

More than a club; more than a game.

Contribution to the Evaluation of the Hijabs and Hat-tricks Project.

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Contents

Introduction.....	3
More than a Club – a family	3
Exclusion: Gendered, Racial, Religious	4
Diverse City: Supportive	5
Diverse City: Inclusive.....	6
More than just a game: Development through participation.....	7
Activism and Engagement	8
Building Confidence	8
Barriers to Participation in Sport.....	9
‘Cultural’ Barriers to Participation.....	10
Religion: Not a barrier to participation	11
Diverse City: Engaging communities; engaging parents	12
Challenging Misconceptions: Muslim Women	13
Concluding comments.....	15
Recommendations:.....	15
Bibliography	17

Introduction

This research report, which forms part of the larger Hijabs and Hat-tricks evaluation, is based on the findings of two focus group discussions held with players from Diverse City, which provided a platform for the participants to share their perspectives on being part of Ireland's first team formed specifically to facilitate the participation of Muslim women in sports. Session A included seven young women aged under-18. Session B included eight young women aged 18 and over. Although the majority 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. Both of the group discussions were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. These transcriptions were subjected to a thematic analysis. A thematic analysis, as the title implies, searches out the common themes that come through in the voices of those taking part in the research (Hennink et al 2011). These themes provide insights into how the players of Diverse City feel about playing football, what they gained from and what they felt was challenging about their participation. A discussion of each of these themes will be presented in turn. This report will conclude with a summary of reflections and recommendations that may be used to inform Diverse City and the Hijabs and Hat-tricks project into the future. Pseudonyms are used throughout this section in order to protect the identity of participants.

More than a Club - a family

As the centre piece of the Hijabs and Hat-tricks project, Diverse City Football Club was created in 2014 to provide a space where young Muslim women could play football; a space that is attentive to whole life character of Islam and, as the name of the team implies, open to diversity. Research (Bradbury 2010) has shown how, faced with exclusion and limited opportunities to play football, members of minority communities respond by forming their own teams. These teams are more than just football clubs and become spaces for players to express their own identities in a safe environment. The analysis of the data generated from discussions with Diverse City players, shows that many of the team had previously encountered difficulties when it came to playing football in a team environment.

Exclusion: Gendered, Racial, Religious

Many of the discussion group participants demonstrated a love of the beautiful game, a desire to play on a team, and even a dream to play on the biggest stages of world football.

"I've always had an interest in football, like since I was a kid I used to dream of being on a brilliant team like playing like...I used to watch matches on the TV I'd be like "Oh I wish that was me " (Amina)

Despite these dreams, many of the players who took part in the discussion groups were not afforded an outlet through which they could play on a team, outside of those organised in schools. One obstacle to their participation was the simple lack of an outlet; a team that catered for young women and girls, Muslim and non-Muslim, that wanted to play football.

"Like I was seventeen, eighteen, obviously I can't play with the boys anymore so I stopped, and then [Coach] told me that he, in the project he's just starting, and he told me if I wanna join up and I loved it" (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)

Despite limited opportunities, many of the Diverse City players were already active in playing other team sports. 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 parents (discussed later). For Denise, a young Black, Irish woman, the problem centred on experiences of racism. Players shared their experiences of racism during the group discussions. These included negative experiences both on and off the pitch. Given the focus of this evaluation, we have chosen to examine two particular incidents which illustrate racist exclusions within mainstream football environments. Below Denise states that she was subjected to racist abuse from her teammates. Despite appealing to her coach to take action nothing seemed to happen. Denise subsequently left and eventually joined Diverse City.

"I played for [X FOOTBALL TEAM] in [DUBLIN SUBURB] and ah, 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)

Denise decided to leave her old team and to search for a new club that would accept her for who she is.

"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". Although the basis for her exclusion was never actually made explicit, for Deepa there was no question that her religion was an obstacle to her inclusion:

"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)

Diverse City: Supportive

The players for Diverse City can draw on the support of their coaches and Sports Against Racism Ireland when they face experiences of racism. They also realise that as a collective, they have a resource in themselves through which they can talk out experiences of racism and reassure and support each other. Diverse City is perceived,

by those who are involved, to be much more than a club; as one participant put it, Diverse City “is like a family” (Amina), a sentiment that was echoed by others.

There is a strong sense of solidarity among the players and this is a key achievement and strength of the Diverse City project. Drawing on this solidarity, players referred to the manner in which they act as advocates for the team and actively recruit new players from among their communities and social networks. This is testament to the success of the Diverse City project, bringing the game to those who like Amina have “always had an interest in football” but have not had the opportunity to play for a team and feel part of a sporting family of choice. In the words of Amaal: “Our team is special”.

