

Rhythm of Resilience: Unpacking the Lived Experiences of Muslim Women in Dance and Sports in Learning Physical Education

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Abstract

The participation of Muslim women in dance and sports remains a complex issue shaped by cultural, religious, and societal expectations. This study explores the lived experiences of Muslim women in learning physical education, focusing on the challenges, opportunities, and strategies they employ to navigate participation in dance and sports. The chief purpose of this study is to understand how Muslim women reconcile their cultural and religious beliefs with the requirements of physical education programs. It aims to provide insights into their struggles and triumphs, informing educators of more inclusive and culturally responsive teaching practices. Using a phenomenological research design, in-depth interviews were conducted with six Muslim women who completed physical education programs (PE 101- PE102) and two who majored

in Physical Education from the three campuses of Sultan Kudarat State University. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret their narratives, identifying recurring themes related to cultural identity, modesty, accessibility, and peer interactions. Findings revealed that while Muslim women acknowledge the benefits of physical education, they often face barriers such as dress code restrictions, gender-segregated settings, and societal perceptions. However, adaptive strategies, including supportive peer networks and modified attire, enable them to participate meaningfully. In conclusion, the study highlights the need for culturally sensitive physical education programs that respect religious beliefs while promoting inclusivity and active participation.

Keywords: *Muslim women, physical education, cultural sensitivity, religious modesty, inclusive sports*

Introduction

Dance and Sports are some of the menus offered in physical education that brought challenges and issues among Muslim women around the globe. In the global context, there are issues affecting Muslim women's participation in dance and sports while learning physical education. Muslim women face unique challenges in participating in these activities due to cultural, religious, and social factors. In Pakistan, the study conducted by Laar et al. (2019) pointed out that religious beliefs, along with cultural and socioeconomic factors, constrain physical activity rates among college women students.

In the Philippines, A 2021 study conducted by the Department of Education (DepEd) showed that 72% of Muslim women in schools felt their cultural and religious practices were not considered in school sports programs (DepEd, 2021). It shows that there was limited research on how the curriculum can be tailored to reflect the diverse cultural background of students, especially in physical education settings. Similarly, a 2019 survey conducted by the Philippine Physical Education Association (PPEA) reported that nearly 58% of Muslim women in urban areas reported that their schools lacked appropriate facilities, such as gender-segregated spaces, to participate in physical activities comfortably (PPEA, 2019).

In Region XII, at Sultan Kudarat State University, a group of Muslim women students asked to be excused from Physical Education (PE) classes during performance tasks for dances and sports activities, the issues of dress code and gender mixing in the conduct of PE classes was raised and have reached the office of the director for student affairs.

Considering pressing issues, this amplified the researcher's desire to discover unique experiences and challenges Muslim women face in dance and sports while learning physical education. By listening to their voices, this research aspires to contribute to the academic discourse surrounding physical education, promote inclusivity and representation within the University's programs, and be the basis for crafting the policy in the conduct of Physical Education classes.

Muslim Women's Lived Experiences in Learning Dance and Sports

The experiences of Muslim women in dance and sports within physical education (PE) are embedded in complex intersections of religion, culture, gender, and institutional norms. Across diverse global and local settings, Muslim women often negotiate between their faith-based values and the expectations of mainstream PE curricula, particularly in activities like dance and competitive sports, where issues of modesty, bodily movement, and public visibility are heightened (Ali, 2021; Elkassem et al., 2018). Islam places significant emphasis on modesty (*haya*), which informs Muslim women's dress, behavior, and interactions, especially in public spaces (Kaul, 2020). Physical education programs often designed around Western norms may involve co-educational classes, form-fitting attire, or activities such as dance that can conflict with these religious expectations (Dagkas & Hunter, 2016). As a result, Muslim women may experience discomfort, exclusion, or pressure to compromise their beliefs to participate (Farooq & Parker, 2017; Sofi et al., 2022).

