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Aaisha Abdullahi
Hamline University

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Extracurricular Activities and Positive Outcomes: Unique Challenges for Muslim Youth in the United States

Aaisha Abdullahi

Hamline University

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Abstract

Extracurricular activities, especially those that include physical activity, are important for the development of a child's personal skills, relationships, and socialization into the community and general culture. As the opportunities for out-of-school youth activities expand and become more privatized, many parents struggle to financially keep up. These activities have become less accessible to kids from low-income and/or families of color. This project focuses on the unique challenges that Muslim youth face when participating in extracurricular activities. It uses two different sets of data and methods: (1) a close reading of existing research on the experience of Muslim youth in extracurricular activities (mostly from European contexts); and (2) exploratory interviews with seven Minnesota Muslim youth and their families about their personal experiences of extracurricular sports and activities. This research shows that Muslim Americans have understandings and expectations about youth activities that are similar to many other American parents and kids, but also identifies distinctive racial and religious challenges that Muslim youth face when participating in activities. Future research is proposed to fully document and explain the experiences of Muslim youth, including where changes need to be made to best support these youth.
The importance of extracurricular activities for positive youth development has been examined by many researchers across the globe, with a focus on how these activities contribute to well-being, good peer relationships, and positive short-term and long-term outcomes. Much of this research is focused on participation in sports and physical activities.

Youth that participate in extracurricular activities have been found to perform better in school, exhibit fewer negative behaviors, and have strong social skills (Lareau, 2018). Research done in Canada notes that team sports allow youth to develop and strengthen skills like communication, teamwork, and time management (Maslen, 2015). Many of these skills can be applied beyond a field or court, but also in their everyday lives. For example, leadership skills and confidence are often displayed and practiced during sports activities, and adolescents gain important practice in making good decisions in high-pressure situations (Burtka, 2018).

Participation in sports and extracurricular activities creates opportunities for youth to develop certain skills that are beneficial across their lifespan. One important strategy behind sports participation is for young people to develop attributes to achieve personal success, and assurance that the environment allows for positive development (Coakley, 2018). The benefits of participating in youth activities are extensive from the development of skills like teamwork, leadership, and grit, to better academic performance and success in the classroom. Participation in activities has become a critical part of individual and social development and is used as a pathway for a better life by many families. Youth activities cultivate social capital which leads to successful work ethic and civic engagement for the future (Coalter, 2007). In addition to
physical activity outlets, youth activities are utilized for professional developments as a way to prepare youth for future responsibilities.

Youth that participate in activities at a young age develop a sense of confidence that allows them to negotiate with adults and advocate for themselves (Maslen, 2015). They are able to defend their skills and abilities without being intimidated by an authority figure. These personal strengths can be recognized as early as fourth grade where children make decisions on their own to gain certain advantages (Lareau, 2011). Activities are also used as a resume booster by many families in hopes of having their children play at the collegiate level or at a professional level. Participating in school-based activities has correlated with better grades in school, higher graduation rates, and lower rates for substance. Certain health benefits are associated with being physically active, such as psychosocial development, personal development, and less consumption of alcohol among adolescents (Malm et al., 2019). Data on high school athletes in Kansas found that athletes had higher percentages of days of school attended, graduation rates, and Kansas assessment scores, and lower dropout rates than nonathletes (Lumpkin, 2014). This does not mean athletes are smarter, but since they are expected to meet certain criteria to compete, they are expected to take their studies seriously, with negative consequences for poor academic performance.

**Unequal Access and Barriers**

Previous research has also revealed the unequal access and/or discrimination related to many of the extracurricular activities that are so important for positive youth development. Factors such as socioeconomic status and cost to play, race and ethnicity, religion, and gender all have received research attention.
The cost to play an organized sport has drastically increased in the past decade, and so much so that many kids and families cannot keep up to participate. Spending on youth sports this year will top 17 billion dollars, with some families spending over 10,000 dollars a year per kid. Many youth sports such as soccer and baseball have become a private industry and increasingly only affluent families are able to afford to have their kids fully participate (Cain Miller, 2018). The socioeconomic status of a family is a factor that impacts how much parents can invest in their children's activities and youth participation in sports. Families are expected to support their children’s involvement in as many activities as possible, but with the rising costs of sports fewer families can afford to do so. Many working families have to find other options in the community for their children to be a part of sports and other extracurricular activities.

