

## More than a Club, More than a Game: The Case of Diverse City

### Introduction

In keeping with the theme of this special issue this paper explores the politics of participation in sport when that participation may be policed by community members monitoring the behaviours of those from within their group, in accordance with the groups preferred norms.

Spring 2014 witnessed the lifting of the prohibition of the hijab in sporting competition by the Federation of International Football Associations (FIFA) (Sports Against Racism Ireland (SARI) 2017). This, ostensibly at least, brought to an end an issue that had been the subject of discussion for a number of years (Ahmad 2011). The espoused rationale for the prohibition of the hijab was that it violated regulations around “basic compulsory equipment which must not contain any political, religious, or personal statements” (Ahmad 2011, p.446). The impact of this on many Muslim women was clear, given the centrality of the hijab to their identities, if they were not permitted to wear it they could/would not play football (Ahmad 2011). The lifting of the ban saw two young Muslim youth leaders in Ireland, Abdulkadir Abdallah and Abdul-Rahman Hajji, establishing the ‘Hijabs and Hat-tricks’ project; an initiative designed to encourage and support the participation of Muslim women in football in Dublin.

This paper contributes to debates examining the rationale for investment in sport as a mechanism to promote social inclusion (see Spaaij et al. 2014; Coalter 2015; Collins & Haudenhuyse 2015; Parnell & Richardson, 2014; Rich et al. 2015; Schailleé et al. 2015), demonstrating that the Diverse City project delivers “*inclusion in sports and inclusion through sport*” (see Collins & Haudenhuyse 2015, p.6). Following MacPhail’s (2012) call for greater examination of how young people experience sport, we detail the impact of the Diverse City Football Club as a means to resist and challenge exclusionary practices experienced by young Muslim women. Furthermore, the manner in which spaces for such resistances are negotiated (through micro-level engagement with patriarchy and cultural perspectives of the ‘role of women’) will also be elaborated upon through the voices of the young women who are the core of Diverse City FC. Our paper demonstrates that the agency of Muslim women, oft denied in racialised discourses (Kumar 2012; Razack 2008) and the social and cultural capitals (Bourdieu 1986) vis-à-vis knowledge of Islam, that are available to our participants are key enablers utilized in the micro-level strategies (Kemper and Collins 1990) for participation deployed by the players and also by the team coaches when it comes to legitimising their arguments and

garnering community support. Finally, the paper will demonstrate the importance of understanding the experiences of the Diverse City players when developing strategies for inclusion in sports management and in wider society, particularly in an international context where securitised practises and discourses (see El-Enany 2019) are discouraging the socio-civic participation of young Muslims in Ireland and abroad.

### **Islamophobia and the Racialisation of Muslim women**

To fully appreciate the importance of Diverse City, it is essential to provide a context for those involved. Beyond proximal experiences of anti-Muslim hostility and discrimination, it is clear to see Islamophobia operate across a range of spheres in Irish society. Extant research studies demonstrate the manner in which institutional practices have, for example, heretofore limited the ability of Muslim children to access their schools of choice (Carr 2016a). At a broader, structural level, political actors in Ireland, mainstream and fringe, have embraced and espoused discourses replete with anti-Muslim tropes; ostensibly for long or short term electoral gain. Similar anti-Muslim discourses are also clearly present in Irish media. These again chime with those discourses circulating in the international context. Stigmatising use of language, co-locating the words Muslims and Islam with ‘terror’ and ‘extremist’ as well as claims of some putative ‘clash of civilisations’ are clearly in evidence in Irish media platforms. In addition to these claims are those ongoing media reports that Ireland is at imminent risk to a terrorist attack from groups such as the so-called Islamic State. Claims such as these serve to scare-monger amongst the general public and further cast Muslim men and women in Ireland as a ‘suspect community’ (Carr 2018; Hillyard 1993). Carr (2016) has shown how one-in-three of his research participants reported experiencing hostility that was specifically based on their being identified as Muslim.<sup>1</sup> While this primarily took the form of verbal abuse (80%), a considerable number (22%) reported experiences of physical assault. A similar number of participants (30%) reported experiencing specifically anti-Muslim discrimination across a range of sectors such as in work or when looking for work, accessing education, and using public transport. Resonating with international studies such as Zempi and Chakraborti (2015), the identifiability of one as Muslim was at the core of these experiences of hostility and discrimination.