In both Western and non-Western societies, structural and attitudinal barriers limit Muslim women's access to inclusive physical education. These include strict dress codes, a lack of female-only facilities, and limited cultural competence among teachers (Walton et al., 2021). These barriers are intensified in dance, where movement is expressive and publicly performed, thus subject to religious scrutiny (Zarobe & Bungay, 2017).

Despite these hindrances, Muslim women exhibit significant agency in modifying their engagement in physical activities. They dress in modest attire for sports (e.g., sport hijabs), promote segregated spaces by gender, and redefine physical activity in terms that suit their religion (Samie, 2018; Ali, 2021). These behaviors show that the Muslim women are not resigned responders to cultural norms but active space, identity, and movement negotiators (Elkassem et al., 2018).

Schools and universities have started introducing culturally responsive measures to meet Muslim students' needs in PE, for example, providing substitute uniforms, female teachers, and single-sex classes (Dagkas

& Stathi, 2020). Yet, the literature shows that most educators remain insufficiently trained in meeting religious and cultural diversity, which leads to ongoing exclusion or stereotyping (Benn et al., 2016).

In areas such as Mindanao, Philippines, where Muslim populations are more dominant, increased awareness of the importance of inclusive physical education exists. However, socio-political pasts, economic disparities, and lingering conflict impacts continue to define how Muslim women can access and experience educational opportunities, including PE. For some, engaging in dance and sporting activities is not only physical but about pushing back against stereotypes, gaining confidence, and reclaiming cultural expression through movement (Ong, 2019). He added that Muslim women encounter greater challenges owing to historical marginalization, conflict, and economic disparity (Ong, 2019). Although institutions such as Sultan Kudarat State University are becoming increasingly sensitive to inclusive practice, access to PE that is culturally suitable is not even. The cultural specificity of Mindanao's Muslim communities, such as Maguindanaon, Maranao, Tausug, and Iranun, demands contextualized understanding to be able to assist Muslim women in PE (Macalandong, 2017; Karim, 2021).

Research Questions

In the pursuit of the study, this research question guided the entire process of inquiry:

1. What are the lived experiences of the Muslim women in dance and sports while learning physical education?

Methodology

This research employed a transcendental phenomenological research design to understand the lived experiences. Moustakas (1994), cited by Protacio (2021), said that the wholeness of the experience and its importance must be the focus of a phenomenological study because transcendental research ensures that the participants' feelings come up rather than the perceptions and presumptions of the researcher. The cross-case analysis method was also employed in this research to compare and contrast the commonalities and differences between the unique characteristics and experiences of Muslim women in dance and sports in learning physical education. Khan and VanWynsberghe said that comparing and contrasting cases stimulated new knowledge (January 2008).

The participants of the study were eight (8) bona fide Muslim women students of Sultan Kudarat State University coming from three big campuses: the Access campus, the Tacurong Campus, and the Isulan campus. Six of them had completed their physical education subjects from Physical Education 01, Physical Education 02, Physical Education 03, and Physical Education 04. (PE101, PE102, PE103, PE104), and the two were students majoring in Physical Education. All of them were pure Maguindanao's. The six non-PE majors were wearing proper Muslim dress codes and Hijab while attending classes in the University, and the two students majoring in PE occasionally wore the Hijab.

Purposive Sampling Technique was used to select participants who have completed the eight (8) units in physical education and those majoring in Physical Education. In this study, participants were chosen based on their experiences in dance and sports as Muslim women, ensuring that the sample reflects the diversity within this group (e.g., completion of the PE subjects, cultural background, dress code). This technique allows for a focused exploration of the lived experiences of Muslim women, capturing rich qualitative data that can reveal insights into their resilience and cultural identity. They were purposively selected by the researcher, considering that according to Creswell (2014), as cited by Lester, J. N. (1999) purposive sampling in phenomenological studies allows researchers to focus on individuals who have directly

experienced the phenomenon being studied, thus enriching the data collected. research were gathered using interview guide questions. The Interview Guide was used to help the researcher structure the interview flow (Verlinden, 2024). It was adapted from the study of Protacio (2019) adopted by Lechonsito (2023), as it is seen to have a similar approach in the conduct of this research study. The data was gathered using the communication phase, seeking consent/permission, identifying the participants, conducting a semi-structured interview, writing the transcripts, and validating them and it was analyzed using thematic analysis. According to Moustakas (1994), thematic analysis emphasizes identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns and themes within the data. It organizes and describes all data in detail.