It is no secret that marginalized communities encounter discrimination when participating in extracurricular activities, and typically encounter some sort of obstacles to becoming a part of certain organizations. Black communities have been targets of crime and racialization for many decades, and to prevent the cycle from continuing many parents have their kids be involved in activities to avoid being influenced by negative situations. One mother explained during her interview, “You don’t have to be another statistic. I make sure I send my kids to programs which help them keep on the right track…getting into stealing or cursing, being gang kids does not have to happen.” Protecting youth from the threats in and beyond their communities is important, but that is only possible if they have access to active, safe spaces. Many times, families from low-income communities do not have access to facilities or areas where youth may participate in organized activities or cannot afford the expenses. Opportunities are very limited for youth of color and that impacts the level of participation that occurs from their communities.
Studies have found that discrimination and harassment by school leaders or coaches who are not culturally competent will also influence the youth in that extracurricular environment (Hartmann et al., 2017). Kids of color may struggle to build strong bonds with their coaches or teammates because they are unable to identify or relate due to systemic racism. Systemic racism is defined as racism directed against a group of people through an institution’s rules and policy (O’Dowd, 2020). One illustration of this kind of racism is provided by Lench (2016). He described a middle school basketball team tryout in which all African-American boys were alleged to have been cut by the coach after asking the players to stand in a line tallest to shortest by race, and then excused all but one black player from participating in the actual tryout to make the team. This experience shows that black athletes are at a disadvantage when attempting to participate in sports, and at times do not even get the opportunity to try out. Black players are impacted by a social system that has been left unquestioned for so long and has allowed for white superiority to infiltrate athletic organizations.

There are other factors related to ethnicity that are specifically connected to certain groups. When Somali youth, for example, discuss the reasons behind their inactivity, many stated that it was difficult to exercise effectively in the United States due to the comparatively sedentary lifestyle, inaccessibility of workout facilities, and unfavorable weather conditions (Carroll et al., 2007). Somali youth explained that, when they lived in Somalia, people walked everywhere from the market for fresh food to the well for water daily. Many activities were community based as well, so families would walk together and partake in active lifestyles every day. The daily physical activity they performed in Somalia has been lost and replaced with
different types of chores, leaving fewer incentives for daily physical activity (Persson et al., 2014).

**Muslim Youth in Muslim Group Activities**

Across the globe Muslim youth often participate in activities that involve other Muslim youth or youth of similar ethnic backgrounds (Walseth, 2015). This is mainly because Muslim communities create a safe space for families to participate in activities and actually get to enjoy those activities without encountering hardships from society. Youth are able to develop a strong identity both as a Muslim and as a citizen of their country. However when participating in school-based extracurricular activities, many face barriers such as not having appropriate uniforms or access to spaces that are single-gendered.

Muslim parents prefer their children to participate in ethnic-specific spaces and activities that allow for comfortable social interactions. This allows for networking opportunities to discuss personal and work-life issues. Many Muslim communities in Norway use sports as a way to alleviate stress and overcome hardships as a community. Playing in an ethnic-specific sport allows for them to enjoy the sport, without having to follow certain policies that apply when playing for a club team. Sports clubs that are minority-focused contribute to the integration of youth into a society (Walseth, 2015). A space in which minorities feel a sense of social belongingness is created when there is an ethnic-specific space. It provides the opportunity for youth to build honest friendships that allows them to integrate, together, into society.

**Muslim Youth and Access/Inclusion in Majority Group Activities**

Another type of barrier that becomes clear when reading the literature involves the religious obstacles placed on Muslim youth when participating in activities. Many Muslim youth
fear being discriminated against or face negative attitudes because of their religious and cultural needs, and this prompts them to choose not to partake in sports. There are several barriers that previous researchers have identified, from a lack of separate gendered spaces to the availability of modest uniforms.