Crucially, when controlled for sex, Carr’s (2016) statistical data demonstrates the manner in which Muslim women in Ireland experience hostility and discrimination at greater rates than their male co-religionists.<sup>2</sup> Ireland is by no means unique in this manner. For example, Easat-Daas (2019, p.123) also discusses the disproportional targeting of Muslim women in

experiences of anti-Muslim hostility, “especially visibly Muslim women.” Perry (2014) presents similar insights from North America into the gendered character of anti-Muslim racism, while Hussein et al. (2019) evidence discriminatory discourses and practices from the Australian and French contexts that directly target the manner in which some Muslim women wish to dress. Thus, before discussing the experiences of Muslim women in Ireland further, it is important that we recognise their myriad diversity vis-a-vis identities (Ratna 2010). Furthermore, we also need to “consider the processes through which gender and ‘race’ are mutually constituted, thus interrogating the racialisation of gender and gendering of ‘race’” (Scruton et al 2005, p.76); processes that have an immeasurable impact on the lives of individuals and communities. Carr (2016) argues that at the heart of anti-Muslim racism, indeed all racisms, are processes of racialisation, which construct ‘Others’ as *other*; thus legitimising related exclusionary practices (see also Carr and Haynes 2015). In the contemporary context, Muslim women are characterised as “subjugated” and “oppressed” (Kumar 2012, p.44), stereotypical representations which serve to present Muslim women as passive victims of their “hyper-patriarchal” male co-religionists who utilise Islam and ‘backward’ cultural norms/practices to restrict their freedom (Razack 2008; see also Kumar 2012). A central feature in the racialising discourses ascribed to Muslim women is that of the hijab,<sup>3</sup> which has become a target for institutional/governmental and interpersonal efforts to manage, through the enforced removal/restriction on the wearing of the hijab, the freedom of Muslim women in the ‘West’ (Carr 2016; Kumar 2012). Such discourses marginalise women of the Islamic faith in society; contra the (ex)implicit aims of ‘liberation’ (see Kumar 2012).

### **Sport and integration**

We now examine the concepts of social exclusion / inclusion and whether football can be utilised as a tool for integration. There is a consensus that social exclusion involves a broad set of inter-related issues over time. Madanipour et al. (1988, p.22 cited in Byrne 1999, p.2) state that it is a “multi-dimensional process, in which various forms of exclusion are combined”, such as exclusion from “participation in decision making... and integration into common cultural processes” such as sport. In the current Neoliberal era we continuously hear about the marginalized and the excluded, but little about who or what is excluding them. We adopt a structural explanation for social exclusion and accordingly the monopoly paradigm which sees exclusion as the outcome of the formation of group monopolies. This paradigm “draws on the work of Weber and emphasises the existence of hierarchical power relations in the constitution of a social order” (De Haan 1999, p.4). Exclusion is thus thought to arise from group

monopolies and the relationship between class, status, and power, and is held to serve the interests of the included (Silver 1994, p.543).

In this context, “the sports world can leave inclusion to others and be part of the problem of an unequal society or take hard decisions and demanding steps to be part of the move to inclusion” (Collins and Kay 2014, p.253 cited in Haudenhuyse & Theeboom 2015, p.3). Accordingly, while “sport may be perceived as a rather trivial and peripheral activity”, the rationale for investment in sport as a mechanism to promote social inclusion has been increasingly embraced in recent years (see Spaaij et al. 2014; Coalter 2015). There are two important dimensions to sport and social inclusion; *inclusion in sports* and *inclusion through sport* (see Collins & Haudenhuyse 2015, p.6) which seek to include people on “multiple domains” (Collins & Haudenhuyse 2015, p.6). People from a “non-western ethnic background and women in general are more likely to be confronted with poverty/social exclusion, and less likely to be volunteering and participating in sports. This has formed the basis for policies targeting such groups, both on an individual and community level, through sports-based interventions, to combat the negative outcomes of poverty and social exclusion.” (Collins & Haudenhuyse 2015, p.6). Sport thus potentially extends the reach of social inclusion programmes to areas that are considered “harder to reach through more traditional political and civic activities” (see Parnell & Richardson, 2014).

Collins and Kay (2014) refer to football as a microcosm of society: the stereotypes and exclusions of broader society are reflected in football. In present-day political discourse sport (including football) is seen as having the “potential to promote tolerance, intercultural dialogue and peace, social cohesion and social inclusion” (Spaaij 2011, p.2; see also Collins and Kay 2014). Yet, greater exploration of how young people experience sport is required (MacPhail, 2012), and the potential value of participatory sport events in the social inclusion of ‘newcomers’ in particular is under researched (Rich et al. 2015, p.130). Moreover, with some notable exceptions there remains relatively little understanding of the “developmental experiences young females in disadvantaged positions have when they participate in sport” (see Schailée et al. 2015, p.52). As a consequence, more rigorous and sustained programme outcomes and process evaluations are required (see Collins & Kay 2014; Parnell & Richardson 2014; Parnell et al. 2015, p.158).

