension of the requirements of the hijab. Discussions on the hijab and sex segregation illustrate how these practices have become embedded within cultural influences, with limited references to Islamic foundational texts.²² However, the different interpretations of these texts have led to different experiences for Muslim women all across the world and many British Muslim women choose to observe the hijab and compete in football in the UK, whilst others would not consider competing in sports within an un-Islamic context; favouring a separate space within a gender-segregated environment.²³

The crux of the discussion surrounding British Muslim women and football is the observance of Islamic dress and finding an avenue to compete in football whilst retaining their 'visible Muslim' identity. The media has highlighted several cases that illustrate the tensions women face in finding an opportunity to play football that is compatible with wearing the hijab. In 2004, *The Independent* reported on a 'headscarf controversy' where a football match had to be stopped because a 17-year-old Muslim female refused to remove her hijab. In addition, there are several other such cases; Heba Al-Nasari, a university student in London was banned from playing in a football match because she failed to remove her hijab;²⁴ and 11-year-old Mansour in Canada was ordered off the pitch by a referee for not removing her headscarf.²⁵ These cases not only highlight the harsh reality that Muslim women must negotiate when competing in football, but also illustrate how the sports system, in particular the institution of football, can discriminate against Muslim female players. To exacerbate the matter, following the case of Mansour, the hijab and its place in football was brought into question at the International Football Association Boards annual meeting in March 2007, where the chief executive of FIFA, Brian Barwick, stated that:

If you play football there's a set of laws and rules, and law four outlines the basic equipment ... It's absolutely right to be sensitive to people's thoughts and philosophies, but equally there has to be a set of laws that are adhered to, and we favour law four being adhered to.²⁶

The reasoning behind this 'ban' on the hijab is because the hijab does not come within the basic equipment outlined in law four of the game, and as Barwick puts it 'Law four

must be adhered to'. A more recent FIFA law states that the basic compulsory equipment must not contain any political, religious or personal statements. So, when it is central to a Muslim woman's identity to wear the hijab, the only option if she cannot wear the hijab in football, is not to play. This begs questions of Islamophobia and whether there really was a clear rationale behind the ban.²⁷ In addition, this illustrates how some British Muslim women, first, face social vulnerability in competing in football,²⁸ and then when they do play competitively they are met with further barriers in terms of discriminatory elements of the sports system.

The Women's Islamic Games provides an opportunity for these British Muslim women to compete in football, whilst retaining their visible Muslim identity. The Women's Islamic Games were formed in 1993 as a 'safe-space' for Muslim women to compete internationally and have continued to run in Iran for 14 years.²⁹ Although research and academic writings on the Games are limited, Hargreaves stated how the games illustrate that 'Islam is a forward looking community that protects and nurtures its women'.³⁰ In 2005, the British football team competed for the second time alongside participants from various other Western countries including Germany, Cyprus and the USA.

A positive step towards recognizing the importance of dress code for Muslim women, following the 2005 Women's Islamic Games, was acknowledged by the United Nations in 2007, where they accepted the importance of the Games in providing a suitable environment for the participation in sport by Muslim women. The International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women (IAPESGW), in 2008, was the first global body to address the needs of Muslim women during a study and discussion week hosted by Sultan Qaboos University in Oman.³¹ Delegates focused on finding ways of improving opportunities for Muslim girls/women in physical education and sport, urging international federations 'to show their commitment to inclusion by ensuring that their dress code for competition embrace Islamic requirements, taking into account the principles of propriety, safety and integrity'.³² The 'accept and respect' declaration that emerged from this week of important discussion and debate, requested for the respect of Islam. Gaining more respect for Islam aimed to improve relations between East and West, and, to encourage more tolerant views of Muslims. This was a positive step forward in closing the divide between East and West, Muslims and non-Muslims, and challenging the negativity surrounding Muslim women. The IAPESGW's adoption of an 'accept and respect' declaration also acknowledges the diversity of Muslim women's experiences and the choices in gender grouping and sport. The declaration stipulates that Muslim women and girls practise their religion in diverse ways, with some women favouring gender segregated environments whilst others request the acceptance of the hijab in mainstream events. There is hope that this declaration will aid sporting federations to improve the participation rates of British Muslim women in football, through providing them with a better experience of British football.

