

The Sporty Muslim Women

Towards greater sports participation among Dutch Muslim women

Havva Yıldız · Bachelor of Arts (BA) Islamic Theology · Islamic University of Applied Sciences Rotterdam (IUASR) · 2023–2024

Background

International literature shows that Muslim women worldwide face barriers to participating in sport and exercise. Four factors recur throughout: tensions between religious and secular values, a lack of empowerment through sport, the motivations that do or do not bring women to the gym or sports club, and the influence of cultural norms and expectations. This research is the first to map these four factors together among Dutch Muslim women, aiming to provide building blocks for increasing their sports participation.

Research question

“How do religious-secular tensions, empowerment through sport, motivations for physical activity, and culture influence the sports participation of Muslim women?”

SUB-QUESTIONS

1. Which religious-secular tensions do Muslim women experience when exercising?
2. Which empowerment initiatives can help them overcome barriers?
3. What motivates Muslim women to be physically active, and how can this be encouraged?
4. How does culture influence their sports participation?

Method

Quantitative research via an online questionnaire (Google Forms), shared through social media and in person via QR code. Open from 28-12-2023 through 06-01-2024.

404

fully completed responses

390

valid respondents (Dutch Muslim women)

4.96%

margin of error at 95% confidence

Key findings

The analysis yields four main conclusions, one per theme studied.

● Religious-secular tensions

These tensions have a positive influence on the sports participation of Dutch Muslim women.

- Shortage of sports facilities and programmes tailored to Muslim women
- Limited time due to household responsibilities
- Lack of female coaches as role models
- Sports environments that are insufficiently inclusive

● Empowerment through sport

Empowerment through sport was not found to demonstrably promote sports participation.

- Insecurity about themselves when exercising
- Too few educational programmes about sport
- Resistance or lack of support from family
- Too little awareness of health and social benefits
- Little confidence in their own athletic abilities

● Motivations for physical activity

Positive motivation does not automatically go hand in hand with more sports participation.

- Too few places that take Muslim women into account
- Lack of support from family and friends
- Negative body image due to social pressure and stereotypes
- Pressure to conform to traditional gender roles

● Cultural factors

Culture has a demonstrable influence on sports participation.

- Negative opinions and prejudice towards Muslim women who exercise
- Differing interpretations of religious rules
- Cultural restrictions on intense physical activity
- Pressure from the community to uphold traditional norms

Recommendations

■ **Religious-secular tensions.** Invest in sports facilities and programmes specifically for Muslim women, offer time-management support, train more female coaches as role models, and make sports environments more inclusive.

■ **Empowerment through sport.** Deploy sports empowerment programmes, workshops and training to concretely map barriers, supported by coaching conversations and support from friends and community.

■ **Motivations for physical activity.** Create more places that take Muslim women into account, involve family and friends as a source of support, and develop programmes that teach women to deal with social pressure.

■ **Cultural factors.** Run campaigns to remove prejudice, offer workshops with professional advice on intense physical activity, and deploy awareness programmes to reduce community pressure.

In closing

This research shows that the sports participation of Dutch Muslim women is shaped by an interplay of religious, social and cultural factors — and that targeted, culturally sensitive interventions can make a difference here. The full, interactive results can be explored via the dashboard accompanying this thesis.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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