Young girls do not feel comfortable being physically active in spaces where men may be present. Muslim girls at a school in Australia expressed how they felt during gym class when asked to participate in the scheduled activity, “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” (Alamari, 2013, p.423). There are very few spaces that provide girls-only activity spaces, and even fewer that are offered in the school system. A community-based project conducted by the University of Minnesota and the Cedar-Riverside community found that when girls were provided a space to be active they were frequently pressured by the boys in their community to get out since they wanted to use the gym. The young girls expressed in their interviews, “...in our community they have soccer and basketball and basically it’s all for boys, you know. There’s not something for girls” (Thul et al., 2016). Opportunities for young Muslim girls are very limited, which impacts their overall level of participation in organized activities.

Modest dress code is another significant barrier for many young girls. Instructors and coaches often do not provide uniforms that are considered modest, which can result in girls being excluded from certain activities. Dressing modestly is consistent with attire that is looser fit, longer sleeves, and overall less-revealing. Research shows that the lack of awareness from school and athletic leaders regarding religious obligations has prevented many Muslim girls from participating in school sporting activities (Alamari, 2013). The lack of modest athletic clothing
available and the understanding of the need to dress modestly has impacted the level of engagement from young Muslim girls in sports at the high school level.

The current research was designed as an exploratory study, to confirm previous research findings and to extend them to another Muslim community. This early work will serve as the basis for additional research studies and provide data that allow for more detailed hypotheses and potential interventions.

**Methods**

**Participants**

A total of seven participants were recruited from the Twin Cities Muslim community mosque. I connected with leaders such as Imams and community organizers who helped us connect with families in the community, and youth participating in varsity high school athletics. There were three parents and four youths, most having a parent/child relationship. This allowed the study to gather multiple perspectives on the same events. Being a young first-generation Muslim American woman likely made the participants interviewed feel comfortable talking about their challenges faced in extracurricular activities due to the intersectional identities, particular gender and religion. Most participants identified as East African (5 out of 7) while the rest identified as Latino (2 out of 7). Youth participants ranged in age from 10-21, with 3 out of 4 being 18 years old. Finally, when considering family income most participants were considered working and middle-class (6 out of 7) or upper-class (1 out of 7).

**Procedure**

This exploratory investigation of Muslim youth experiences in extracurricular activities included two steps. The first step was a literature review of existing research on Muslim youth,
most of which comes from Europe. The second step was a set of interviews to identify recurring themes related to participation and barriers to participation in extracurricular activities. Prior to the interviews, I connected with past teammates and athletes that were Muslim from the community for background and perspective. This study was supported by a University of Minnesota TRIO McNair Scholars Program, under the direction of Prof. Douglas Hartmann, in the Department of Sociology.

Part 1. Research studies were selected for review based on several criteria. The first criterion was to include articles specifically from Western societies that focused on community- or school-based activities. The second criterion was to select articles that discussed the experiences of Muslim youth and the impact that being Muslim had on their participation or lack of participation. The third criterion was to add articles that explored the impact that parents and coaches played in the selection of activities. Finally, studies were included that summarized possible interventions to improve the Muslim youth experience in activities, and that detailed what the community can contribute to help support them.

Part 2. There were seven interviews that ranged in length from one hour to 90 minutes to examine youth and parent experiences with extracurricular activities. Basic demographic information on age, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity was collected from each participant. Questions related to age and ethnicity were open-ended to allow participants to answer as they chose. All participants were given a pseudonym immediately after completing the demographics form.

Interviews were conducted using questions similar to those from the Kids Involvement and Diversity Study (KIDS), a larger interview study conducted by sociologists and principal
investigators Doug Hartmann and Teresa Swartz at the University of Minnesota. With the goal of better understanding the experiences of involvement in youth extracurricular activities among families in the Twin Cities Metro Area, researchers from the KIDS project interviewed 75 children and 70 parents. The focus of the KIDS project was an examination of how parents and children of different cultural and economic backgrounds interpret and experience extracurricular activities. Understanding how one's racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and economic factors reflected in different and unequal patterns of participation. By centering on the voices and experiences of Muslim families, the purpose of this research was to identify the structure and organization of youth activities in one particular community, and how their experiences relate to broader patterns of religious and racial diversity, developmental outcomes, and social inequality.

