

Conference: TASA 2014 Challenging Identities, Institutions and Communities

Category: Full paper (refereed)

Stream: Open (Note: For consideration in the Sport sessions)

Word count: 2990

Keywords: sport, Muslim women, participation, fandom, representation

Title: Muslim women and sport: participation, consumption, representation

Abstract: This paper proposes a new framework for approaching Muslim women in sport, beyond the oft-utilised framework of sports development. In preference to a deficit model of sports participation, where marginalized groups and individuals are incorporated into mainstream culture as players of sport, we bring together three domains that remain under-investigated in terms of Muslim women and sport in Australia and internationally – participation, consumption and representation. By shifting the research focus toward the contribution of both active and passive sports participation to fostering pleasure, enjoyment and self-determination for Muslim women, possibilities emerge to expand on the narrow priority formulation and policy fields of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘well-being’ focused on physical health outcomes through which Muslim women and sports-based interventions are commonly framed.

Introduction

The past decade has seen the formulation of a number of policy initiatives intended to assist with social cohesion among culturally and linguistically diverse communities in Australia. While a relatively small percentage of CALD communities are Muslim (2011 Census data suggests that 2.2% of the Australian population are Muslim), national and global events have produced a public discourse that constructs and represents them as ‘Other’, with Muslim women (most visibly through dress) commonly positioned within this discourse as oppressed and silent (Abdel-Fattah and Carland 2010). Public policy has responded to the perceived problems of social cohesion, integration and difference among Australian Muslims; notably, the ‘People of Australia’ Multicultural Policy of which a key initiative is the Multicultural Youth Sports Partnership (MYSP). A central premise of this initiative is that sport and recreation activities are “‘proven” strategies to build social and community cohesion’ (IMMI 2011: 8). This emphasis on building cohesion through sport and *active* recreation pursuits focuses on a limited experience of sport and recreation and directs policy attention in particular ways that we argue no longer reflect the varied means by which people engage with sport beyond playing, and the potential that consuming sport offers for social cohesion, well-being and connectedness.

Spaaij and Jeanes (2013) have been attentive to a critique of the sport for development and peace (SDP) movement as ignoring critical pedagogies of empowerment, arguing for approaches that challenge the status quo of the SDP movement. It is in a similar vein that this paper is framed. More specifically, we propose a new framework for approaching Muslim women in sport, beyond the oft-utilised framework of sports development. In preference to a deficit model of sports participation, where marginalized groups and individuals are

incorporated into mainstream culture as players of sport, we bring together three domains that remain under-investigated in terms of Muslim women and sport in Australia and internationally – participation, consumption and representation. By shifting the research focus toward the contribution of both active and passive sports participation to fostering pleasure, enjoyment and self-determination for Muslim women, possibilities emerge to expand on the narrow priority formulation and policy fields of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘well-being’ focused on physical health outcomes through which Muslim women and sports-based interventions are commonly framed (Northcote and Casimiro 2009).

Our research responds to the geographical and cultural expansion of sport in Australia (at grass roots and elite level) through changing demographics. Suburbs such as those in western Sydney have seen a growth in resident populations self-identifying as Muslim. At the same time, there has been a conscious effort from major sporting codes to reach new markets, particularly in NSW and Victoria. The new AFL club Greater Western Sydney, for example, and NFL club Canterbury Bulldogs, are explicitly appealing to a diverse ethnic and religious community, particularly those of Muslim faith. In calling for a more expansive consideration of the ways in which Muslim women experience sport and recreation, we argue that research attending to the dimensions of participation, consumption and representation can contribute research evidence to widen current policy agendas addressing social cohesion and diversity beyond active participation and social capital rhetoric.

