

The Sleeping Giant: Australian Rules Football in the Lives of Muslim Women in Western Sydney

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ABSTRACT

While Australians are famed internationally for their obsession of sport from both a participant and spectator level, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has identified a significant underrepresentation of culturally diverse women in sport and physical recreation. In particular, Muslim women have some of the lowest rates of participation and engagement in sport which has produced minimal academic research. To address this neglect, this qualitative study interviewed nine female Muslim players who are actively involved within a semi-professional Western Sydney Australian Rules Football Club. From the data generated and the analysis undertaken, three clear themes emerged. First, the issue of racism is still a prominent feature within this sporting code, and there has been a lack of support from external bodies for players who experience discrimination. Second, retention rates are maintained due to the cultural responsiveness of the Club, as it includes all women whilst enhancing the experience for Muslim women. Finally, this study also found that charismatic leadership attracted players, sponsors, and hence, maintained the longevity of the Club.

INTRODUCTION

Whilst Muslim minorities have lived in Western countries for centuries (Duderija, 2007; Voas & Fleischmann, 2012), recent political events such as the Gulf War and September 11 has put Islam under a microscope, especially within mass media (Poynting & Mason, 2007). Due to the number of Muslim immigrants increasing in the West, issues surrounding Islam acted as a focal point in academic literature. However, Australian literature has mainly documented issues associated with Muslims and their experiences with racism (Poynting & Noble, 2004; Mansouri & Trembath, 2005), assimilation (Mills & Keddie, 2010; Woodlock, 2011), and gender construction (Rozario, 1998; Bouma & Brace-Govan, 2000).

Internationally, there has been an emergence of literature centered on Muslim youth and their interactions with sport in the Western world. Moreover, it is well-documented that Australia is renowned for being a 'sport-obsessed' nation, due to its continual international success across a number of sports, and both high participation and spectator rates (Toohey & Taylor, 2009; Porter, 2017). Although, Australian literature has a narrowed focus based on the history of traditional sporting codes such as Rugby

League, Australian Rules football, and cricket (Rowe, 1997; Brawley, 2009; Judd, 2010). For the last three decades, research into Muslim women and sport has been a feature in European literature.

This was due to Muslim women being recognized as having a lack of representation in organized sport, as well as being disengaged in Physical Education (PE) at school. According to this body of literature, multicultural women living in secular countries face many challenges with sport participation, especially at a school level (Sfeir, 1985; De Knop et al., 1995; De Knop, Theeboom, Wittock, & De Martelaer, 1996; Dagkas & Benn, 2006).

In particular, this research aimed to explore issues faced by Muslim girls specifically, with the most prominent theme among this literature highlighting that Islamic requirements such as fasting during the lunar month of Ramadan, modest dress, and gender organization, act as barriers to sport participation (De Knop et al., 1995; De Knop et al., 1996). Hence, these barriers acted as a focus point in further international literature, either supporting or discrediting the idea that Islamic requirements restrict Muslim women from participating in physical activity.

However, in Australia, despite sport being a pervasive and dominant social institution which has generated significant academic literature, there has been considerable neglect towards investigating anything Islamic, even though it is clear in Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) that female Muslim representation in sport is very low (ABS, 2006; ABS, 2007).

The ABS identified that the rate of participation in sport and physical recreation was only 19.7% for women from North Africa and the Middle East, in which there is a significant gap in comparison to the 66% for women born in Australia (ABS, 2006). Moreover, it was also identified that Muslim women in particular are marginalized within physical activity, as they face both sociocultural, and access constraints (Cortis, Sawrikar, & Muir, 2007).

However, the academic analysis on Muslim women and sport is limited to two articles published more than a decade ago (Taylor & Toohey, 1998; Taylor, 2001) and scarce contemporary articles (see Knez, MacDonald, & Abbott, 2012; Maxwell, Foley, Taylor, & Burton, 2013; Toffoletti & Palmer, 2017). Clearly, what this illustrates is the lack of Australian academic interest. Therefore, this area of scholarship warrants more sophisticated research in order to ascertain issues associated with Australian Muslim women and their interactions with sport.