In the context of our study it is worth noting that “traditional gender identities are constructed, reinforced and contested” in / through sport (Humberstone 2002 cited in Kay 2014, p.93); a site where the “unequal social relations that underpin women’s experience of social exclusion are persuasively reproduced” (Kay 2014, p.93). Women’s participation in sport is often in keeping with the stereotypical understanding of the woman as subordinate, and stems from a “socialization process that perpetuates the ideology of women as nurturers and carers” (Kay 2014, p.96). For example, young female Somalis’ ability to participate in sport is determined to a large extent by their family circumstances. The families need to be assured that appropriate provision is made to ensure that the girl’s / women’s’ participation does not contravene religious or cultural norms / necessities (Kay 2006 cited in Spaaij 2011, p.105). Consequently, we can argue that if sporting practices challenge such hegemony then by extension they challenge “gender inequity in social relations”. Colwell (1999 cited in Kay 2014, p.98) argues that women challenge “patriarchal definitions of submissiveness, passivity and dependence” simply by participating in sport. The claim is not that women wholly alter gender expectations through sport, rather it is that they experience a multifaceted synthesis of “compliance and contestation” that unlocks important innovative experiences for them (Kay 2014, p.98). In that context, it is interesting to note that the biggest benefits (developing a “commitment towards others, co-receptive trust and respect, and social skills involving co-operation, responsibility and discipline”) accrue to individuals experiencing “persistent social and economic disadvantage”, whose participation in sport is framed by a “personal and social development” perspective (Spaaij 20011, pp.180-181).

Linking social capital is effectively the resources that are accumulated from “social relationships between individuals and groups in different social strata” and the capability of these individuals and groups to obtain resources from “formal institutions” outside of their respective communities (Woolcock 2001 cited in Spaaij 20011, p.107). In that context it is noteworthy that in the Republic of Ireland, the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) engage in a range of grassroots activities with football clubs and associates to “encourage participation in football among people from minority ethnic and cultural backgrounds” as well as challenging racism (FAI 2018). In 2003, the FAI was one of a range of sporting organisations that supported the ‘Charter Against Racism in Sport.’ Following on from this, the FAI also supported initiatives catalysed by the now defunct National Action Plan Against Racism, in addition to other projects that saw sport as a key pathway towards supporting interculturalism, encouraging the participation of members of diverse communities, and challenging racism (Ní

Chonaiill 2018). At an EU level, in 2017, the FAI was successful in securing funding from the European Commission through its Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund to develop further initiatives to encourage integration through sport (Ní Chonaiill 2018). The ‘Integration Through Football’ (ITF) project has a three-year timescale (2017 to 2020) and in many ways builds on previous efforts by the FAI to promote integration and increase participation in sport amongst diverse ethnic communities in Ireland (Ní Chonaiill 2018). An early evaluation of the project raises some interesting points of relevance to our research. The educational programmes were identified as being beneficial for participants; as indeed was the manner in which the various elements of the ITF project bring diverse communities together (Ní Chonaiill 2018). Interestingly, those who participated in this early evaluation noted the difficulties they experienced in encouraging members of diverse groups to join, as well as problems in ‘reaching out to specific demographics’ (participant cited in Ní Chonaiill 2018). Participants noted that the ITF project provided a platform for inclusion for people who otherwise may not have been encouraged to participate in sport or similar social activities.

### **Diverse City – An overview**

The lifting of the prohibition of the hijab in sporting competition by FIFA (Sports Against Racism Ireland - SARI 2017) saw two young Muslim youth leaders, Abdulkadir Abdallah and Abdul-Rahman Hajji, establishing the ‘Hijabs and Hat-tricks’ project; in Dublin, Ireland. The project was designed to encourage and support the participation of Muslim women in football in Dublin. As the center piece of this project, Diverse City Football Club was established in 2014 to provide a space where young Muslim women could play football; a space that was to be attentive to the whole life character of Islam (implications for dress codes, diet, prayer *inter alia*), and, as the name of the club implies, open to players from diverse backgrounds (SARI 2017). Initially, fifteen young Muslim girls joined the club and took part in their first competition after four weeks of training. All too aware of the exclusions that they experience themselves, the players and coaches of Diverse City provide a welcoming environment for all young women who wish to play football. Non-Muslim women on the team, while supporting their Muslim teammates have also had to deal with ‘traditional racisms’ that target them on the basis of different markers of otherness. Since its inception, the ‘Hijabs and Hat-tricks’ project (and the young people involved) have gone from strength to strength, winning both national and international awards.

## **Methods and Theoretical Framework**

The research discussed here formed part of a larger evaluative study on the ‘Hijabs and Hat-tricks’ project<sup>4</sup>. All of the participants were initially contacted by the project partner, SARI, in order to ascertain their interest in taking part in our study. Focus group discussions with those who had expressed an interest in taking part were held at the offices of SARI in Dublin, a location that the participants were familiar and comfortable with. Ethical approval for the project was granted by the University of Limerick.

