



How to... 'engage with females from BME communities and different cultural backgrounds'



Why it's important

Religion plays a very important role for many BME communities and research suggests that people often prefer to be defined by their faith identity rather than their ethnic origin. After Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and Hinduism are the three main religions in the UK.

Family responsibilities are the most common reason given for not participating in sport and physical activity by many minority ethnic groups. Lack of awareness, cultural challenges and negative perception of sporting environments are also barriers to participation.

It is therefore important to understand that strong religious alliance and commitments to the requirements of different faiths can have an impact on sport and physical activity participation. Religion can dictate daily life and can be a principal organiser of social life and free time. Females who follow the Islam (Muslims), Sikh (Sikhs) and Hindu (Hindus) faiths are often most disengaged from sport and physical activity. There are a number of things to consider when organising activity sessions in order to attract females from these groups.





Hammersmith and Fulham
Us Girls Project

Factors to consider

Female only sessions vs female exclusive environments

When setting up a new activity for women and girls the environment you want to create is important and may impact on the participants that attend.

Female only sessions – We know that many women prefer to exercise alongside other females and not males. Setting up and advertising female only sessions will encourage more non-sporty females to attend. The quality of the session coach or leader however is more important than whether they are male or female but being able to guarantee a female coach or leader may make the session more attractive. Us Girls projects predominately deliver female only sessions.

Female exclusive environments – In addition to the sessions being female only participants from some cultural groups will need the coach or leader to be female in order for them to take part. They may also need the environment to be exclusively for females where there are no males present and the activity is out of sight of male spectators. Covering glass doors and windows with black paper and using simple signage can be an effective and easy way of achieving this.

Depending on the target group think about whether you need to deliver female only sessions, whether a female instructor is important and whether you need to create a female exclusive environment. Don't forget that female only sessions will be appealing for many young women and girls, not just those who face cultural barriers.

Dress code

Relaxed dress codes will inevitably attract more females to all sports sessions. Allowing participants to wear long trousers, long-sleeved tops and head coverings will ensure that the environment is not excluding those from different cultural backgrounds. If you have a relaxed dress code promote this in the information you send out, it will make participants more confident about attending the sessions for the first time.



Parental approval and building relationships

Gaining parental approval is important in order for some young females to access a new sport or activity for the first time. The participant and their family need to understand that taking part will not conflict with their cultural beliefs. Engaging young females and their parents throughout the consultation and planning stage will help to overcome this barrier and build trust. Remember 'word of mouth' can be very strong, if you are able to get a few parents to support your activity they will soon act as ambassadors for it and tell others that you are doing a good job.

Faith calendar

Although there are a number of faith events which may prevent females from taking part in activity some festivals and religious dates will open up opportunities too. It is important to be mindful of the faith calendars that relate to different cultures when planning sessions and events. However certain festivals and cultural events will be open to the sports sector to engage with their communities by promoting local activities. Think about making contact with a few groups and asking about opportunities to attend events to either deliver taster sessions or to promote your sport and physical activity sessions. Remember that some cultural festivals also include fasting periods; this will not prevent people taking part but be sensitive towards this.

Islam, Sikhism and Hinduism all follow the lunar calendar so festival dates will vary from year to year. Sports events tend to occur on the same week or day so this is something to bear in mind. If you are planning an event that you would like to invite all members of your local community to, try to ensure it doesn't clash with one of the main faith festivals:

- The main Islamic festivals include Ramadan (month of fasting from dawn to dusk), Eid al Adha, Eid al Fitr and Ashura.
- The main Sikh festivals include Hola Mohalla, Vaisakhi, Diwali, Martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur and Birthdays of the Ten Gurus. Sikhism follows a lunar calendar and the Nanakshahi calendar, so dates of religious celebrations vary from year to year.
- The main Hindu festivals are Mahashivarati Holi, Ramnavami, Dusserah, Diwali and Navratri. Dates of these festivals and many other Hindu festivals also follow a lunar calendar and will vary from year to year.



Image courtesy of MWSF

Talk to your local faith group leaders to find out more about their calendar of events. Find out which events are best for you to engage with and how sport and physical activity can support what they are already doing.