Hence, this article attempts to address some of this neglect by giving voice to Muslim women who are actively involved within an Australian Rules Football Club in Western Sydney, exploring the link between Australian Rules and its subsequent impact on their cultural identity. The Club was selected as it is the only club in the women's Sydney Australian Football League (AFL) competition where the playing squad is predominantly Muslim.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Whilst in Australia this topic has produced minimal research, within international literature, the fascination of Muslim women and sport first emerged after Sfeir (1985) conducted a study based on Muslim women's participation in sport in 29 predominantly Islamic countries, including in the Middle East. In this body of research, Sfeir (1985) deduced that this minority group in the West can participate in sport in a secular context, but not as an identifiable 'Muslim'. This pioneering study was followed by more European focus which further explored

experiences of Muslim women and sport (Carrington & Williams, 1988; Carroll & Hollinshead, 1993; De Knop et al., 1995; Walseth & Fasting, 2004; Walseth 2006; Dagkas & Benn 2006; Dagkas, Benn, & Jawad; 2011). As a result, the Islamic religion became a focal point for other scholars to explore its link with sport participation among Muslim women. Although, the diversity which has existed in the other studies has not been a feature in the Australian context. The examination of European literature surrounding Muslim women and sport yielded two main themes. The first theme concluded that Islamic requirements such as fasting, modest dress, and interaction with the opposite gender act as significant barriers to sport participation (Carroll & Hollinshead, 1993; De Knop et al., 1995).

For instance, De Knop et al. (1995) explored the link between sport and ethnic minority youth in Belgium, documenting that Muslim girls had an interest in physical activity, however, were prohibited from taking part in it because of their religious and cultural beliefs. Whilst scholars critiqued these bodies of literature, as it adopted a 'problem-focused', 'sexist', 'racist' and 'Eurocentric' approach (Siraj-Blatchford, 1993; Zaman, 1997), the complexities of Islam acted as a focal point in future literature, exploring how this may influence involvement in physical activity.

The second theme that emerged from European research was in relation to Muslim parents deeming PE as a subject which should not appear in schools. This was due to the learning environment clashing with Islamic values, with parents believing that their daughters were not taken care of at school (Benn et al., 2011; McGee & Hardman; 2012). In summary, this European body of literature linked the lack of sport participation among Muslim girls to religious beliefs, and restrictive parents.

The final theme which emerged from European literature focused on teacher pedagogy influencing Muslim girls' engagement in PE. One pioneering body of literature highlighted that the common perspective of teachers was that Muslim girls are deemed as "the other" (Walseth, 2015, p. 314), whereby it was highlighted that the stance of the teachers is a reiteration of Western discourse, applying a deficit view of Muslim girls and placing them at fault. Similarly, Benn et al. (2011) deduced that physical activity is not problematic; rather, structural factors such as compulsory uniform

and gender organization can disengage this group. Therefore, these studies began to apply a more comprehensive view on the topic, shifting the focus from ethnicity to structural ethos.

In doing so, this challenges protocol in educational systems that fail to provide suitable learning environments for engagement (McGee & Hardman, 2012), rather than reinforcing the negative stigma surrounding religion. In summary, the link between Islam and sport had been a central focus in European literature. However, more recent literature aims to identify structural boundaries that marginalise this group.

In the neglected Australian setting, there has been little interest in documenting issues faced by Australian Muslim women, despite Islam being the second largest religion in Australia behind Christianity since the 1970s (Khawaja & Khawaja, 2016). A body of literature by Taylor and Toohey (1998) was foundational in exploring barriers towards sport participation for women of non-English speaking backgrounds in Australia.

It was found that Lebanese-Muslim women specifically stated sport participation prohibits them from meeting cultural requirements (Taylor & Toohey, 1998, p. 82). Moreover, Taylor (2001) again explored cultural diversity in sport organizations, concluding that gender and culture inclusivity needs to be actively pursued, “it cannot happen on its own” (Taylor, 2001, p. 39).

Whilst this research acted as a basis for future literature regarding the exploration of barriers impacting Muslim women from engaging in sport, there has been a lack of further research in the Australian context. After the emergence of Taylor’s work, there was an absence of any research undertaken for more than a decade. Scholars identified this lack of interest due to the impact of September 11, as media representation of Muslim women was predominantly in fictional films and television programs (Toffoletti & Palmer, 2017).