The specific findings discussed below derive from focus group discussions with players from *Diverse City*. Session A included seven young women aged under-18. Session B included eight young women aged 18 and over. Although most of the young women were Muslim, given the inclusive ethos of the project, three were of a Christian background. A diverse range of ethnic and national heritages were also represented including Irish, African, Arabic, Eastern European and South Asian.

We would argue that being ‘outsiders,’ if anything, provided us with the opportunity to operate with a beneficial naivety that gave us a platform to probe into issues a little deeper than an ‘insider’ may have done (Walseth 2006). Grounded theory was chosen as the method of qualitative data analysis. It provided a procedure for developing categories (open coding), interlocking these categories (axial coding), building a story that joins the categories (selective coding) and ending with a set of discursive theoretical proposals (see Flick 2006, pp.296-303). Two members of the wider research team coded the interview transcripts independently of each other. They employed three criteria (Creswell 1998, p.302) to select core categories from the data, those being “(a) the centrality of a category relative to the other categories, (b) the frequency with which it occurs in the data, and (c) its power in producing the emergent theory”. The emergent themes provide insights into how the participants felt about playing football; what they gained from playing; what they perceived was challenging about their participation; and importantly, how they overcame these challenges. To protect the identity of participants, pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

In order to develop a set of discursive theoretical proposals from the data we utilised a cultural studies approach bolstered by a theoretical framework which consisted of Bourdieu’s (1986) insights on cultural and social capital and Kemper and Collins’ (1990) work on micro level interactions. At its heart, cultural studies has aimed to develop an understanding of “what is

going on” while opening new avenues of thought, “strategies for survival and resources for resistance...” for those “...excluded from anything that could be called access to the national culture of the national community” (Hall 1990, p.22). Bourdieu’s theoretical approaches can usefully be deployed in conjunction with Kemper and Collin’s (1990) insights on micro level conflict theory to understand how the players of Diverse City negotiate their participation in football, both as individuals and as a group. “Micro-interactions are the plane on which human agents build and perform relationships, and these interactions usually occur on a face-to-face basis and are influenced by power differentials” (Power 2009, p.29). This micro level understanding sees “emotional energy” (which is the “quantity of genuineness, self-belief, and endeavour that actors show in social interactions” Kemper and Collins 1990, p.41) and the acquisition of cultural capital as being of paramount importance in determining the outcome of any interaction (Collins 1993b cited in Rossel and Collins 2001, p.516). This theoretical framework offered valuable insight into our data, allowing us to make sense of the ‘micro-level battle[s]’ (Power 2009, p.29) that occur between Diverse City players and the various power holders (both within and out with their communities) that they engage with.

## **Findings:**

### **Barriers to Participation in Sport:**

Our participants spoke of facing several barriers (including interpersonal racism and structural barriers) which inhibit their participation in sport. While some of them were already active in other team sports, for the majority, a major obstacle to their participation was the lack of a football team (outside of their schools) that catered for young women and girls, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Some played football on the street, but many, like Rabia could not find a team that would enable them to play the game whilst being sensitive to their religious identity and the concerns of their parents (discussed later).

*Like I was seventeen, eighteen, obviously I can't play with the boys anymore, so I stopped. (Rabia)*

*I mean I could kick around a ball but I wanted to get better [but]...around where I live there is only really like boys teams so there never was really any girls teams or if there was it would end up disappearing after the year. (Sophie)*



The players that we spoke with shared their experiences of racism (both on and off the pitch) during the group discussions. Two incidents in particular illustrate the racist exclusions experienced by the young women within mainstream football environments. In the following excerpt Denise states that she was subjected to racist abuse from her own teammates.

*I played for [X FOOTBALL TEAM] in [DUBLIN SUBURB] and we had a match and one of the girls kept saying, like, racist stuff to me like... [a girl] on me own team like, and I was...only new so I couldn't really say anything, I had no friends. They were all like, a formed group... do you know what I mean? And kept on saying stuff and I kept saying to the manager like "Are you not going to say anything?"...and like, the referee had to stop for a player off my team giving me racist comments.*  
(Denise)

Experiences such as these have a tremendous impact on the person who has to live it; including diminished self-esteem and confidence (Ahmad 2011). Determined to continue to play football, Denise decided to leave her old team and to search for a new club<sup>5</sup>.