Results and Discussion

The Themes emerging from the thematic analysis of the experiences of Muslim Women in learning Dance and Sports are as follows: 1. Anxiety and emotional discomfort 2. Support systems and adaptation 3. Guidance, inclusion, and misjudgment 4. Identity and strong belief 5. Empowerment and Resilience

Theme 1: Anxiety and Emotional Discomfort

The conflict between personal identity, cultural values, and institutional expectations is a main source of emotional discomfort for Muslim women in PE contexts. As the study participants disclosed, the discomfort arises from feeling misplaced in an environment that frequently clashes with their religious and cultural norms. This conflict reflects research from several other studies that look at struggles experienced by Muslim women in public life, most notably in domains such as education and sport, where religious and cultural practices may conflict with dominant expectations (Safi, 2020). In a research work on Muslim women and sport, participants had been observed to struggle between their desire to exercise and their requirement to follow cultural and religious dress codes (Hasan & Ahmed, 2020).

On the other hand, Ali, S. H., & Bukhari, S. (2021) documented the emotional and identity-related challenges faced by Muslim girls in PE classes, particularly surrounding dress, peer judgment, and teacher insensitivity while Dagkas, S., & Hunter, L. (2018) critiques how dominant norms in PE marginalize racialized and religiously diverse students. According to them, Muslim girls are particularly affected by discourses around the “ideal” athletic body, which conflicts with modesty norms.

Gholami, R. (2018) shows how systemic and institutional Islamophobia contributes to emotional and psychological discomfort for Muslim individuals, especially in settings like schools and public services. Basit, T. N., & Mogra, I. (2019) highlighted how cultural identity and religious obligations place emotional stress on Muslim girls navigating Western educational spaces, including sports and physical education. Similarly, Ahmad, N. et.al. (2022) revealed how Muslim women participants felt emotional unease and exclusion in physical activity environments due to their religious dress and perceived incompatibility with mainstream sports culture.

Theme 2: Support systems and adaptation

The emotional stress associated with peer judgment is another serious problem. As one of the participants remembered, she was uncomfortable on the first day of her BPED course because her peers wondered why a Muslim woman would study such a subject. This feeling is indicative of a wider cultural pattern in which Muslim women feel excluded or not understood when they participate in secular environments such as PE (Zohar, 2021). The repeated questioning of their decisions can lead to feelings of loneliness and self-doubt. This is in line with the results of a study by Yousuf and Kazi (2022), which investigated how Muslim women

in academic environments feel discriminated against and marginalized. The study found that women who wore the hijab or were Muslim were frequently subjected to negative assumptions and viewed as 'outsiders.'

Chen, N., & Qiao, F. (2024) suggested that the increased social support can alleviate anxiety and emotional discomfort by enhancing psychological resilience, thereby promoting greater engagement in physical activities. Nazir, T., & Özçiçek, A. (2023) explored the sociocultural adjustment challenges faced by Arab female international students in Türkiye. It highlights issues such as discrimination, cultural differences, and limited exposure to the opposite gender, which contribute to feelings of isolation and emotional discomfort. The research also discusses coping strategies employed by these students, including seeking social support and relying on religious coping mechanisms

Theme 3: Guidance, Inclusion, and Misjudgment

Another key issue discussed in the findings is modesty concern, which is a core part of the cultural and religious practices of the participants. This is not just a surface-level concern but indicates underlying worry at being exposed when engaged in physical activity. For instance, concern about how clothing may restrict movement and still ensure modesty is a big concern in PE contexts. These issues have also been raised in other studies, with one by Alkhateeb (2019) explaining how Muslim women who took part in sport were frequently required to balance the functionality of sportswear with compliance with modest dress rules. Alkhateeb indicates that this tension can create serious emotional distress, especially when participants believe that what they wear might expose them in a manner to which they are uncomfortable, or feel is inappropriate.