It was not until an emergence of literature centered on veiled female athletes at the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Amara, 2012) where Muslim women and sport became a focus in academia. Hence, Knez, MacDonald, and Abbott (2012) found that Muslim girls valued being active, however, boys naturally dominate in coeducational PE.

A year later, Maxwell et al. (2013) explored inclusion in Lakemba Sport and Recreation

Club in Sydney’s south-west, deducing that retention of Muslim women was facilitated through provision of Islamic sportswear, gender segregated training, female coaches, as well as culturally appropriate food. However, Maxwell et al. (2013) noted there is a missing element in providing social inclusion for one minority group, without excluding other social groups.

What the small number of Australian research illustrates is a lack of understanding of how the Islamic community functions in modern Australia.

The Islamic community, like most other communities, is divided up by ethnicity, as well as denominations of Islam, for example, Sunni and Shia. There are Islamic communities who have immigrated from the Middle East, as well as a number of newly arrived immigrants from African countries and refugees from Syria. Hence, Australian literature presents a homogenous and at times stereotypical reporting of findings. As such, what Australian research displays is an unsophisticated understanding of what it is to be a Muslim female in this country.

Hence, this research aims to present a new perspective on this topical issue by giving voice to the Muslim women actively involved in an Australian Rules Football Club in Western Sydney. No research has critically analyzed the positive involvement of diverse Muslim women within a particular sport, in this case, Australian Rules football. Therefore, this research presents a new perception of the linkage between Muslim women and sport, aiming to answer the question: how does the participation of Muslim women in an Australian Rules Football Club impact on their lives?

METHODOLOGY

What also characterizes the literature noted above was the use of a qualitative approach in the interpretive paradigm of research. This is not surprising as qualitative research provides a more in-depth understanding of themes through an alternative to the “numbers only approach” (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005, p. 4) based on quantitative research and subsequent under representation of Muslim women in ABS statistics (ABS, 2007). Therefore, qualitative research methods allow for a deeper insight into specific topics, whereby personal recollections act as evidence and gives participants an opportunity to contribute expert knowledge (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000). As a result, qualitative research allows for validity through

linkages with empirical evidence (Creswell, 2013). Hence, to gain a more comprehensive view of issues surrounding Muslim women and sport, this study utilised qualitative research methodology. In order to examine the experiences of Muslim women in Australian sport the Western Sydney women's Australian Rules Football Club was selected. This Club was established by its female Muslim Manager in 2009, and is comprised almost exclusively of Muslim women. This Club is the only club out of the 23 teams in the women's Sydney AFL top two divisions where the playing squad is made up of predominantly Muslims.

To undertake the research, initial contact was made with the Manager of the Club, who agreed to support the research. The Manager provided background information of potential participants, and the sample group was developed on strict criteria:

- female and over the age of 18,
- identify as Muslim, and
- Registered players of the Club.

After establishment of the criteria, an ethics application was lodged to The University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Once the application was approved, each eligible participant was approached by the Manager with an invitation to join the study, to which 9 of the 14 players consented to participate. Five legible players did not wish to participate in the study.

Data was gathered in June and July of 2017, through a series of face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. This data collection method was selected as interviews are the most prominent research method in qualitative studies (Yin, 1993; King & Horrocks, 2010). In addition, semi-structured interviews promoted a narrative style, reflecting a recursive means of questioning (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Thus, this fostered an environment that was not restrictive of participants elaborating on their thoughts, and involving the interviewer to use probes to focus on particular themes or topics as the conversation flowed (Richardson, 2000). Additionally, this structure allowed for the interviewer to understand each participant's opinion, and the meanings attributed to these opinions by placing it in the context of their individual experiences.

Therefore, the sample groups were asked questions related to their experiences of sport as

a Muslim woman, and what this Australian Rules Football Club has provided for them. The questions focused on the participants' previous involvement in sport, and how their current involvement with the Club impacts their lives. This qualitative approach offered a counter-voice to the problems-focused approach adopted by previous European literature (Stride, 2014), in order to present a new angle of Muslim women's involvement in sport, investigating their thoughts and feelings. Evidence in the form of narratives allowed participants to have a voice (Marshall & Rossman, 2014) thus providing a deeper understanding of their opinions and views.