Method

Participants

The research, for my PhD, was carried out with the BMWFT who represented Britain in the Women's Islamic Games in 2005. The Women's Islamic Games was instigated in 1993, and to date four rounds of games have taken place. The games initially started

to give Muslim women in Islamic countries an opportunity to compete internationally, and in 2001, it opened to Muslim women in Non-Islamic countries. In 2005, the 4th Women's Islamic Games celebrated the inclusion of non-Muslim women who wished to share solidarity with Muslim women. The BMWFT trained fortnightly in London for two years prior to the games, and travelled to Iran at their own expense.³³ Outside training with the BMWFT, the participants also trained and competed for local clubs and university teams. The study that informs this article draws on the football experiences of this team, both in terms of their participation in mainstream football in the UK (university teams and local clubs) and also their participation in the Women's Islamic Games, and training for the BMWFT.

The participants in the research ranged in terms of ethnic origin, age, education and religious adherence. The majority of participants wore the hijab; two participants did not. Participants were largely of South Asian heritage and all participants were either university students at British universities, or had completed their degrees and were aged between 18 and 26. Members of the BMWFT largely comprised women from the London area, but women also attended training from other locations, including Milton Keynes, Leicester and Birmingham.

Triangulation of methods

Data collection, for my PhD, spanned five years and involved a triangulation of methods within an interpretivist paradigm.³⁴ A multimethod approach was adopted because it produces different kinds of data on the same topic and allows researchers to corroborate the findings, producing richer data.³⁵ Triangulating methods does not necessarily mean that there is a single truth to be discovered, for each method produces different data. The study consisted of semi-structured interviews, semi-structured questionnaires (which extended to other non-British athletes at the Women's Islamic Games), participant observation and document analysis; each producing different types of data.

The in-depth interviews revealed the constructions that participants have of sport and their social worlds, and the questionnaires were able to draw generalizations on participants' experiences and perceptions of sport, whilst participant observation can tell us more about what people do and can be a careful way of cross-checking oral claims with related actions.³⁶ This article focuses on the data derived from the semi-structured interviews, with the use of pseudonyms to retain anonymity of the participants.

Sixteen semi-structured interviews with participants, coaches, observers and organizers at the Games were conducted.³⁷ The interviews were recorded using a digital dictaphone and were later transcribed. Interviews with the BMWFT took place at different times and locations – outside training, during training sessions and during the Women's Islamic Games. Data collected from interviews was further substantiated through media documentation collected and field notes during participant observation with the team. Five years of participant observation with the BMWFT was carried out prior, during and post Women's Islamic Games 2005.

For the PhD study, documentation on the Women's Islamic Games and the British involvement were also collected in the form of newspaper/magazine articles, radio footage, television coverage and publications during the Games, in order to illustrate a wider picture of the Games. The aim of using document analysis was primarily due to the valuable dimension that this type of data can add to a study, where dominant

ideologies are reflected in the media and where the media serves to construct and further reinforce mainstream values, which often marginalize females, athletes of colour and lesbian/gay athletes.³⁸ Because sport has often been understood as a micro-cosm of society, where gender construction is most visible in the sport media,³⁹ the wider connotations of a Muslim female football team in the West were grounded in dominant ideologies of Muslims as reflected in the media⁴⁰ and provided an insightful dimension to the data gained from interviews and observations.

Findings

Ethnicity, South Asian cultures and the female footballer

The experiences of the BMWFT reinforced the assumption that South Asian cultures still hold relatively traditional ideals about femininity. Since the majority of the participants in this study were of South Asian heritage, the findings in this section relate to South Asian cultures, not necessarily rooted in Islamic traditions, but which are nonetheless interwoven with Islamic values in the lives of the Muslim women in this study. In relation to their involvement in football, the participants of this study had to fight traditional cultural norms, derived from their South Asian heritage⁴¹ in order to compete in football. Amina spoke about some of the cultural ideals that surround Asian girls playing football:

Amina: If my mum tells someone that I play football, they just say ‘what she doing playing football, that’s a boys sport, she should be doing girly things like cooking and cleaning’. You know it does happen because there aren’t many Asians or Muslims participating in a sport like football, so it’s not looked upon too highly. (Interview transcript)

Amina explained that women playing football is not the norm in South Asian cultures and the resistance to her involvement stems from traditional roles for women, where feminine roles of cooking and cleaning are more closely linked with a woman’s role. Amina recognized that her identity as a footballer was frowned upon within her community culture because it is not perceived as feminine. Interestingly, these stereotypes that surround femininity, in terms of a domestic femininity, are not confined to South Asian cultures, but are also experienced by some white non-Muslim players.⁴²

Harris, in his work on women’s football, writes about the perception that some women are viewed as ‘too pretty’ to play football. He argues that football has historically been constructed as masculine and that the desired femininity associated with prettiness, is often questioned when players cross ‘socially constructed gender demarcations’.⁴³ Mariam spoke about how members of her community that associate football with masculinity questioned her gender identity:

Mariam: The other day this boy that I chat to he’s about eighteen and he just says ‘oh you’re such a boy, you know everything about football’, and that pisses me off because at the end of the day a girl can do just as much as a boy. So what, I’m not trying to compete with them, we can all play football and yet I can still cook and clean. (Interview transcript)

Here Mariam’s femininity is brought into question when she is referred to as a boy for playing football. She goes on to justify her femininity and reassures herself by

referring to the more traditional roles that women fulfil, such as her ability to cook and clean. Again, this image of female footballers being boys and/or tomboys is also prevalent within non-Asian and non-Muslim female footballers.⁴⁴ In this sense, the BMWFT share some similar experiences to those of non-Muslim women, but they also had very different experiences, for example wearing the hijab, which is discussed in the next section.

Mariam believes that marriage is at the forefront of some of the restrictions that Asian women face when competing in football. She connects this cultural resistance to patriarchal ideals about marriage and the need for male approval to legitimize their football involvement:

Mariam: For every Asian family it's important for their girls to get married and to be honest that's the biggest part I think, that they think where're they gonna get a guy from that doesn't mind them playing football. (Interview transcript)

This interview extract illustrates how cultural values may hinder Asian women's participation in football. From the research, it is evident that perceptions from within their communities have shaped the identities of women playing for the BMWFT. Through negotiation of these perceptions, the players have challenged prevailing cultural norms by continuing to compete in football.

According to Weiss, sport 'gives so many people, regardless of their religion, gender, age or social or educational level, access to a system of social validation and acknowledgement by others'.⁴⁵ However, it is also apparent from the interview research, that for some members of the BMWFT who also competed in local football clubs and university teams that their participation led to feelings of self-worthlessness and low self-esteem. Mariam reflected on her experience of being the only Muslim female footballer in her university team:

Mariam: I just found that you know when I started playing alright and then they picked teams and stuff I never used to get picked. I slowly got used to it, I never felt like I actually clicked with any of them, because ... I just didn't feel like part of the team ... they never used to make an effort with me ... like some of the girls generally are a bit unconsciously racist ... then I just lost the enthusiasm and stopped going. (Interview transcript)

Competing in football at university did not offer Mariam a positive self-image; on the contrary, she felt that she lacked footballing skills because she was not part of the selected line up for matches. Although Mariam was not asked to remove her hijab, she felt the hijab was a mediator of social interaction where she experienced alienation whilst competing in the hijab. This eventually led to low self-esteem and consequently removing herself from the football team. It could be argued that her footballing experience reinforced her identity as a Muslim female footballer, who in wider society forms a disadvantaged minority ethnic community in the UK. Thus, for Mariam, competing in mainstream football reproduced the notion that she was 'different' from the others.

British football culture: room for the hijab?