Diverse City: Inclusive

It was clear from the discussion groups that Diverse City provides a welcoming environment that is inclusive of different religious identities, ethnicities, national backgrounds and levels of skill. Together 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 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). Summayah, who had never played football before, met with the coaches who told her that:

*“We take girls...from all ages and all backgrounds...just come along so, yeah...I joined up and it's been the best thing ever, really”
(Summayah)*

“[Diverse City's] main purpose is starting up a Muslim team and raising awareness by wearing the headscarf and I think they did a good thing by allowing other people of different backgrounds and religion to show that we are all equal we are one it doesn't matter where you are from and all that” (Deepa)

The barriers faced by members of Diverse City, Muslim or otherwise are discussed in more detail below. It is important to emphasise the warmth and enthusiasm felt and demonstrated by the Diverse City players towards and between their team mates and coaches.

More than just a game: Development through participation

Playing football, while at the heart of all of the activities associated with the Hijabs and Hat-tricks project, is but one part of a broader suite of activities that the players can get involved with. Participation in sport can be empowering. Playing football as part of a team can help 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). The players of Diverse City, as part of the broader Hijabs and Hat-tricks project, have been provided with opportunities to develop personally; ranging from participating in the design of their own football kit and; participation in workshops on issues such as nutrition; through to engagement in charitable activism. The diverse character of Diverse City has also encouraged a greater cultural awareness among the team; providing a platform from which people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds can interact and build relationships through sport. Similar initiatives are in place in other European contexts albeit with a specific focus on developing skills for future employment (Discover Football 2013). The development of transferable skills has been in evidence from the earliest stages of the Hijabs and Hat-tricks project. Players have been actively involved in the decision making processes around the development of Diverse City: “at the start with the gear there was a meeting on what it should look like then on what colour” (Maryam). Drawing on the support of Sports Against Racism Ireland and its relationships with other civil society activists, team members have been afforded opportunities to develop networking and other skills that will benefit them into the future.

“It was through Ken [Sports Against Racism Ireland] that I got to know people like Kate O’ Connell and then through Kate I got like a great placement in the Bluebell Youth Centre and then I joined like loads of other campaigns and I got to see like what they get to do as youth workers and they were showing me around their offices and everything they gave me my own office and they were like “oh we need you to get music”, “oh we need you to book this event”, so I got to see how everything is actually run” (Nasreen)

Activism and Engagement

As the quotes provided here demonstrate, participation in Diverse City offers players opportunities to engage with a range of activities which extend well beyond football, encouraging the development of skills that the players can bring into other aspects of their lives. This can help them to unlock and develop potential that may otherwise remain untapped. As Deepa and Summayah demonstrate below, playing for Diverse City has encouraged them to become involved in charitable activism, something they may be otherwise be reluctant to engage in. Deepa is proud of her charity work while Summayah was encouraged to participate by the solidarity of team support. In addition to feelings of pride and support, the practical experience and skills gained through the organisation of a charity fundraising event should not be under-estimated (Discover Football 2013).

“That was actually the first time ever I did something...First time I did something to raise money for a different country that was something that was like a really proud moment for me” (Deepa)

“Knowing that the team is behind certain causes...makes me more likely to engage with those causes as opposed to just say well, if it's just up to me to go do something about it I'd probably be more lazy and not engage, but when you know there are organisations that you actually are involved with then you're more likely to partake” (Summayah)

While there is evidence that playing football with Diverse City encouraged participation in charitable activism, the players also noted how through their fundraising they also recruited new players into the game. In that context, not only does participation develop skills and promote activism; activism also encourages participation in football.

Building Confidence

An important subtheme that was raised on a number of occasions referred specifically to the issue of confidence. This manifested in two ways, first in relation to playing sports and sporting ability; and secondly in relation to feelings of self-confidence in terms of personal identity. Players related that they felt more confident as a result of joining Diverse City. On the field Summayah had not played football before and found that the

welcoming environment provided by Diverse City gave her the confidence to play; moreover, the coaches helped to build this confidence through active support. Off the field, Diverse City provides a platform from which the players can build self-confidence in their own cultural identities, and the self-belief to be themselves. Writing of the UK context, Bradbury (2010, p.40) notes how football teams that cater for the needs of culturally diverse groups provide an important space for “positive sporting and societal representations”. Not all of the Muslim players wear the hijab. For those who do, there is an increased self-belief and pride in their identity. Amaal was previously reluctant to wear her hijab while playing for her school team. As a consequence of playing with Diverse City she now has increased confidence and indeed pride in being herself.