Sports for development

In recent years, sport has become recognised as a key site and source of engagement for minority groups in Australia and globally (Sherry 2010; Walseth and Fasting 2004). Typically, research has been framed in the language of social inclusion/exclusion and building social capital (Spaaij 2011; Walseth 2008), and has examined ethnicity (Müller et.al. 2008), poverty (Sherry 2010), crime prevention and rehabilitation (Kelly 2011), drug and alcohol preventions and recovery, among others. More recently, sport studies have engaged with sports development and sports *for* development agendas (Beutler 2008). Here, research has examined issues such as HIV/AIDS in Africa (Jeanes 2011), war torn communities (Sugden 2010), women's education (Kay 2009), child protection from violence (Coalter 2012) and policy and political advocacy. In Australia, work has focused on Indigenous communities, crime prevention and anti-social behaviour (Cameron and MacDougall 2000), as well as outreach programs in the Pacific region.

Although sports development is the dominant paradigm for considering sports-based social inclusion initiatives, there are several shortcomings with this framework. These include a narrow theoretical focus with its emphasis on social capital (Blackshaw and Long 2005); a 'top down' prescriptive formulation of sports-based interventions that largely fail to consult with communities, and which ignores principles of participatory and action research (Coalter 2010); the potential reproduction of inequitable global relations of class and race (Spaaij and Jeanes 2013); an absence of evidence that any of it works (Coalter 2007); a predominant focus on men as the subjects of these interventions (Kelly 2011); and an over-riding emphasis on sport in terms of active participation (Knez et.al. 2012; Pfister 2000) rather than other forms of engagement like consumption and fandom.

Participation

Within this sports development framework, Muslim women have been the subjects of a growing body of literature concerned with female empowerment as a means of achieving global gender justice (Benn et.al. 2011b) and the generation of social capital (Walseth 2008). The broader field of international scholarship on Muslim women and sport emphasises both the facilitation of and hindrances to involvement in physical activity by exploring the interrelated factors of family influence (Kay 2006), socio-cultural expectations of Muslim femininities and patriarchy (Hargreaves 2007), ethnic identity (Abdul Razak et.al. 2010) and religion (Benn et.al. 2011a). The tendency of this research is to identify barriers to participation as a means of facilitating Muslim women's involvement in sport and promoting gender equality, often in tandem with post-structuralist concerns with agency, resistance and the performance/negotiation of feminine identities (Walseth 2006).

Despite a recognised need for greater critical engagement with Muslim females in the global sporting domain (Knoppers and McDonald 2010), no comprehensive investigation of Australian Muslim *women's* sporting experiences has been undertaken. Palmer's (2008, 2009) work remains the key Australian contribution to this field, with recent scholarship by Toffoletti (2014) acknowledging and redressing the fact that research into Muslim women and sport remains significantly under-theorised. While piecemeal information can be derived from general investigations into Muslim women's interactions with various sectors of the Australian community (McCue and Kourouche 2010), the role of physical activity in the lives of women from diverse cultural backgrounds (Cortis 2009) and the health benefits of physical activity for young Australians (Knez et.al. 2012), these findings do not offer a comprehensive picture of the ways in which different Muslim women engage with sport through the inter-

related frameworks of participation, consumption and representation. Nor do they provide critical insight into how Muslim women characterise their relationship to wider Australian society through sport. Moreover, bearing in mind the diversity among Muslim women, no Australian study has considered the intersectional dimensions of gender, ethnicity, class, ability and age, as they inform Muslim women's practices and representations in the sporting context, even though the importance of such research has been identified and conducted in other countries facing similar concerns regarding Muslim integration and assimilation (Walseth 2006; Walseth and Fasting 2004).

Such omissions suggest a need to extend previous studies by moving beyond a deficit view of Muslim women's sports participation, which is typically couched in terms of barriers to social inclusion through sport. Here we argue that recognising diversity among Muslim women and concentrating on their wider engagements with the processes and discourses of the Australian sporting sphere – as players, spectators and facilitators – opens up the possibility for alternative articulations of both sporting and Muslim identity. In turn, such research has the potential to impact on social policy agendas by widening the conceptual frameworks and contexts with which Muslim women are understood and from which policy instruments can be developed so as to challenge limited definitions and assumptions of sport and Muslim women on which current policy such as the MYSP is based.