The fundamental difference in footballing experiences of Muslim women and non-Muslim women arises when women's Muslim identity is questioned. Nahid, a non-hijab wearing Muslim, talked about religion and her involvement in British football:

Nahid: I think in the latest stages of my time at college there was an issue of whether I should continue to wear shorts and play, or how I would go about it, whether I wanted to join a club ... It was an internal sort of thing ... I was thinking shall I wear a hijab ... it was like, do I decide to stop playing or do I decide to find a team where I could cover my legs, which is where this team came from. (Interview transcript)

It was Nahid's self-recognition as a Muslim footballer that made her reconsider her place and involvement in mainstream British football. For Nahid, it was as clear as 'do I stop playing because I want to wear the hijab'. Nahid felt that the hijab and football were not compatible, and it was her perception as being 'different' from other female footballers that reinforced her identity as a Muslim female footballer. It was this acknowledgement that led Nahid to consider an alternative football avenue, where she could cover her legs, wear the hijab and remain a footballer.

Similarly, Shamim acknowledged the difficulties she would face in British football if she wanted to compete at a level higher than the university league:

Shamim: I understand that the furthest I'd ever go with football is probably playing for university and school because of the Islamic dress code ... the fact that you know it's hard enough trying to get universities to tolerate it, schools to tolerate the way you dress during your football ... you know wearing a tracksuit bottom and a long-sleeve top and wearing a head scarf, if you had the talent to go further but if you wanted to hold onto your Islamic dress you wouldn't be able to do it, you'd have to compromise. (Interview transcript)

It is apparent here that Shamim felt that the football culture in which she lived would not accommodate her wearing the hijab, which limited her football career. Anjim also commented on the relationship between the hijab and the possibility of moving towards an international football career:

Anjim: The coach keeps on saying that a lot of you in this team if you weren't weary of having to wear the hijab then they might get involved with you know the full England team. (Interview transcript)

This illustrates that members of the BMWFT have the skill and passion to play at higher levels than they were playing within British football. The coach (white and non-Muslim) reinforced the belief that there is no place for the hijab in top-level British football. Here she expressed her views on the hijab in football:

Laura: You're not allowed to wear jewellery, so if the FA have decided that Muslim women can't play because of their headscarf's then there's no other option than to either fight the FA which I think would be quite difficult ... because if they bring that in then you'll start getting people with turbans, Jews with those little caps And then they'll have this great big problem. Football is a sport, you dress for that sport. I think they're (British Muslim women) going to have to adapt ... maybe not wear the scarf but cover up their legs and their arms ... but then that's not fair. (Interview transcript)

Whilst airing her concerns about women observing the hijab in football, Laura suggests that British Muslim women should adapt their views on the hijab and conform to the 'normal' football attire. As she reflected on her comments of the hijab she recognizes the inequity that this entailed – that to ask a Muslim woman to remove her hijab when she plays football was unfair and not acceptable. At this point Laura, was faced with

the unjust reality that Muslim footballers have had to contemplate when competing in UK football teams, where discriminatory football codes of practice remain.

Ultimately, it was participants' self-recognition as Muslim footballers – and good footballers at that – which gave these women the confidence to explore their participation through finding an alternative avenue to the barriers they faced in mainstream football. Their confidence as talented footballers gave them the drive to fight to compete in alternative avenues. The negotiated values of cultural and religious adherence, in terms of wearing the hijab (and so retaining their visible Muslim identity) and rejecting traditional, non-Islamic cultural norms about femininity, spurred them on, giving them the determination to stand up to traditional cultural ideals and compete in football at the Women's Islamic Games. The team facilitated their own participation, where they travelled to Iran to find a platform that was compatible with their religious identity and their love for football.

Discussion and conclusion

Negotiating identities: balancing women's football culture and a Muslim identity

Players in the BMWFT developed a balance between their identity as footballers, and their position within their cultural and religious communities, and found a way that worked for them. They not only negotiated their values in terms of rejecting cultural ideals of femininity whilst holding on to their Muslim identity, but also negotiated these values within British football and found a space for themselves. Figure 1 illustrates how British Muslim female footballers are faced with a constant process of a negotiation of identities; identities which are grounded in the interlocking relation-