Al-Amri, S., & Al-Kathiri, F. (2023) investigated the impact of modesty expectations on Muslim women's participation in PE courses within universities. It found that many participants felt the need to constantly adjust their clothing to ensure coverage during movement, leading to stress and reduced enjoyment. The research emphasizes the psychological toll of navigating between religious identity and institutional norms. Afrouz, R., & Crisp, B. R. (2022) in their qualitative study they highlighted how Muslim women perceive clothing-related barriers in dance and sport. Participants mentioned the lack of modest sportswear and fear of inappropriate exposure as significant deterrents. The study shows that these clothing issues are not mere inconveniences but represent deep-seated concerns tied to identity and dignity. Likewise, Ahmed, N., & Lawrence, S. (2021) explored how Muslim adolescent girls in secondary schools navigate dress codes in PE. It shows how discomfort with standard uniforms leads to withdrawal or low engagement in PE. The authors argue for policy reforms that integrate religious dress accommodations in school sports settings.

Jette, S., & Hutchinson, P. (2020) examine how Muslim women interpret modesty through movement and attire. The findings suggest that many women alter their participation styles, such as choosing non-competitive roles or less vigorous activities, to minimize potential exposure. Emotional stress is frequently associated with having to compromise modesty in public PE settings. Ali, M., & Mansoor, S. (2018), focusing on Muslim female students, found that the inability to wear religiously appropriate clothing during dance and sports often results in avoidance behavior and emotional withdrawal. Participants reported feelings of "double exclusion": from both cultural communities (for participating) and sports institutions (for not conforming).

Theme 4: Identity and Strong Belief

The psychological burden that these women went through underscores the need to implement more diverse and culturally responsive PE program strategies. Several researchers contend that physical education curricula need to be modified to address the varied needs of students, especially those belonging to minority

cultural and religious groups (Omar & Jackson, 2021). In her research on Islamic feminist pedagogy in sport education, Smith (2018) highlights the need to develop inclusive spaces where religious and cultural differences are valued. Adapting PE programs to include religious dress, for example, by offering alternatives for women who want to wear modest clothing, might assist in alleviating feelings of alienation and anxiety. It agreed with Senarath and Liyanage (2020) when they examined the relationship between religious involvement and young Islamic women's participation in physical activities; they concluded that adherence to Islamic principles can both challenge and strengthen their resolve to engage in dance and sports, fostering a balance between faith and physical well-being.

Theme 5: Empowerment and Resilience

Despite the emotional tension, the study participants demonstrated great resilience, negotiating the difficult ground between their cultural identity and the demands of the PE curriculum. Such emotional resilience has been noted in other research on how Muslim women negotiate conflicting expectations in educational environments. Research by Kassem and Darwish (2020) noted how Muslim women in academia coped by inventing ways, like turning to similar-minded peers for support or developing other forms of physical engagement that were value-aligned. This highlights the value of supporting environments that respect such emotional challenges while enabling Muslim women to hold on to their identity.

Chen and Qiao (2024) highlighted that social support enhances psychological adjustment, leading to increased participation and empowerment in sports. Nasser (2025) reported that initiatives like the Amanah Rec Project provide Muslim women with opportunities to engage in physical activities, fostering resilience and community bonding. Kazimi (2025) argued that education, including physical education, is key to ending cycles of conflict and empowering women in the Middle East.

Conclusion

The study concluded that the experiences of Muslim women in learning physical education are shaped by internal conflicts, external pressures, and the need to constantly navigate between faith and physical activity.

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