Due to ethical considerations, the names of the participants were not provided and pseudonyms (through numbers) were used to maintain anonymity. Anonymous accounts are recognized as a way to enhance the integrity and validity of the research process, as it allows participants to freely discuss their thoughts without the risk of data being traced back to them (Wallace, 1999; Wiles, Crow, Heath, & Charles, 2008).

Hence, when the results were compiled, data was confidential and was untraceable to the individuals apart from the pseudonyms used. Each participant was provided with an information sheet prior to their interview, outlining the topic and ensuring participants they could withdraw from the study at any time. The interviews were audio taped at a mutual location, that of which being the home ground of the Club. The interviews were then transcribed and analysed in depth to generate common themes. Secondary data analysis was conducted by collecting published articles and themes from external sources. This data was analysed and collaborated in the discussion section to extend on previously observed findings (Greenhoot & Dowsett, 2012), drawing upon the interviews to present a clear picture on the topic. Denzin's (1978) theory of 'triangulation' was highly referred to, examining different data sources to validate findings and allow for a more in-depth analysis of the qualitative data gathered.

In turn, this enabled a consistent comparison between themes to be observed effectively (Wald, 2014), thus increasing validity by incorporating several viewpoints. Therefore, combining multiple methods reduced the potential for intrinsic bias, and influence of pre-existing patterns and trends (Yeasmin, & Rahman, 2012).

To interpret data, triangulation entailed the usage of interpreting raw primary data with literature to reach convergence, or finding inconsistencies within sources. As a result, this acted as the basis for a well-rounded analysis. Consideration of participant opinions, relevant literature, and analysis of secondary data provided a deep level of insight towards the themes and findings of the research process, allowing for the identification of relationships between data patterns which have been discussed throughout the dissertation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through a deep analysis of the interview transcripts and drawing upon Denzin's (1978) theory of 'triangulation', what emerged from the qualitative data was three dominant themes regarding the Muslim players in this Club. To understand these themes better, this analysis has been divided into three parts.

Racism

The most visible theme to emerge from the study is the clear issues associated with racism. Whilst the AFL prides itself as an inclusive sport with multicultural rounds and presence of diverse players, the research painted a rather more discriminative picture. The issues of discrimination emerged on a number of interrelated levels. First, the traditional Islamic dress of the hijab (headscarf) creates a significant difference in attitudes towards Muslim women and their sport participation. Second, the participants being subjected to discrimination from non-Muslims was largely attributed to the current perception of Muslims in Western countries. With recent political events and mass media shaping a global negative perspective of Muslims, there

Firstly, whilst the Club promotes inclusivity among multicultural women, all nine participants stated that the ethnic contribution creates an avenue to receive direct racism on the field. This form of discrimination differs to structural boundaries and teacher dispositions as identified in the European and Australian literature (Taylor, 2001; Dagkas & Benn, 2006; Dagkas et al., 2011; Maxwell et al., 2013; Stride, 2014; Walseth, 2015).

International literature saw that culturally insensitive organizations, as well as a PE curriculum that focuses on male-dominated sports (Tischler & McCaughy, 2011), decreased participation among Muslim women.

However, this study found that external organisations supported the cultural inclusivity of the Club, although, the Muslim players experienced casual racism on match day from opposition teams.

All nine participants agreed that the reasoning behind this discrimination was a false image of the Club being tied solely to Islam and Muslims. Whilst the Club is comprised of women from many ethnicities, a strong presence of Muslim women who wear the hijab acts as an identifier of the Club. Six of the nine participants wear the hijab, agreeing that the hijab is "not representative being an Australian female, it is representative of Muslims" (Participant 8). This issue was raised among both the participants who wear the hijab and the three participants who do not. Hence, the six participants who wear the hijab acknowledged that individual behavior whilst wearing the hijab becomes representative of the religion and the Club. As such, this view aligns with recent literature which identified that within Western discourses, the hijab and Muslim women are synonymous (MacDonald, as cited in Long, Fletcher, & Watson, 2017).