*I didn't go back and play and I wouldn't just go and join any team now. Like it's hard to find a team...the first thing I think of now is "Oh am I actually going to go and are they going to accept me?"*

Similarly, Deepa perceived a former coach to be determined to exclude anyone who did not conform to a very narrow (and arguably racialised) conception of Irishness: "We can't have outsiders...foreign people on the team". Indeed, there was no question that her religion was the basis for her exclusion:

*I wanted to join a football team...I had a school team but I wanted to join an outside team and see what it felt like but I wasn't allowed to join because I am a Muslim and the team, like, the whole team was Christian, and then when I got told that I wasn't allowed to play because I am Muslim even though they knew I was a good player they were like no you are a Muslim we can't have you on the team.* (Deepa)

Racism, in football is not something that is always overt; it can remain "hidden," depending on the needs of the team and the skill of the player (Scraton et al 2005, p.81). Nonetheless, as with broader social interaction, racism in football is a means of letting one know 'one's place' and

indicating the hierarchy of who *really* belongs and who power resides with (Scrutton et al 2005). Previous research (see for example Bradbury 2010) has shown how members of minority communities when faced with exclusion and limited opportunities to play football, often respond by forming their own teams. In the UK context, members of minority communities have done just this to play the game in an environment insulated from the realities of interpersonal and institutional racism (Scrutton et al 2005). These teams create a sporting forum wherein people feel like they belong (Ratna 2010) by allowing them to be themselves, for example, by enabling them to manifest their Islamic identity while playing football (Ahmad 2011).

Accordingly, we would argue that teams such as Diverse City act as more than just football clubs; they become spaces for players to express their own identities in a safe, comfortable environment. Importantly, such examples of team formation demonstrate that members of minority communities do not just accept the exclusions they are faced with but actively resist and negotiate ways around the barriers they are confronted with (Ratna 2010; Scrutton et al 2005). Social and cultural capitals thus become incredibly important in the context of resisting exclusion.

Studies such as Discover Football (2013) and the ‘Widening Access Through Sport’ (WATS) project developed in Leicestershire, England (Collins and Kay 2014, p.104) demonstrated additional potential barriers such as cultural and religious sensitivities towards female participation emanating from *within* the minority communities of which they are part. This point is underscored by Ahmad (2011, p.453) who notes that Muslim women can face “subtle inequalities and discrimination” from within and out with their own communities. Our participants discussed such sensitivities in the Dublin context. According to some of the players, they had lost “five or six players” (Saddiqa) from the team, not only due to practical issues such as study commitments, but also due to some parents’ cultural sensitivities. Resonating with Ratna’s (2010) research, our participants felt that the main barriers to female participation in football were based on a mix of stereotypical cultural and generational perspectives on the relationship/role of women in sport, issues which we examine next.

## **Culture**

It is important to recognise that all cultural groups encompass a diverse range of beliefs and outlooks. It would be grossly inaccurate to think that all members of any ethnic/religious

community hold the same beliefs. Nonetheless, the perspectives of the cultural communities which the players come from are particularly influential and interesting when it comes to female participation in sport. Of course, what it means to be a 'good woman' vis-à-vis sports participation and cultural backgrounds will vary depending where one is from (Walseth 2006). Moreover, restrictive perspectives on the role of women in society are not the sole property of 'minority communities,' despite what stereotypes deployed in the interest of othering often depict (Kumar 2012). Football in most Western societies is still perceived of as a "masculine activity" (Walseth 2006, p.86) and female players, even when representing their country are often treated as second class citizens.<sup>6</sup>

Ratna's (2011) research with British Asian women of various religious backgrounds demonstrated how acting outside of the norms of traditional cultural roles could be deemed as bringing dishonour on the family. Participation in sports is policed by members of similar community backgrounds monitoring the behaviours of those from within their group, policing how one behaves in accordance with preferred norms. The awareness of being monitored polices the behaviour of those who are being observed, including the players themselves and their parents (Ratna 2011; Walseth 2006). Summayah spoke of the malign influence such community perspectives can have even when parents may be comfortable with their daughters playing football:

*I think that is an issue because... you'd hear small things... you know this girl wants to join but isn't going to join because, you know, her mum or her parents are worried about whatever is going to be said [by/within the community] ... so there is a bit of that. There is pressure, in communities and ... I've seen this with people, especially older generation parents where it's a big deal to please their surroundings.*  
(Summayah)

Again, we are keen not to homogenise all members of minority communities, regardless of their age, gender etc. However, our research findings support Walseth's (2006, p.86) argument that older generations are the "driving forces behind the processes of cultural maintenance" which may serve to restrict female participation in sport.

There is a sense among the team members that through their participation in football, Diverse City players can go some way to overcoming this barrier. The club is seen as having the

potential to serve as an example to communities and parents of how beneficial playing football can be for young women; increasing rates of participation in turn.