For this study, I used the interview protocol from the KIDS study, but I added additional questions to specifically explore the role religion might have played in their experiences. The questions that were included were: How has your religious identity impacted your experience in sports? Was there ever a time where your religion influenced a sports event or tournament? Respondents were also asked questions such as: How did your children get started in these activities? What is the racial makeup of the activities your children have been involved in? Does race or ethnicity influence your interaction with other parents?

**Thematic Analysis.** To organize the data collected from the review of research-to-date and the interviews, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify themes. With a thematic analysis, the data are closely examined to identify common themes - topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that appear repeatedly (Caulfield, 2019). There were three steps followed during the analysis: coding, generating themes, and defining and naming themes. Coding is when text is
highlighted, and content is labeled from both the literature review and interviews. Themes were then generated based on repeating patterns that were identified. Once the recurring themes were identified, we interpreted and named them. Themes were then re-checked with the data from past research and statements from the interviews to ensure that they were consistent and distinctive.

Results

The four key themes that were identified through this process were: benefits of extracurricular activities, specific influences related to participation for families of color, specific influences related to participation for Muslim families, and barriers to participation of Muslim athletes. The first theme identified is extracurricular benefits, which here include soft skills and personal attributes used in everyday life, like communication and confidence, as well as resume building which is participating in activities for college application. Youth athletes in particular identified resume building as a reason why they continued their involvement in sports. Participant Maria explained, “... in high school, a lot of people do activities so they can put it on their college resume, not because they want to do it or they enjoy it.” As a varsity soccer player at her high school she never felt welcomed on her team and struggled adjusting to the environment. Yet she continued to participate on the team because her high school counselors informed her that colleges look for competitive students that participate in extracurricular activities and hold leadership positions. With these types of comments, we observe that students continue to place themselves in spaces and activities in which they are not comfortable in hopes of increasing their chances to attain a higher education.

Youth activities create a space in which kids are able to begin developing the personal and interpersonal skills that can help immediately as well as later in their careers. Adam, a father
whose daughter plays soccer explained, “Teamwork is very important, because even if they go to school or the workplace, if they have teamwork, that will help them succeed in life.” Youth sports and community recreation programs allow kids as young as four years old to begin developing these skills. For example, communication skills are key to a team's success and can be expressed in a variety of ways from the locker room, the field, in nonverbal cues, and even in feedback from coaches. A sense of community is developed in youth activities with teammates, parents, coaches, and family members involved, which creates stable social support that is critical for self-esteem development. Athletes learn how to connect with their peers, develop a sense of character, and excel in an activity which they enjoy. These experiences allow them to have the confidence needed to succeed in different environments.

The second theme identified was specific influences related to participation for families of color. This is defined as the barriers or obstacles families of color may face when participating in activities in their community. The topic of ethnically diverse opportunities appeared multiple times in interviews. This is related to spaces and activities that are inclusive and not tokenized. When exploring different activities that their children might pursue, parents explained that they visited the environment that their child would compete in before registering. Adam described, “I would reconsider putting my kids in a place if it was all white people. Then I may not put my kids in that, because I don’t want my kids to feel like they are the only black kids, or the only Muslim.” A diverse space is important for a child’s development of self-identity and being able to recognize their difference as a positive aspect of their identity.

Risk avoidance was another common topic within this theme. Parents using sports as an outlet or a safe space apart from the negative influences in the community. Helping their child
stay active in the community was critical for some parents, but they wanted it to be in a safe space which sports normally provide. A mother explained in her interview, “... instead of having them driven out, offering different kinds of activities allows them to stay involved in the community.” Many programs that are offered today do offer spaces for youth, but do not provide mentorship or opportunities to develop necessary skills. The focus of programs in low-income communities is often to regulate and monitor the youth so they are not involved in problematic or criminal activities (Hartmann, 2016).

The last topic that appeared within this theme was discrimination, defined as unreasonable conduct towards youth regarding race. There are different ways in which discrimination can occur in youth sports, from coaches demeaning an athlete in practice to having teammates that use derogatory terms. Multiple participants discussed how they have experienced some form of discrimination on their team, sometimes from their coaches, but feared that if they reported it they would be removed from the team. One athlete explained how she was discriminated against by the head coach of her lacrosse team because of her race and did not receive equal playing time because of it. She explained in the interview, “... one girl had no idea what she was doing, and she put her out there, and I felt like I could've been better if I was out there.” Athletes of color believed that they are not given the same opportunities as their peers, and that influences how they enjoy their sport.