An implication of this view is that both Muslims and non-Muslims will associate the hijab with Islam, without consideration of other factors such as ethnicity, family, and individual character. That said, all nine participants agreed that misconduct among Muslim women who wear the hijab can tarnish the already fragile image of Islam. The six participants who wear the hijab unanimously agreed that they are more aware of their behaviour on the field, acknowledging that wrongdoing would be attached to Islam as a scapegoat instead of the individual.

Moreover, ethnic affiliation is not a significant feature of Australian Rules when compared to soccer and Rugby League. As such, this study presents that direct casual racism remains a prominent issue in this sporting code, finding that all nine participants claimed to be racially vilified during matches. However, this was more prominent with the six participants who wear the hijab. When receiving racist remarks, the consensus was that participants would either ignore the comments, or "thank the opposition for their opinion" (Participant 3) and continue playing. The context behind why women received racism was unclear, however, seven of the nine participants stated that non-Muslims have a lack of understanding on what Islam

stands for, therefore, ignorance creates opportunity for casual racism.

On the other hand, the three participants who do not wear the hijab were not on the receiving end of these remarks directly, rather, when these women experienced racism it was more so targeted at the team. For instance, the team were labelled as “terrorists” and that they “do not belong here” (Participant 4). Clearly, the identifier of the hijab creates a perception these women on the team are undoubtedly Muslim and nothing else, creating an avenue for racist remarks based on religion. What can be gathered from this notion is that Muslims are painted as a homogenous group, although, previous literature has identified that this applies a deficit view of Islam (Walseth, 2006). Hence, the general consensus deduced that there is a lack of understanding on what Islam entails, and justifies poor attitudes towards the Muslim women involved in the Club and sport.

Moreover, all participants gave evidence of discrimination occurring during the formative years of the Club, which in turn saw a number of players leave. Hence, the psychological distress due to being racially vilified proves to be an issue that needs to be addressed. Although the Club offered social support for these players, it was identified that there was no external body that policed misconduct, or to provide support for players who may experience racism.

Therefore, unfortunately, the Club has no choice but to accept racism at face value, as there were no repercussions for the opposition teams for their discrimination. In saying this, the AFL has a sub-organization being AFL Education, aiming to raise awareness of social issues such as alcohol, illicit drugs, and racism. Although AFL Education has a framework designed to inform and address the issue of vilification at all levels of competition (AFL, 2017), there is still no evidence of this being put into practice.

Additionally, the AFL Education website also provides fact sheets surrounding diverse cultural beliefs (AFL, 2017). However, despite this array of educational resources that raise awareness of cultural values, and the psychological impacts of racial vilification, the AFL lacks a support system where players can reach out if they are affected by this. Furthermore, more needs to be done at a community level to directly inform players about racial vilification to prevent such misconduct from occurring.

Motivation to Play

What became clear among the interviews was that these women had marginalized experiences throughout their sporting lives, especially at school. That said, the cultural responsiveness of the Club allowed for these multicultural women to maintain motivation to play. One prominent theme that was evident across all nine interviews was the strong sense of camaraderie within the Club, which in turn enables higher retention rates.

This was due to two reasons: firstly, the Club fosters a safe environment that caters for diverse needs and secondly, these women unite with the common value of expanding women’s Australian Rules football.

The notion of Muslim women being marginalized in sport was supported by the European studies, whereby it was identified that Islamic dress, communal sport, and fasting during Ramadan deterred Muslim girls from engaging in PE (Carroll & Hollinshead, 1993; De Knop et al., 1995; De Knop et al., 1996). When asked how participants felt towards this issue, eight of the nine participants stated that this applies a deficit view of Muslim girls, and assumes that Islam is restrictive. Hence, majority of participants acknowledged that such a concept demonstrates Muslims as homogenous, despite Islam being highly diverse through its denominations and association with an array of ethnicities.

This stance aligns with more recent literature towards this issue, whereby scholars identified that Islam is not a barrier, rather, teachers having predispositions of Muslim girls’ ability impacts their self-esteem and subsequent participation (Stride, 2014; Walseth, 2015). Although, Participant 2 highlighted that barriers “are probably more of an issue overseas”, and in Australia there are more avenues for females to participate in both PE and organized sport outside of the schooling context. Participant 2 continued, “here, there are separate male and female teams.