*As a Muslim in general I think it is a big deal...by us playing, other parents, especially those who are not happy letting their daughters play...might change their mind...because they'd see actually, they'd engage with us and say "oh you know what? I know so-and-so and she's a really good girl, and you know, she's playing and she's getting loads out of it, sure what's the harm, maybe we should let our kid play or whatever. (Summayah)*

Our participants clearly see their participation as sowing the seeds of change for future generations, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

*We're the first generation, like our parents all came back from Africa, Asia, all that so we're the first ones growing up here. I don't think we're gonna be like that with our kids like if my daughter tells me she's gonna play football, like, I'm gonna be her trainer and all that. (Rabia)*

## **Religion**

Ratna (2011, p.384) correctly warns against “false universalisms” when understanding the role of religion and culture and their impacts on female participation in sport. As with cultural diversity, Islam too should not be perceived as a monolith, despite racialising constructions to the contrary (Runnymede Trust 1997). Indeed, different interpretations of Islam will inform perspectives on the role of women and sport (see Walseth and Fasting 2003) and some may appear ostensibly to contradict popular perception. For example, Ahmad (2011) demonstrates that being perceived as religiously conservative should not be understood as reflecting proclivities towards restricting the participation of women in sport, underscoring the importance in Islam of personal interpretation when it comes to issues such as whether one should participate in sport at all or only in contexts where sensitivity towards religious belief is accounted for. Recourse to Islamic religious sources including the Qur’an, the Sunnah and the Ahadith<sup>7</sup> are of course central to personal interpretation with differing results. Despite there being “no explicit mention of sex segregation in the Islamic foundational texts” (Ahmad 2011, p.445) some do use these sources to justify segregation on gender lines. Others draw from the Qur’an and Ahadith to emphasise how Islam encourages women to participate in sport. For example, Walseth and Fasting (2003) draw on religious sources to underscore the importance

of participation in sport for both sexes, and cite the example of the Prophet Muhammed, who both engaged in and encouraged sporting activities with / for his wife.

Our participants were keen to stress that they do not see Islam as a barrier to their participation in sport. The Muslim players from Diverse City referred to utilizing their Islamic faith to challenge culturally located exclusions, disaggregating religious from cultural norms and legitimizing their sporting activity (Ahmad 2011; Ratna 2011; Walseth 2006). Moreover, they drew on their faith and Islamic teachings to demonstrate that female participation in sport is not only appropriate, it promotes and maintains good health and wellbeing, both of which are encouraged in Islam (see Walseth 2006; Walseth and Fasting 2003). For our participants Islam acts as a “framework... for their participation” and as will be discussed below, it is “important that their participation is in accordance with Islam,” (Walseth 2006, p.91).

*You're meant to do sports...like the Prophet used to take his wife and they'd be going running around and jogging and stuff like that. Its fine, like our religion doesn't stop us from doing anything but it's just the people, the community, what they say and all. (Saddiqa)*

Our findings indicate that the young women involved in Diverse City need to engage in strategies of negotiation in order to realise their goal of playing football. Interestingly, the use of Islamic sources to support their case for participation highlights the agency of Muslim women, oft denied in racialised discourses; and the importance of being able to draw on their own cultural capital vis-à-vis knowledge of Islam to legitimise their argument.

Stereotypes of Muslim men present an image of an oppressive figure intent on limiting the life chances of his female co-religionists (Razack 2008), yet our findings challenge myopic racialised understandings that Muslim fathers, homogenously constructed as “hyper-patriarchal” (Razack 2008), are reluctant to ‘allow’ their daughters/wives/sisters play sports. Crucially, whether one is supportive as a parent cannot and should not be reduced to their gender, religious or cultural background as our findings make clear. The players of Diverse City laid bare the shortcomings of racialised constructions of Muslim men by evidencing the support they received from their fathers when it came to sport. Indeed, resonating with Walseth (2006), it was interesting to hear one of the respondents recall how her non-Muslim mother was more reluctant to allow her play football than her Muslim father. Indeed, the majority of our participants shared similar experiences with us:

*My Dad is really supportive... if I didn't go to a training session, he'd be like "Amina, why aren't you going training? Do you go football anymore?" and I'd be like "Yeah dad I do, but like it's just not on today" ... but my Mam [would say] ... "You're a girl, you shouldn't be playing, you're Muslim!" (Amina)*

*I come from a background where ... girls can't play sports or girls can't go out and say kick a ball around but when my dad heard about the way this project had started ... [he] was really proud so he really wanted me to play. (Amaal)*