“I am much prouder to wear my scarf playing for my school team now as well as playing with Diverse City like it has helped me build more self-confidence in wearing my scarf” (Amaal)

Sherene attends a school where the principal does not permit female Muslim students to wear their headscarves. This is despite uniform regulations being implemented by a former principal that allowed the wearing of the hijab in school once it was the correct colour. Although so far unsuccessful in her efforts, Sherene felt the strength to question the ban, “to go and ask” as she put it, and she attributed this self-belief directly to her participation in Diverse City.

Barriers to Participation in Sport

Our respondents revealed that they face a number of barriers inhibiting their participation in sport. Studies such as Discover Football (2013) and the ‘Widening Access Through Sport’ (WATS) project developed in Leicestershire (Collins and Kay 2014, p.104) engaged with potential barriers such as cultural and religious sensitivities towards female participation in sport from *within* cultural communities. Discussions with the Diverse City players presented evidence of such sensitivities in the Dublin context. According to some of the discussion group members, they had lost “five or six players” (Saddiqa) not only due to practical issues such as study commitments but also due to some parents’ cultural sensitivities. The players felt that the main barriers to female participation were based on a mix of stereotypical cultural and generational perspectives on the role of women in sport.

'Cultural' Barriers to Participation

It is important to recognise that all cultural groups encompass a diverse range of beliefs and outlooks. It would be wrong to think that all members of an ethnic community holding the same beliefs. The perspectives of the cultural communities which the players come from are particularly influential and interesting when it comes to encouraging or discouraging female participation in sport. At the heart of these perspectives lies the belief held by some members of the broader communities of which the players are part, not all, that women should not participate in sporting activities. Summayah sums up the influence, in some cases, of community perspectives on female participation in sport.

"Even if parents are comfortable with you know [that] football is good...what's the community going to think of it? I think that is an issue because, I haven't spoken to people but 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 the community], you know, so there is a bit of that. There is pressure, in communities and I think this could go ethnic communities, religious communities, any type of ethnic community, I think this, I've seen this with people, especially older generation parents where it's a big deal to, kind of, please their surroundings" (Summayah)

Like Summayah, Rabia also recognises the role of community perspectives and the effect it can have on young women playing football, and again stresses the influence of generational differences.

"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)

There is a sense among the team that through participation in sport, Diverse City players can go some way to overcoming this barrier. Diverse City can set 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”. So I think it is a big, I think it's a change in the right direction” (Summayah)

Religion: Not a barrier to participation

An interesting finding from our work is one which challenges stereotypical understandings that fathers, and particularly Muslim fathers, are reluctant to let their daughters play sports. Our data suggests something different. In this context, it was interesting to hear one of the Diverse City players recall how her non-Muslim mother was more reluctant to allow her play football than her Muslim father. Amina, whose parents are both Muslim, shared a similar experience; while for Amaal, her father is also very supportive of her participation in sport:

“My dad is really supportive. He'd be like, say 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” or something 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 how - the way this project had started ...[he] was really proud so he really wanted me to play” (Amaal)

When it comes to religion, the Diverse City players were keen to stress that Islam is not a barrier to their participation in sport. Moreover, they drew on their faith and Islamic teachings to demonstrate that female participation in sport is appropriate. Mona El Said has employed a similar approach in Lebanon (Discover Football 2013), meeting concerns about religion on religious terms.

“In fact in, like in religion the prophet said that you should teach, you should allow your kids to do sports and all that”(Rabia)

“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)

Diverse City: Engaging communities; engaging parents

Faced with the barriers discussed above, Diverse City and the broader Hijabs and Hat-tricks project has had to provide strong, culturally sensitive support to help the players realise their goal of playing football for a team. This support has been particularly evident in addressing religious sensitivities towards female participation in sport. The WATS project in Leicestershire encouraged the participation of Muslim women in sport. To do this a project worker was tasked with, among other things, reassuring parents that the activities they engaged with were religiously and culturally appropriate (Collins and Kay 2014). The coaches of Diverse City also engaged in addressing sensitivities around female participation in sport. The ethos of inclusivity evident in the discussions with the players in terms of their participation extends beyond the team to include and reassure the parents. The players recognise how important the coaches have been in addressing the concerns of the parents. They shared how, when it comes to getting permission for activities, the coaches speak to “every single” (Amina) parent and in a manner that is respectful towards the parents.