The third theme identified was specific influences related to participation for the Muslim community, meaning obstacles or barriers that the Muslim athletes experienced. A recurring comment from the youth interviewed addressed how coaches were not culturally competent and access to modest uniforms was limited. Culturally competent is defined as coaches that have
respect for diversity, equity, and fairness. Participants explained that coaches were not knowledgeable about their religious needs which made it difficult to continue being involved in their sport. Certain religious practices described were praying, fasting - abstaining from food and water, and modest dressing. When coaches cannot comprehend the reasons or do not attempt to learn about their athletes and their culturally-specific needs, it creates an uncomfortable environment for the youth. Female participants explained in a previous study, “girls did not have coaches that were inclusive or culturally competent, and many did not understand why they needed to cover their bodies when playing … so girls were always placed in an ultimatum.” It is difficult for developing youth to continue being involved in a space where coaches are not willing to understand the differences in culture or religion. This lack of understanding can result in excluding a community.

Another common topic addressed only by Muslim female athletes was dress code, which is inclusive uniform policies that allow youth to participate in their sport. Access to modest uniforms was addressed in many earlier research studies, and it was also brought up during current interviews as well. One female participant explained a specific scenario when playing in a soccer tournament her senior year. Her hijab came untucked from her jersey top, and the referee gave her a yellow card considering it a hazard on the field. She explained in her interview, “I wear a small hijab, and yeah sometimes it would flare, and some refs would stop the game and be like no, you have to tuck that in.” This athlete was penalized for practicing her religion on the field, and at times it could place her team at a disadvantage. This girl went on to explain that referees would give her stricter calls compared to other players on the field and she believed they considered her attitude inappropriate if she ever spoke against their call. Due to
misconceptions and discrimination on the playing field, many young girls have not felt comfortable being involved in sports.

The last theme that was identified were barriers to participation for Muslim youth. When discussing with parents the reasons why they did not register their children for organized sports in their community, many expressed the importance of ethnic and religious factors being included with sports. Many first-generation immigrant families explained how they wanted their child to be physically active, but they preferred that activity to be with other children from the same cultural heritage. This allows for the child to develop a sense of self within their heritage while also participating in community organized tournaments. Parents believe that they are able to get the same experience playing in the cultural team like Ethiopian or Somali soccer teams as they would on the local St. Paul Blackhawks. One parent explained how her children were involved in sports through their religious weekend school. In her interview she said, “they went to weekend school so they can practice religion while at the same time be involved in sports like soccer or basketball.” Having a space where kids are able to gain more than just physical activity time was important to Muslim families, which limited the youths’ involvement in large-scale organized sports.

The last topic that was highlighted in interviews were cultural expectations for Muslim girls. The conservative ideology that girls should not play sports and instead belong in the kitchen is a principle that some parents believe, and influences how young girls think about sports. Mothers in particular expressed their dislike towards young girls partaking in sports like basketball, and believe that they should spend that time doing chores. When discussing this
topic, many of the young girls mentioned how their parents are learning to acclimate to a new society that offers organized sports for youth.

Discussion

The goal of this research study was to identify the multiple barriers and obstacles faced by the Muslim community in youth sports and other extracurricular activities. Previous research explored barriers and obstacles encountered by communities of color, low-income families, and first-generation communities. Each community described different sets of barriers that might be experienced when participating in youth sports. This study was able to locate key challenges that Muslim youth face. The obstacles that were identified were unique to the Muslim community and have not been emphasized or fully explored in other studies. Both the literature review and interviews support that Muslim youth across the world are facing a specific set of barriers in extracurricular activities and sports participation (Walseth, 2015).