It is different because I’m not scarfed. That wouldn’t be an issue or barrier for me” (Participant 2). Therefore, the absence of the hijab may create a lack of resonance with the potential barriers previously mentioned. Hence, individual characteristics of Muslim women creates differing perspectives on these issues, all of which being influenced by their religion, ethnicity, and family structure.

Whilst all nine participants acknowledged that Islamic requirements act as potential barriers, the real issue was found to be a lack of cultural sensitivity at school. Similarly, as explored in Europe, the lack of knowledge of cultural traditions creates an ignorance towards issues concerning Muslim girls (Dagkas & Benn, 2006; Santoro & Forghani-Arani, 2015).

Therefore, the nine participants agreed that Islam does not denounce sport, rather, facilitators of sport such as PE teachers and sporting clubs lack information on how to cater for this minority group. Hence, this Club has clearly fostered a supportive environment for the diverse needs of their players, as more women are committing to the Club. For instance, uniforms were modified to cater for Islamic dress code, interactions with men were based off scheduling, and there is an absence of night games.

Eight of the nine participants found that these modifications enhanced their experiences within organized sport. These simple modifications debunk myths around Islamic requirements acting as barriers towards sport participation, as there are feasible solutions to each potential barrier. In the same way, these modifications are still highly inclusive of all players, whilst maintaining the integrity of the sport.

In addition, the Club promotes all roles within organized sporting competitions. One participant identified that if women are reluctant to play, there are other roles in the Club where they can still be actively involved, for instance, logistics, coaching, and social media. Likewise, new research by Toffoletti and Palmer (2017) theorise that literature on Muslim women and sports are conceptualized.

Previous European and Australian literature focus on sports development and inclusion, however, Toffoletti and Palmer (2017) suggest that more holistic accounts that acknowledge the role of fandom, consumption and representation is warranted in literature on Muslim women's encounters and experiences of sport. Clearly, the values of this Club are ahead of its time, as being a semi-professional club accounts for sport consumption through creation of a fan base, whilst also providing opportunities for representation of Muslim women as active participants in mainstream sport. In turn, this allows for higher retention rates as there are more avenues for women to be involved in the Club.

Building upon this, the nine participants unanimously agreed that no matter what ethnicity, men are given more opportunities to achieve success in sport. Participant 6 found that the sense of community within this Club is heightened because all the people involved have the same vision of supporting diverse women in sport. Moreover, all nine participants likened the team to their "second family" as everyone "understands each other" (Participant 9). Participant 4 highlighted that during Ramadan this year, all women from the Club including those from different ethnic backgrounds and religions were invited to iftar (break fast) at the Manager's home.

The Muslim women broke their fast whilst the women from other backgrounds enjoyed a nice dinner with their teammates. This notion counters the idea put forward by Maxwell et al. (2013), whereby the literature found that social inclusion for one minority group excludes other social groups. It can be deduced from this study that the inclusion of all women regardless of their beliefs through simple gestures such as inviting the whole team for iftar, allows for retained motivation and building the strong sense of community that the club is renowned for. Ultimately, participants found that the lack of sport participation among Muslim women is due to external facilitators focusing on ethnicity rather than creating spaces that are culturally responsive to the needs of multicultural groups.

Similarly, recent European literature found that young Muslim women faced the same issues as other multicultural women such as a lack of cultural sensitivity and dominance of men within sport (Stride, 2014). What became evident upon the interviews was that players are motivated to be involved in the Club as it offers more in terms of positions for women, cultural responsiveness, media exposure, sponsorship and opportunities to play in the professional premier division league.

Leadership

The final theme to emerge from this research was centre don the success of the Club, and the importance placed on the Club by the participants was clearly related to the leadership by the Manager. The participants provided considerable evidence to highlight that the success of the Club was due to the cultural responsiveness and individual efforts of the female Muslim Manager to make the Club more viable for the future. While the AFL provided financial support for this Club, establishing

youth development systems and sponsors to maintain longevity, the success of the Club can be attributed to the commitment of the Manager as she independently established the team and took risks to ensure the Club was preserved for future generations.