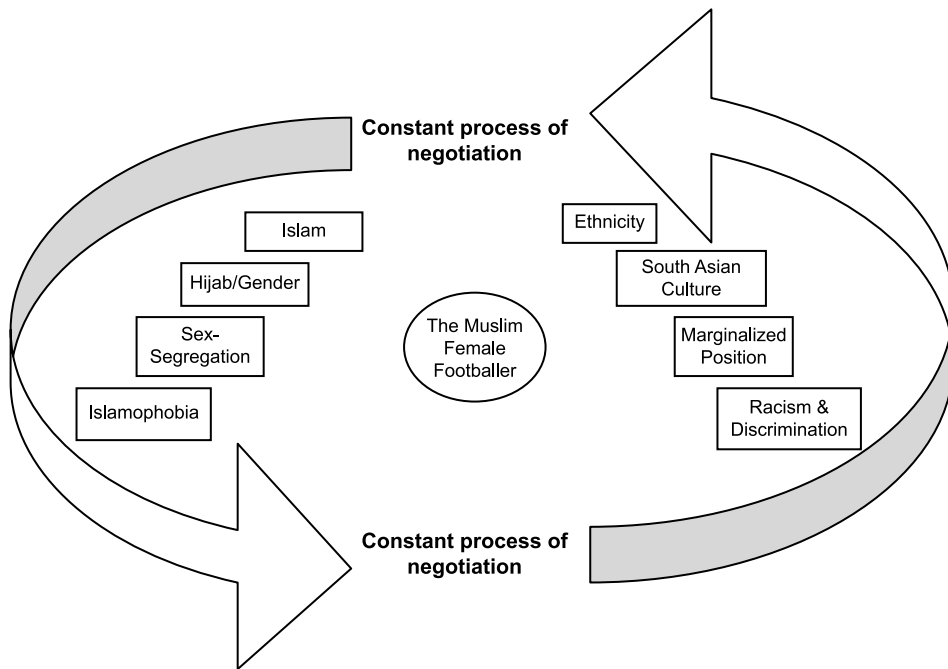


Figure 1. Negotiating values.

ship between their gender, ethnicity, religion and love for football. Figure 1 further highlights how members of the BMWFT deal with numerous factors that contribute to shaping their identity as British Muslim female footballers, and displays some of the consequences of their choices in wider British society, such as prejudice and discrimination, racism and Islamophobia.

Issues of identity came forth from the negotiated choices these women made to wear or not to wear the hijab. Their struggle to compete in sport whilst observing the hijab illustrates the importance of religious belief, indicating that the hijab was something highly significant to each individual which could not be compromised in order to compete in football. From within their communities there were also consequences of breaking perceived rules of cultural adherence. Mariam for example, experienced verbal abuse from male Muslims; she was taunted for being 'boyish' and unfeminine. The negotiated choices that these women make lead to different footballing experiences for Muslim women, and there was disparity in experiences even within this small group of Muslim women.

Nevertheless, the decision of the BMWFT to compete in the Women's Islamic Games shows the ways in which they challenged traditional gender roles through competing in football, a predominantly male sport.⁴⁶ The BMWFT exercised some degree of power in fighting perceived cultural norms and dispelling stereotypical images of the heavily veiled and oppressed Muslim woman in the West. Although the team recognized that their participation challenged traditional gender roles, they also justified their femininity through typical feminine roles, for example, it was important for Mariam to acknowledge her ability to cook and clean. This seemed to be a way in which she convinced herself that although she played a 'masculine' sport she was also feminine; illustrating how the stereotypes attached to women playing football in a wider context have impacted on her construction of self.

The findings of this study suggest that the hijab was not usually 'tolerated', and often hijab wearers were alienated in sport, consequently affecting their sport participation. The hijab was constructed as a visible barrier to sport in Britain, where football organizations discriminated against Muslim women, as evidenced in the FIFA hijab ban in March 2007 and the revisions of Law 4 of the Game that followed. Negative connotations of the hijab in the West⁴⁷ impacted on the identities of the sportswomen in this study;⁴⁸ they felt there was no room for them, as hijab wearers, in British football. Through their visibility as Muslim footballers, some respondents challenged Western stereotypes. However, Mariam believed that it was her fault that she was not selected for matches, because she wore the hijab; ultimately blaming herself for people's lack of understanding of the hijab. For Mariam and some of the other players, the experiences of British football serve to reinforce their identities as 'Muslim footballers' and competing for the BMWFT at the Women's Islamic Games allowed these players to express *their* Muslim identity in a positive way. The Women's Islamic Games became a safety zone in which identities were not threatened⁴⁹, and where the hijab did not present a barrier.