Historically youth sports have been racialized at all levels from professional to recreational. Discrimination and harassment by school leaders or coaches who are not culturally competent influence the youths’ experience in that extracurricular environment (Hartmann et al., 2017). In the United States, many youth sports programs justify and explain themselves by highlighting the larger, non-sports benefits, goals and value of participation. These values and goals were very important for parents that were interviewed, and how they selected which activities to partake in. Yet these outcomes are far from inevitable or automatic; they do not just happen by the mere act of playing sports. The organization from the top-down has to create an inclusive space that allows for growth and development to occur in all areas. The overall purpose
of youth sports has changed drastically in the past decade, and marginalized communities were the ones impacted by it the most.

In the current study, I hypothesized that Muslim youth face challenges that are different from those faced by other marginalized communities when participating in youth sports. While the results are preliminary data, we now have a better understanding of the role religion plays in youth activities, and how identities intersect in different spaces. Discrimination towards Muslim girls has occurred in all levels of sports from high school games to international tournaments. In a FIFA soccer tournament that took place in Ontario, a referee forced a young girl to choose between her hijab or continuing to play with her team. The referee would not permit her to play with her hijab, which resulted in the team forfeiting the game and leaving the tournament. Following this incident, the FIFA Board decided to ban the hijab from the league and created a policy that would not allow head coverings that exposed the neck (Ahmed, 2018). This ban was upheld for seven years before getting overturned in 2014 when protests were conducted from women across the world. Experiences like this affect the involvement of young girls in youth sports.

A community-based project has begun in Minneapolis to help mothers become physically active with their daughters, and help them understand the benefits of participating in youth sports. Teaching parents and having them be a part of the process is how different communities can get involved. Programs like this help young girls feel comfortable being physically active while being religiously modest. Including the mother helps break down assumptions that sports are incompatible with their beliefs, and mothers can learn different ways they can be active with their girls.
Programs similar to this need to be expanded to high schools and club organizations to increase the number of Muslim girls involved. Providing modest uniforms at the high school level will create an inclusive environment for Muslim girls and may even encourage them to pursue high levels of competition. This kind of representation will likely impact the young girls in the community and show them the opportunities available for girls like them in sports. Organizations that can provide a space for girls only to be physically active is another way to make sports more accessible. Single-gendered gyms and locker rooms will create a sense of comfort for young girls who fear boys may enter the space when working out. This will create a safe environment for young girls to participate in sports and be a part of a community.

The lack of culturally competent coaches is a huge concern in the community, as is the lack of knowledge that coaches have when working with diverse athletes. One way this can be addressed is having all coaches participate in a diversity and inclusion training to help them understand how to work with all athletes and ways to create inclusive environments. Initiatives like this can also help ensure that actions will be taken if discrimination or stereotyping occurs within an organization. Bringing awareness of the needs of Muslim athletes will provide opportunities for many youths and empower youth to continue pursuing their passion. Many athletic brands like Nike did not recognize the importance of modest clothing for physical activity, but with the increase of Muslim women in sports, that has slowly been changing. It is important that sports organizations not only diversify their spaces, but also create inclusive environments that support everyone involved.

Moving forward, future research should focus on the issues unique to Muslim youth and explore how discrimination may differ in different states, such as the south. Questions from the
KIDS project should be tailored to best fit the experiences and circumstances of Muslim youth and parents. Possible future interview questions should include: a) What forms of discrimination in your extracurricular activities have you experienced for being a Muslim? b) What was your experience as a Muslim girl with current athletic uniforms? c) Has being Muslim placed any barriers for you in activities? If so, what are they? Questions such as these will allow interviews to clearly understand the experiences of the participant and understand that types of barriers they may have faced. The focus should be on diaspora youth between the ages of 15-21. This particular group is impacted the most as they are trying to juggle two different identities, while attempting to assimilate into the society they live in.

**Conclusion**

The growth of youth sports over the past decade has been tremendous, and the cost to participate is expensive. Multimillion-dollar complexes have been built in many communities and elite travel teams cost almost $10,000 annually to participate. The challenges that youth of color face when participating in activities include not only unequal access and financial stress, but some form of racial barriers as well. Previous research found that youth from marginalized communities are being excluded due to all these changes, and the enjoyment of sports is not present. The purpose of this study was to begin exploring the unique challenges that Muslim youth face when participating in sports. The results were able to highlight some key differences from other communities, but more data will need to be collected. Future research focusing on diaspora Muslim youth can help develop policies that are inclusive to all children participating in sports.
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