The Club had humble beginnings, with the vision of one woman creating a community that has grown into a successful Australian Rules Football Club. What started as an observation that no women were part of an AFL Gala Day at a Harmony Day Festival in 2009, turned into a mission to get women involved in a sport that is dear to Australia. With the Manager being with the Australian Federal Police (AFP) at the time, it was her job to organize the 2010 Harmony Day Festival.

Despite having no interest in Australian Rules and no knowledge of what it was, “it would be the right thing to do to have women play just like the blokes” (Participant 1). Hence, she took initiative and gathered women such as other police officers, and women from a local football (soccer) club, regardless of any stereotypes or abilities, to play a demonstration game of Australian Rules at the 2010 festival. In addition, a memorable conversation with her male cousin who saw AFL as an equaliser between cultures, further added to the Manager’s vision of sharing this experience among multicultural women.

Hence, in 2011, the Manager rallied girls from the community to come to the home ground of a Western Sydney men’s Australian Rules Football Club. Some women were reluctant in joining, however, the Manager was dedicated to make her vision come to life.

I was at boot camp, developing my fitness. The Manager saw me one day and asked me to join the team. I thought about it, but told her I really need to focus on university. She said to me “you can do both.” I said to her, “but I work.” And she said, “you can do all three.” (Participant 7).

What can be seen through this conversation that the Manager adopted a stance that was highly devoted to recruiting women even if they had other commitments, thus, defying her own social traditions. Moreover, whilst the Manager had no experience in coaching, she single-handedly taught these women fundamental skills such as throwing and catching.

As the number of women who came to the park increased weekly, this group evolved into a sister team of the men’s club. She then on

boarded her female friend who was a personal trainer to assist with sport-specific skills. That year, the team entered the Sydney AFL competition and were having enormous losses, however, were still making an impact within the community. Although, Participant 1 highlighted that the men’s club had poor administration and imploded in 2012. Therefore, in 2013, as an initiative to make the Club more viable, the Manager registered the women’s team as an independent women’s club.

Due to the visible dedication of the Manager, the Club attracted two sponsors who committed to three-year contracts. Additionally, the AFL showed no hesitation with supporting the endeavors of the women’s club through donations of equipment. At the end of 2013, a member of a national elite AFL club approached the Manager to discuss partnerships.

As her thought process was heavily influenced by the longevity of the Club, a strategic decision to partner with the elite club would ensure extra support, as both clubs have the same vision in supporting opportunities for women. The Club rebranded under the name of the elite club, whereby it became clear that external organizations had faith in her vision, and her charismatic nature attracted committed sponsors.

Moreover, due to the Manager being a Muslim woman, she has a plethora of knowledge on how to accommodate for the needs of not only Muslim women but other multicultural women. Up until 2014, players and coaching staff were made up of only women. That year, the Manager introduced an Anglo-Australian male coach, who had previously converted to Islam. It was highlighted among all nine participants that the coach understood the laws of the game, and the laws of Islam. Participant 3 specifically stated that “he is very firm in his coaching.

He understands our cultural beliefs and the way he speaks to us is very respectful, which is very refreshing.” As such, introducing a male coach enhanced the experiences for the Muslim women, as he was aware of their cultural requirements and could cater for their needs. Previously, international literature widely acknowledged that the interaction between men and women acted as a barrier towards Muslim women’s participation in sport (De Knop et al., 1996; Dagkas & Benn, 2006; Jiwani & Rail, 2010). However, this study found that men are not socially excluded from this women’s club, rather, they are actively involved especially due to their cultural contribution.

Similarly, Lakemba Sport and Recreation Club saw an influx of participation once they appointed two Muslim managers (one male and one female), after the club's previous management failed to attract members of the community (Maxwell et al., 2013). What can be deduced from this is that senior management who understand cultural values and traditions can easily influence those of similar backgrounds to engage with their sporting organization.

It became clear that the individual efforts of the Manager inspire the women, as the underdog story acts as highly relatable towards diverse women who are marginalized. All nine participants acknowledged the Manager's inner drive to create opportunities for women of all ethnicities to participate in AFL has "combated many stereotypes" (Participant 5) especially those of Muslim women being complacent (Walseth, 2015). The Manager was acknowledged as "a big part of the Club. She is the type to go after what she wants and will not let anything get in her way" (Participant 9). Hence, in 2015, the initiatives of the Manager to preserve the Club for future generations, attracted Harvey Norman as a major sponsor, which was an amazing feature to the Club as this confirmed further support with their financial sustainability.