Although members of the BMWFT constitute a minority ethnic group in the UK – which has historically placed them within a disadvantaged community – their struggles gave them the determination to push the boundaries and find an alternative avenue to compete in football at the Women's Islamic Games. Their confidence to compete in British football prior to the Women's Islamic Games, illustrates the extent of their motivation; they stood up for what they believed in, demonstrating strength of character and a passion for football.

The irony is that attending the Women's Islamic Games reinforced the participants' identity as *British* citizens. Although they faced challenges in British football and chose to travel to Iran to compete in an arena that respects their religious values, they were nonetheless flying the flag for Britain. The team was proud to be representing their country in a sport they loved, a country, in which they struggled to compete in football. The teams' experiences of British football have brought the UK's limited sporting infrastructure to light, where it fails to facilitate the needs of these British Muslim women; a group that will continue to be marginalized from mainstream football unless sport governing bodies facilitate their needs through eliminating discriminatory dress code rules.

This article has introduced a critical approach to inequalities in British football, which have been highlighted through the experiences of the BMWFT. The article has presented initial insights into the subtle inequalities and discrimination that Muslim women face from 'within' their groups as well as from the 'outside'. It has emphasized their life choices and degrees of religious freedom, which manifest into different lived experiences of football in a British context. It has demonstrated the significance and interlocking relationship between ethnicity, gender and religion, and revealed the ways in which Muslim female footballers have constructed their identities from their experiences and position in British society as a whole. Whilst this article highlights significant issues, further work is required to analyse and understand this important aspect of UK football cultures.

Notes

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8. Bains, 'Asians Can Play Football'; Johal, 'Playing their Own Game'.
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10. Burdsey, *British Asians and Football*; Collins and Kay, *Sport and Social Exclusion*; Sport England, *National Statistics*.
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19. Ratna, 'Taking the Power Back', 19.
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21. The Qur'an, Surah Fatir and Surah An-Nur; Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil*; Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*; Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*; Odeh, 'Post-Colonial Feminism and the Veil'.

22. Ahmad, 'An Exploration of Muslim Women's Experiences'.
23. Benn and Ahmed, 'Alternative Visions'.
24. *The Muslim News*, 'Head Scarf Controversy Ends Game'.
25. Blatchford, 'FIFA Should Have Overruled Hijab Ban'.
26. Board of Directors Meeting, 95.
27. Allen, 'Justifying Islamophobia'.
28. Ahmad, 'An Exploration of Muslim Women's Experiences'.
29. Ibid.; Benn and Ahmed, 'Alternative Visions'.
30. Hargreaves, 'The Muslim Female Heroic', 66.
31. Benn and Koushkie-Jahromi, 'Improving Inclusion'.
32. Ibid., 7.
33. Benn and Ahmed, 'Alternative Visions'.
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37. Hargreaves, 'The Muslim Female Heroic'.
38. Wright, 'Analysing Sportsmedia Texts'.
39. Christopherson and Janning, 'Two Kicks Forward'.
40. Inayat, 'The Meaning of Being a Muslim'; Malik, 'British or Muslim'.
41. See Ahmad, 'An Exploration of Muslim Women's Experiences' for the distinction between cultural and Islamic traditions.
42. Harris, 'The Image Problem'; Caudwell, 'Women's Football in the United Kingdom'; Cox and Thompson, 'Facing the Bogey'.
43. Cox and Thompson, 'Facing the Bogey', 7.
44. Scraton, Caudwell, and Holland, 'Bend It Like Patel'; Pfister et al., 'Women and Football'.
45. Weiss, 'Identity Reinforcement In Sport', 393.
46. Caudwell, 'Women's Football in the United Kingdom'.
47. For example, hijab wearers are oppressed – Bullock, 'Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil'.
48. Inayat, 'The Meaning of Being a Muslim'.
49. Stempel, Adult Participation'.

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