Using faith centres as a location for new activity

Consider using faith centres as a location for your new activities. Faith venues often have large activity spaces that can be used for sports or activity sessions. Large numbers of people attend their local faith centre on a regular basis so to start a programme think about delivering at their venue for a few weeks in order to encourage them to attend other local sessions or to join a club. As soon as participants are comfortable with the activity and know what to expect they will be much more likely to attend a session out in the local community.

Other benefits of sports participation

Don't forget that there are other benefits to sports participation that are not related to health. There are ways to use sport to support education and community cohesion. Some faith groups do not see sport as a priority so packaging an activity for women and girls that has additional benefits is likely to be well received. Ensure that the activity is advertised as fun and a way of making new friends and building social networks, explain that the activity will help reduce social exclusion and improve understanding and relationships between communities.



Case studies

Swimming lessons at Dormers Well Leisure Centre, Ealing

The project offered female only swimming lessons, delivered by a female teacher in a female only environment. This helped to overcome the cultural barriers that many females face when taking part in sport and physical activity. The session days and times were chosen after careful consultation with local women from the target group to ensure that they were accessible; sessions were delivered on week days and at weekends at varying times. The lessons were also given exclusive use of a large area of the pool meaning that there was lots of space, there was also time after the lesson for participants to continue to practise in a female only environment. The Centre was able to guarantee female lifeguards to supervise the session. The Centre operates a flexible clothing policy meaning that many more women and girls can access the activity, they allow participants to wear long-sleeved T-shirts and long trousers over the top of their swimwear.

Tower Hamlets Cycling Club

Tower Hamlets CC didn't have a women's only section prior to working with Access Sport through the Us Girls project. Now they do, the club has attracted a high proportion of Muslim women who are able to cycle and be confident in a female only environment. They have a newly trained female ride leader who has developed the group to include a more social element. Club members have been given the opportunity to take bike maintenance courses delivered by a female bike mechanic which has proved very popular.

'T' joined the club as she'd never had the chance to cycle due to cultural and religious barriers. Her goal was to learn how to cycle; through the club she has achieved this and is now a confident cyclist. 'T' volunteers within the club to help at sessions and promote rides to her friends.

She has also lost weight, and has gained the confidence to take on other challenges such as learning to swim and learning to drive. She said:

“The Cycling Club has allowed me to learn to cycle after years of wanting to and has stopped my caring about the stereotypical view that Muslim women shouldn't be cycling. The club has given me the chance to enjoy riding a bike –something most people take for granted and have the privilege to do all their lives without a second thought.”

The biggest challenge faced so far is breaking down the perceptions of the local community that cycling isn't an activity suitable for females. Many of the females attending the club for the first time didn't have access to a bike so the club worked hard to build a supply so that everyone can borrow a bike for the sessions. The biggest success is that the sessions continued through the winter months despite the cold weather, this is a big achievement for a women and girls programme.





Us Girls Project
Newham

Top tips

- Consider providing female only sessions with female instructors. Try and choose a facility where viewing areas can be restricted in order to create a female exclusive environment.
- Have a flexible clothing policy and advertise this.
- Conduct consultation with potential participants to better understand their needs. Involve other people who are important in the community in order to gain their trust.
- If you are planning an event be mindful of different faith festivals that may be taking place. If you can, use these as opportunities to engage with local communities. Talk to your local faith leaders and ask them which festivals you can engage with.
- Consider using faith centres as the venue for delivering new activity sessions.

Further information

Sporting Equals exists to actively promote greater involvement in sport and physical activity by all communities especially those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and different cultural groups who are often disengaged. For more in-depth information on any of these topics visit their website: www.sportingequals.org.uk

The Muslim Women's Sport Foundation lead by example by creating opportunities for women of all abilities to access female only sports sessions delivering training, coaching and competition. Through their work MWSF are experts at engaging women from different cultural backgrounds. They are a national partner to the Us Girls project. For more information on their work visit:

www.mwsf.org.uk

www.usgirls.org.uk

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