



## Islamophobia Awareness Month:

### The role of MSA in making changes to increase numbers of Muslim women participating in sports

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# mend

ISLAMOPHOBIA  
AWARENESS MONTH

#TIMEFORCHANGE

Early nights and autumn colours ushers us into the month of November.

November also welcomes the return of Islamophobia Awareness Month, which began many years ago in 2012. This 30-day campaign is used to raise public awareness of discrimination against Muslims currently in society, challenging the lazy stereotyping of Muslim individuals in work and sports, encouraging better reporting of incidents to the police and therefore, motivating organizations to take positive actions to implement measures to prevent any form of Islamophobia.

It is ironic, that in the same month, we have witnessed *Yorkshire Cricket Club's* failure in handling racism and bullying allegations made by Azeem Rafiq. Thankfully, the pressure put upon *Yorkshire Cricket Club* by its sponsors, media attention and *UK government* has resulted in positive changes which hopefully will result in abolishing Islamophobic behaviour for future members.

Sitting at the launch of Islamophobia Awareness Month at East London Mosque on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November, I reflected on the state of Islamophobia for Muslim women in the world of sports. Shireen Ahmed, a journalist and sports activist, astutely commented that "there are generations of women who didn't bother playing football because they simply couldn't advance." In recent years, it has been pure joy watching "more and more Muslim women take the sporting world by storm" (Rahman, 2019). We have seen the talents of Ibtihaj Muhammad, Ruqsana Begum, upcoming Athena Bashar, Jawahir Roble and more in wide ranging field of sports. Muslim women athletes are competing in fencing, basketball, tennis, cricket, martial arts, mountaineering, football, volleyball, weightlifting, figure skating, ice hockey and field athletics. Out of 11 Muslim athletes who made headlines at the Tokyo Olympics 2021, three of them were women. Hijab bans have been lifted by various sports authorities worldwide. In Finland, the Football Association of Finland plan to make sports uniform "more hijabi appropriate." They have donated sports hijabs to girls playing football in order to make football accessible to everyone.

This change in scenery is a positive step forward for Muslim women. It is the result of years of dedication and persistence by individuals and organizations tackling barriers facing Muslim women. So, does this mean that work needed to tackle Islamophobia on behalf of Muslim women is complete?

The answer sadly, is no. Doors of opportunities have been open, however, there is still lots of groundwork needed to give Muslim women an equal footing in sports. The French Football Federation (FFF) maintains a ban on the wearing of "conspicuous religious symbols" despite FIFA lifting its own hijab ban in 2014. The organization, *Sporting Equals*, has reported that only 26.1% of Asian women take part in recommended levels of sports and physical activities compared to 31.4% of white British women. A *Sports England* study revealed that only 18% of Muslim women participate in regular sport, compared to 30% of the entire UK population. Within school settings and sports clubs, Muslim girls and women still face situations where they are compelled to make a choice between playing a sport or practicing their faith. Also, Muslim women face low expectations and lazy stereotypes of disliking the physical challenges needed to pursue sports. It is a frustrating predicament for Muslim women who enjoy playing sports as a part of a healthy lifestyle, have fun

taking part in a game they love, thrilled by the competitive nature of the game or burn with ambition to play and win in competitive sporting events.

The statistics reveal a demanding need for organizations like MSA (Muslimah Sports Association) to continue providing settings where Muslim women can develop their skills in sports by trained coaches without compromising their religious beliefs. Over 6 years, MSA has seen 1000 female participants take part in various sports (currently running 15 sport activities a week) with 90 Qualified coaches. Many of these coaches are MSA participants/volunteers who gained qualifications in training programmes run by National Sports Organisations. Many participants have voiced how MSA coaches have instilled confidence and belief in their ability to achieve success in sports. Listening to the inspiring stories of all those involved in the MSA in Redbridge/Barking and Dagenham has demonstrated that the MSA have pioneered a successful and proven strategic plan which has started to reverse the low numbers of Muslim women participating in sports.

In order to achieve this successful outcome on a nationwide scale, Yashmin Harun BEM (founder and chair of MSA) highlighted key areas from their strategic plan that should be embarked upon, in order for others to achieve the same success:

- Muslim women should be given a platform to share their lived experiences and direct the narrative to make positive changes tackling Islamophobia. We need engagement from the National Governing Bodies to understand the different intersectionality that exists within Muslim Communities and not assume one strategy fits all.

Currently, Yashmin Harun BEM is a Director at the London FA and the FA Council Representative. She also serves as an Independent Director at British Fencing. Yashmin is part of the Asian Females in Football Working Party Group with the FA and Vice Chair of the British Asians in Sports and Physical Activity with Sporting Equals. Her various roles enable her to influence strategy and policies made at the top level of National Governing Bodies and sports organisations by amplifying the concerns and best interests for ethnically diverse communities in order to increase accessibility. Yashmin Harun BEM promotes inclusion, diversity and ensures it is at the heart of policy and strategy. Diverse thoughts and voices around the table makes a better organisation and brings different skills set. That is why she encourages MSA participants to apply for roles they would never consider before becoming involved with the MSA. Hafiza Patel (MSA Trustee), who also helped set up MSA, is also an Independent Non-Executive Director at Essex FA and chairs the Inclusion Advisory Group for the county FA. With a place on the board, she is directly able to review and influence existing procedures and policies, and support new policies, procedures and training aimed at improving diversity into football. The county was recently awarded intermediate level on the equality standard (the only county to hold the standard at this level). Reha Ullah BEM (MSA Trustee) is a coach for Football, Fencing, an activator for Tennis and Badminton and most recently an instructor for Archery. She was integral in setting up the MSA female football team. She is the Project Manager for Muslim Girls Fence (social inclusion initiative) whose aims is to bring fencing to Muslim women living in highly populated BME areas. Recently, Muslim Girls Fence have released a project on Islamophobia and racism. Lipa Nessa (MSA Trustee) is the Co-founder of a sports podcast, formally a semi-professional footballer and now a grassroots coach, sports activist, and National Youth Board member for several sports boards. Ibtisam Belola's (MSA Trustee) experience in research and insight will support MSA's new 5-year strategy with its ambition to grow and strengthen their place as market leaders in the sports industry.

This is just the beginning and we need to see more representation at every level from Local Sports authorities to National Governing Bodies.

- MSA's work doesn't stop with governing bodies, they also work with local councils, sports clubs and leisure centres to ensure they take into consideration how to provide leisure spaces which are inclusive, engaging and accessible (affordable).
- Community organisations, like MSA, need financial support to expand in order to meet demand for MSA sessions nationwide. We need to train more women in sports leadership and coaching programmes. Currently, we offer Level 1 coaching to participants. We have ambitions to offer a range of level coaching to participants so that they can see progression in their chosen sports career.

MSA have made great strides in opening the doors of opportunities for Muslim women. Nevertheless, there is still much needed work to expand what we have in East London and ensure it is being offered to every corner in the United Kingdom. Research by Stanford University revealed that there was an 18.9% drop in anti-Muslim hate crimes in the Merseyside area and the number of anti-Muslim tweets by Liverpool fans were cut in half when Mohamed Salah signed for Liverpool football team (Independent newspaper, 2019). This drop in the number of anti-hate crimes towards Muslims was attributed to his stellar performance on the field, as well as his open and unapologetic portrayal of his faith. In conclusion, only by providing Muslim women an equal and fair footing into the world of sports will we ensure Muslim women feel valued by society as an individual and therefore, successfully eradicate Islamophobia from society.



*Pic 1 MSA Boat Race 2021*