The fact that the coaches are both from an Islamic background places them at an ideal position to understand the concerns that parents may have. The Right to Play (2015) initiative which uses sport as a vehicle to address a variety of social challenges similarly employs people from within the communities they are working with to encourage

participation. Culturally aware staff can approach issues in a manner that is appropriate for the communities concerned (Discover Football 2013; Right To Play 2015). In this sense the coaches are best placed people to work with the team given their understanding of parents' sensitivities around appropriate activities and related religious considerations.

It is also important to recognise the support that is provided by the parents, siblings and friends of the players of Diverse City. The players recalled support coming from parents in a range of ways, from enthusiastic questions of 'how did you get on?' To washing kits and coming to training and matches. There was clear evidence of strong support on the part of parents, family and friends of Diverse City's players. This is in no doubt testament to the hard work of the coaches but also desire of the parents, Muslim and non-Muslim, to ensure their daughters can play sports.

"The parents are very supportive, like, I've been on different teams and I know...but at the Soccer-Fest and other tournaments I was looking and there was a lot of support, a lot of support and a lot of people behind this team and I'm one of them so to me, I'm like wow...(Laughter) but players that we have, their parents are very supportive...when we're playing they want us to do well" (Denise)

This is more than just providing support however. Through the concerted engagement of the coaches with 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.

Challenging Misconceptions: Muslim Women

Collins and Kay (2014) refer to football as a microcosm of society: the stereotypes and exclusions of broader society can be seen reflected in football. Our discussions with the players from Diverse City certainly bear this out. The female Muslim players of Diverse City understand their role in addressing the manner in which Muslim women are stereotypically portrayed. They want to show what they, as Muslim women are really about, what they can do. The players know that Diverse City stands out and in doing so can develop cultural and religious awareness among 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)

"I heard that a lot, 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)

The four quotes are used here intentionally to underline the feelings of the players from Diverse City that, in playing football, they can challenge the stereotypes which have been constructed of Muslim women in society. Diverse City and the Hijabs and Hat-tricks project play an important role in challenging these stereotypes; encouraging participation of Muslim and non-Muslim women in sport, within their communities and without. In the words of Deepa: "It is about getting the whole nation together".

Diverse City can also challenge barriers outside of the immediate cultural and national communities of which the girls are part. Deepa is confident that their experience can transcend borders and encourage female participation in sports in other states.

“Give them a presentation...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)

The players for Diverse City have had to overcome barriers based on their gender, their ‘race’ and their religion to play football. The Hijabs and Hat-tricks project provides them with an outlet through which they can not only play football and develop as individuals, but as a means upon which they can also raise cultural and religious awareness, about and within their own communities as well as without; and importantly, help challenge negative stereotypes of the role of women in football, and the image of Muslim women in society (Carr and Haynes 2013).

Concluding comments

The discussions with the young women that make up Diverse City were enlightening. The perspectives shared by the young women provide rich insights on issues relating to female participation in sport and their experiences of racism; cultural 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.

Recommendations:

1. Diverse City is an outlet for players that face exclusion from sports on the basis of their 'race', religion and gender. As a project it needs to be maintained and where possible developed to attract even more players from a wide range of backgrounds.
2. Take Diverse City around other cities in Ireland – bring it on tour; spread the word and encourage the development of similar teams around the country.
3. Publicise the achievements of Diverse City. Advertise! Increase usage of social media and other such tools to publicise the activities and successes of the team. Doing so will aid the project and counter stereotypes.

4. The Hijabs and Hat-tricks project is more than simply playing football. The range and significance of non-sporting activities should be communicated to parents. The skills and experiences that the players can gain off the pitch by being associated with Diverse City are very beneficial. This should be made clear to parents of potential players in order to help encourage participation. It may be worth exploring the option of providing certificates of participation for the various workshops and classes that the players can attend as part of the Hijabs and Hat-tricks project.
5. 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.
6. The coaches are trusted and respected by the players. It is clear that they engage with parents in a respectful manner and their overall contribution cannot be underestimated. It would be good, in order to ensure continuity, to see some of the female players encouraged to take up coaching/assistant coaching positions.

Dr Amanda Haynes: "You know that this evaluation it is basically feeding back to the organisation that has so far provided funding. Is there anything you want to say to them?"

Thank you! (Sherene)...Thank you!! (multiple voices and laughter)...sometimes you just need a lift to help you get off the floor and get started... I think that is what they did for us (Sherene).

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