Consumption

Whereas international and Australian research into Muslim women and sport is almost exclusively focused on active participation in sport and encouraging community engagement

within a social inclusion agenda, passive participation/consumption by sports fans is growing. Fans attend games (Giulianotti 2002), follow teams globally online and contribute to social media (Hutchins and Rowe 2012), with clear benefits for well-being and a sense of community. To date, sports fan studies have overwhelmingly documented the experiences of male spectators (Toffoletti and Mewett 2012). However, there is a growing interest in women as passive participants - fans or consumers - both internationally and in the Australian context. Mewett and Toffoletti's body of scholarship (2008, 2010, 2011) has critically explored the meaning and importance of sport spectating for Australian women, highlighting the absence of, and need for further research into passive consumption by women from *minority* backgrounds. Pope's (2013) work, for example, has examined female fans of rugby and football in the UK, yet her sample was drawn from White-Anglo participants. Missing from fan research is an analysis of the practices, experiences and meaning of sports spectatorship for women who do not fit normative categories of 'women' and 'sports fans' – particularly through religion and/or ethnicity.

Representation

Major Australian sports such as AFL, rugby league and cricket are pursuing greater engagement with Muslim communities through the prism of multicultural harmony. Such initiatives suggest that addressing cultural difference in sport is no longer confined to policy, but has come to occupy the wider public imagination. For this reason, we identify a need to reflect on how Muslim women are depicted in popular culture in relation to sport. This would allow for the contextualisation of Australian Muslim women's sporting experiences in terms of wider societal discourses framing Muslim women, as rendered in mainstream media representations. Popular media typically depicts Muslim women as a singular, homogeneous

group (MacDonald 2006), ignoring them as sports players, fans or followers. Rarely shown in sporting representations are women who do not conform to hegemonic norms, such as veiled women, with the notable exception of Rouba Houli (wife of Richmond player Bachar) at the 2012 AFL Brownlow Medal presentations. Existing sports media scholarship tends to focus on the under-representation and sexualisation of Western female athletes in the media (Messner, Duncan and Cooky 2003) or women in secondary and sexualised roles, such as cheerleaders, groupies, wives and girlfriends (Crawford and Gosling 2004), with few studies considering the representation of women sport fans in advertising and film (Wenner 2011, Toffoletti 2014).

Proposing a model that considers media representation, as well as participation as players and fans, raises the important problem of how to articulate and respond to Australian Muslim women's experiences in non-reductive ways that encompass the variety of encounters, situations and sites through which they partake in sport beyond the playing field. One of the key aims of this paper is to identify the need for further investigation into the complexities, tensions, pleasures and contradictions Muslim women encounter in the increasingly globalised sporting sphere, as means to generate a much-needed intersectional account of the representational and material dimensions of sports participation and consumption.

Conclusion

Emerging from the multi-dimensional approach we propose are a number of key questions: where do the experiences of Muslim women fit into an understanding of sport? How do they interpret their representation (or absence thereof) in the popular media? How do they

experience the pleasure of being a sports fan, and in what ways does it contribute to their sense of identity as a Muslim woman in Australia? How can ethnographic and textual methods capture Muslim women's life worlds in ways that 'inject critical questions into studies of sports and other forms of social and public policy' (Palmer 2013: 188)? These questions highlight a clear gap in the theoretical, conceptual and empirical research, and a need to explore Muslim women's encounters with sport –as both active participants and passive consumers, and the representation of them in popular media– in ways identified by the women themselves.

Throughout this paper we have challenged the deficit model that prevails in sport for development literature in favour of an approach that brings together an analysis of three key domains of sport identity - active participation; passive participation and consumption, and representation. This multi-dimensional approach to Muslim women's engagement with sport, we argue, is urgently needed in a climate where difference on the basis of gender and ethnic identity is commonly understood in the wider cultural imaginary (including media portrayals and sporting life) as a problem to overcome. Rather than viewing difference per se as the 'problem' we question the narrow set of representational and discursive frames to research mainstream conceptualisations of the intersections of gender and ethnic difference. Hence our research highlights an important gap in sport studies, calling for further critical reflection and investigation to redress the limited understandings of Muslim women as they appear in representational accounts, in favour of a more holistic understanding of Muslim experiences in Australia through the study of sport.

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