The social and cultural capitals available to the players of Diverse City are key enablers utilized in the micro-level strategies for participation deployed by the players and also by the team coaches when it comes to garnering community support. Faced with the barriers discussed earlier, Diverse City and the broader Hijabs and Hat-tricks project has had to provide strong, culturally sensitive support to potential players who wish to realise their goal of playing football for a team. As part of the WATS project in Leicestershire a project worker was tasked with, among other things, reassuring parents that the activities their children engaged with were religiously and culturally appropriate (Collins and Kay 2014). The coaches of Diverse City adopt a similar approach with the ethos of inclusivity extending beyond the team to include and reassure the parents. The players recognise how important the coaches have been in addressing the concerns of their parents, stating that when it comes to getting permission for activities, the coaches speak to “every single” parent and in a manner that is respectful towards them (Amina). The fact that both coaches are from an Islamic background places them in an ideal position to understand the concerns of Muslim parents. Such culturally aware staff can thus approach issues in a manner that is appropriate for the communities concerned (Discover Football 2013; Right To Play 2015). Our participants recalled support coming from the parents in a range of ways, from enthusiastic questions such as ‘how did you get on?’, to washing kits and coming to training and matches. This is in no doubt testament to the hard work of the coaches and young women but also the desire of the parents, Muslim and non-Muslim, to ensure their daughters can play sports. We would argue that through the concerted engagement of the coaches with the parents, the benefits of playing with Diverse City move beyond the immediate players themselves; spilling over into the lives of the parents, the players’ siblings and the broader cultural communities of which they are part, in Ireland and abroad.

## **Muslim Women: Challenging the popular gaze through football**

We spoke earlier of how Collins and Kay (2014) refer to the stereotypes and exclusions of broader society being reflected in football. Our findings certainly bear this out. The female Muslim players of Diverse City understand the barriers they face at the structural (FIFA ban on the hijab; institutional racism) and interpersonal level (in the form of anti-Muslim racism 'on the pitch' and the religious and cultural perspectives which impact upon them). Yet as the following comments demonstrate, the players understand their role in developing cultural and religious awareness amongst other communities.

*I think the fact that it was on [national] TV and people were like whoa! There are Muslims playing football! And sort of like, that brings up that Muslim girls aren't oppressed...that they can go out and do stuff.*  
(Sherene)

*It's educational as well because a lot of people will think, um, Muslim girls don't engage in sport because they're not allowed you know, because they have to be locked up and things like that.* (Summayah)

*In my college when I tell people I play football and they're like "Oh which team?" ... "So you get to play football and it's okay with you? We thought you [Muslims] don't do that" and then from that they start asking questions and they learned a lot from it.* (Saddiqa)

*They think just because we're Muslim girls, we're always locked up in the house or because we don't drink every weekend...they think we have no ... life ... so it's a good way to say yeah we play football, we're just like you as well ... there's no difference between us just because we're Muslim and from different backgrounds.* (Amina)

These four quotes are used here intentionally to underline the awareness that the players from Diverse City have of challenging the stereotypical understandings which have been constructed of Muslim women, through their participation in football. Additionally, they provide positive representations of what it means to be Muslim and female. Deepa for example is confident that their experience can transcend borders and encourage female participation in sports in other states.

*Show them our experience, like, we are the first Muslim team in Ireland and this is what happened. It could motivate other girls from other countries, that Muslim girls, we can start our own thing and it will eventually build up. (Deepa)*

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

While Ireland is the focus of the paper, our findings may also be of relevance to the UK and other European countries. The ability to generalize our findings to the experience of similar participants in other countries is limited, however, we do wish to emphasize the importance of understanding how this football club impacted upon our participants' experiences of social inclusion. In a context where Muslim women are disproportionately the target of anti-Muslim racism, the findings presented here, based on the voices of young Muslim women in Ireland, are of immense importance, providing insights which can be deployed in strategies for integration and inclusion in sports management and in wider Irish society.

At level of the individual, projects such as the FAI's *Integration Through Football* and playing football as part of a team, can help to promote social networking skills, communication skills, greater health and wellbeing, increase confidence and self-esteem, and develop other transferable skills (Bradbury 2010; Discover Football 2013; Collins and Kay 2014). At a broader, arguably more profound level, playing football as a member of a team has much wider benefits for racialised minorities. This paper adds to the literature that evidences the manner in which Muslim women use their agency in sport to resist constraining forces from above and below. Our discussions with the young women that play for Diverse City provide rich insights on issues relating to female participation in sport, their experiences of racism; cultural and religious barriers; and the resolve and determination of the players to challenge and overcome these barriers – thanks in no small part to the support of parents, coaches and each other.