The fiscal partnership with Harvey Norman provided players with much incentive, as Participant 2 specifically highlighted that the funding of prospective juniors is more feasible with the development of the under-14s and under-18s youth girls' team. Moreover, five participants of this study have been promoted to the top premier division of the Sydney AFL competition. Therefore, the representation of Muslim women achieving success in an elite sport may be enough for young women to take the plunge and get involved. As such, in terms of financial sustainability, the Club has achieved viability since attracting sponsors and rebranding. In summary, this research has shown that the Club's success stems from the devotion and charisma of the Manager. The Club are reaping the rewards of their labour, as they are seeing an increasing number of female players transitioning into the premier league division. The Club has fostered a safe environment for culturally diverse female players to fully engage with Australian Rules football, and it is for this reason why the Club will continue to maintain longevity.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has begun to address some of the gap that currently exists within contemporary Australian literature through analysis of the opinions provided by players of this AFL club which is comprised of Muslim women. Although the study is specific in nature, the first limitation of this research is that the small sample size cannot account for the experiences of all the Muslim women involved in sport, because they only represent the voices of these participants. If more players consented to participate, the possibility of utilizing a larger sample size would have increased the reliability of the study (Silverman, 2013). In addition, the issues presented in this research may be different at other Australian Rules Football Clubs and other sporting codes. The second limitation is related to the fact that this small sample size includes participants who have continued their involvement in organized sport. Future study should seek to locate participants who have dropped out of sport.

The experiences of these women would clearly be different from the experiences of the nine interviewed in this study. In future research, an expansion of this study could investigate other female minority groups, and provide a comparative study to better understand their experiences. This will allow for a more comprehensive and well-rounded view surrounding the overall issues associated with culturally diverse women and sport participation.

CONCLUSION

Whilst Australian academia has a strong presence of sport, there has been a narrowed focus based on the history of sporting codes such as Rugby League, cricket, and Australian Rules football. Even though the ABS (2006; 2007) highlighted that Muslim women are underrepresented in sport and physical recreation, there has been very little interest in Australian scholarship documenting issues associated with this minority group.

As such, to address this neglect in literature, this qualitative study gave voice to Muslim women who are actively involved in an Australian Rules Football Club in Western Sydney. As this thesis has shown, issues associated with Muslim women are wide and varied. Upon analyzing primary and secondary data, this research drew three main conclusions.

First, this study clearly highlighted that whilst there are many programs to stamp out racism in AFL and all bodies have been pro-active doing this, it still appears that racism is a significant issue especially at the community level. Another emerging issue from the research deduced that due to evidence of players at this Club receiving racism on the field, more needs to be done by the AFL to address the issue of match day racism.

As there was a substantial number of women who left the Club due to being racially vilified, more support systems are warranted to enhance the overall well-being of these players in order for them to maintain engagement and feel safe in their participation. Second, this study found that the success and prominent reason why the women continued involvement was related more to the autonomy of the Club.

This Club took into consideration Islamic value and other social inclusion principles to maintain retention rates, and keep women engaged in playing Australian Rules. What the study found was that initially, the women in this Club recruited their family and friends to be involved in what started as a small sister team to a bigger men's Club, and their commitment to include all women in AFL grew popularity. Moreover, the initiative of the Manager and the players has created a safe space for multicultural women to be involved in all aspects of professional sport through the facilitation of modifications that accommodate for diverse needs, as well as providing playing, coaching, and logistical roles.

Therefore, as this study has shown, motivation to play stems from the cultural responsiveness of the Club which was player led. Finally, this Club and others in the future cannot happen without managers who are passionate enough to take risks for the benefit of the community. The success of this Club was highly due to the charismatic leadership of the Manager, whose vision was solely to give women the same opportunity as men.

The Club is currently reaping the rewards of her risks and dedication as they have attracted major sponsors and a partnership with a national AFL team. As evident within this dissertation, if sporting organizations want to include marginalized groups in society, then there needs to be support from external bodies for managers who want to make an influential change.

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