At the macro-level, the young Muslim women are playing a sport which until recently banned the wearing of a headscarf. While the ban may have been lifted, the stigma associated with the headscarf and the legitimising, othering effect of the ban arguably linger on. Yet it is clear that the players of Diverse City are provided with an outlet through which they can not only play football and develop as individuals, but also raise cultural and religious awareness about and within their own communities; and importantly, help to challenge negative stereotypes of the role of women in football, and the racialised image of Muslim women in society (Carr 2016;



Carr and Haynes 2013). Moreover, by highlighting the support of parents, particularly fathers, the Diverse City story also challenges gendered stereotypes associated with Muslim men. This raises additional areas for consideration in the development of projects such as those run by the FAI which, while focusing on integration for migrant communities could also challenge racialised understandings of immigrants. Projects such as the Hijabs and Hat-tricks, with partners such as SARI, provide racialised communities with another opportunity to themselves challenge anti-muslim discourses and practices in Ireland. Our findings suggest that engagement with such trusted partners should be highly encouraged.

At the micro level our participants have engaged in a process of identity negotiation. Cultural background and / or religious identities present interesting fields for these negotiations, highlighting how the young women and their male coaches draw on social and cultural capitals in micro-level strategies of resistance (Kemper and Collins 1990). As noted earlier, social capital (Bourdieu 1986; Lin 1999) refers to a relational process wherein a person invests time and emotional energy in social relationships anticipating a return. Of course, this needs not be thought of as a one-way street, essentially, all partners in the relationship will engage for some benefit. Lin (1999) shows that the knowledge of where to derive support from is also important if resistance is to be successful. In that context, the proximity of the Diverse City founders to SARI is incredibly important in facilitating the creation of the team; as is the local knowledge of Muslim women in recruiting /informing others about their team. The participants have also come to realise that as a collective, they are themselves a resource, through which they can talk out experiences of racism, reassure and support each other; and also recruit more players. The players of Diverse City also evidence the 'altruistic' aspect of social capital by reaching out to encourage others who may be in similar situations to join their team. Players referred to how they act as advocates for the team and actively recruit new players from among their communities and social networks. Adopting a similar approach, may see bodies such as the FAI enjoy greater success in recruiting and retaining players from a migrant background.

From a third party (state or non-state) perspective, it is important to work with trusted partners within the communities - as the success of this project demonstrates. In conjunction with the players, the coaches of Diverse City encourage a safe and secure, egalitarian environment that is welcoming to all potential female players regardless of their background. An environment such as this, which promotes equality is vitally important if new players are to enjoy football; the more inclusive the team is, the greater the enjoyment of the game (Collins and Kay 2014).

Our findings highlight the need to continue to develop coaches and team representatives from within the communities from which the players derive. The understanding they have of religious and cultural sensitivities makes them best placed to address any related issues that may arise. The coaches are trusted and respected by the players and their families. It is clear that they engage with parents in a respectful manner and their overall contribution cannot be underestimated. Our findings would suggest that in order to ensure continuity, some of the female players should be encouraged to take up coaching/assistant coaching positions within the club.

Diverse City is a project that needs to be maintained and where possible developed to attract even more players from a wide range of backgrounds. Our findings lead us to recommend that the Diverse City model should be replicated in other cities in Ireland. The Hijabs and Hat-tricks project is about more than simply playing football. The skills and experiences that the players gain off the pitch by being associated with Diverse City may prove to be very beneficial, particularly in an international context where securitised practises (see for example El-Enany 2019) have a “chilling effect”, discouraging the socio-civic participation of young muslims in Ireland and abroad. This should be made clear to parents of potential players in order to help encourage participation. In the words of Amaal: “Our team is special”.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that participants were specifically asked if they believed they were targeted based on their Muslimness. Hostility was defined as physical assault, theft, graffiti (home or work), damage to property, verbal assault, threats or harassment.

<sup>2</sup> 44% of Muslim women reported experiencing hostility compared to 28% of Muslim men; 40% of Muslim women reported experiencing anti-Muslim discrimination, while the figure was 22% for Muslim men.

<sup>3</sup> A piece of clothing, of religious significance to the wearer, that is readily identified as being associated with Islam (Allen 2010) in Western societies and has come to symbolise the racialised understanding of the (alleged) second-class position of women in Islamic societies and communities (Hoodfar 1993; Open Society Institute 2011).

<sup>4</sup> See Carr et al (2015).

<sup>5</sup> She eventually joined Diverse City FC.

<sup>6</sup> For example, in 2017 members of the Republic of Ireland women's team refused to rule out a boycott of their international against Slovakia because of their frustration at the FAI's failure to deal with issues they had raised. PFAI solicitor Stuart Gilhooly said that "we need to recognise that the women's team are fifth class citizens, the dirt on the FAI's shoes" (see Malone 2017).

<sup>7</sup> The Qur'an is the central religious text which, for Muslims, is believed to be the word of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammed; the Sunnah refers to "the way of life of Muhammed", the Prophet's lifestyle, the manner in which the Prophet conducted himself; and Ahadith, plural of hadith which are something that the Prophet did or said, taught or approved of as shared by those close to the Prophet. For more please see Hewer (2006).