



Understanding what supports South Asian and Muslim women to move more

A guide for creating inclusive physical activity spaces for South Asian and Muslim women

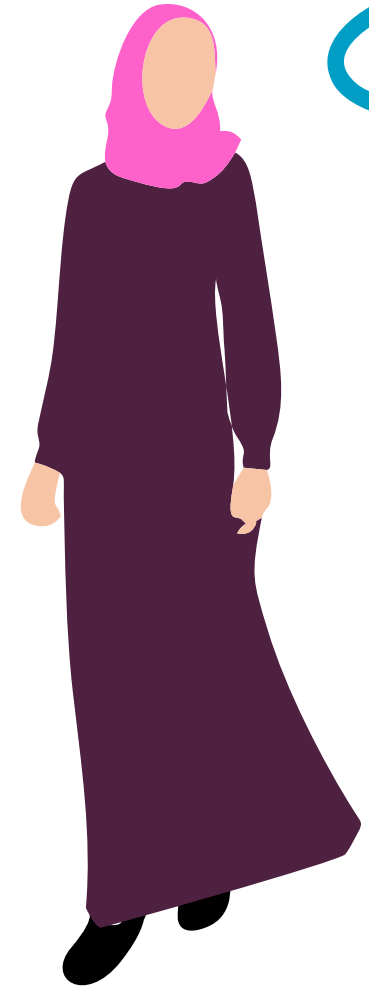
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Understanding what supports South Asian and Muslim women to move more

Who is this guide for?

Any groups or individuals providing physical activity or movement sessions for South Asian and Muslim women and anyone thinking about doing so in the future.

This guide can support you in creating inclusive and accessible spaces that will help to enable more South Asian and Muslim women to move more, contributing to overall health and wellbeing.

It is important to recognise that all women are individuals with their own life experiences, differing levels of cultural and religious beliefs and, with that, the barriers and opportunities to being active.

Getting to know the women you want to work with is important. Embedding people into your discussions, planning and implementation is the best way to providing successful, accessible and inclusive sessions.

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Note: This document has been produced through a Nottingham city lens. Engagement and consultation has been with local women, activity providers and venues. Opinions and perspectives may differ depending on the area you are working in.

A special thanks to Asia Asghar, *Nottingham Muslim Women's Network*, for her contribution to this document through her work with *This Girl Can Nottingham*.

South Asian and Muslim women

This guide aims to provide you with some headline information, so you can better understand women from South Asian and Muslim communities from a cultural and faith perspective.

This insight document focuses on women who are South Asian and Muslim. It's important to know the significance of this phrasing, the intersectionality that lies within it and why we're using it.

The term South Asian refers to people with heritage from the geographical region of South Asia, which includes:

- **India**
- **Pakistan**
- **Bangladesh**
- **Nepal**
- **Sri Lanka**
- **Afghanistan**

Many of these countries' descendants have a strong relationship with Islam but not all people from these countries are Muslim.

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The term Muslim refers to people who follow the religion of Islam, regardless of their ethnic background or geographical origin.

In this document we are talking about people who could be:

- Muslim without being South Asian (for example, many people from countries in Africa, or Asia, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Somalia, or Malaysia follow Islam)
- South Asian without being Muslim (for example, many people from India could be of Hindu or Sikh faith)
- Both South Asian and Muslim (for example, a Muslim person from Pakistan or Bangladesh)
- Identifying as a Muslim having converted to Islam.

Within the work of **This Girl Can Nottingham** the majority of participants in the programme have come through the **Nottingham Muslim Women's Network** partnership.

Things to consider:

Family and faith

Women may have childcare and home-making commitments as well as religious and cultural commitments that need to be prioritised above physical activity.

Older generations of Muslim women especially may feel reluctant to take 'me-time' and often take on other family commitments such as looking after grandchildren for the younger generation of women who are more likely to go out to work.



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Adaptions

To ensure sessions are accessible for South Asian and Muslim women, take into consideration family and faith commitments:

- **Avoid scheduling activity before 9.30am and between 3 – 5pm:** these times often involve dropping off and picking children up from school, preparing and eating dinner and attending Mosque to read the Quran.
- **Focus activity during morning and early afternoon:** when children are at school and family members are typically working. Women may be more inclined to participate and not feel that they are sacrificing family life and responsibilities.
- **Include children:** either provide childcare or run activities that include children within them.
- **Avoid 12 – 2pm on Fridays:** it is the religious day of prayer (called Jummah). Being active between 12 – 2pm is unlikely to take priority.

Things to consider:

Clothing

Culture plays an important role in how Muslim women dress. For example, Bangladeshi and Indian heritage women traditionally wear a Sari, women from the Middle East traditionally wear an Abay, whilst Pakistani women often wear a Salwar Kameez, as pictured opposite.

Adherence to traditional dress can influence a woman's mobility and therefore access to certain activities. For example, swimming or cycling might require differing levels of adaptations compared to walking or running. However, some communities that have been in the UK for several generations may take a more relaxed approach to their dress.



Sari, traditional dress for Bangladeshi and Indian women



Abay, traditional womenswear in the Middle East



Salwar Kameez, traditional dress for Pakistani women

Adaptions

- **Encourage women to adapt their clothing:** ensure this is clear on all promotional material, including imagery.
- **Enable activities that are inclusive and accessible:** activities like walking, running and badminton are easier to adapt for example.
- **Promoting or providing Muslim inclusive active wear:** organisations can address this cultural consideration by promoting these options, such as burkinis or sport hijabs. This will enable Muslim women to participate in activity whilst maintaining modesty values.

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Things to consider:

Equipment and cost of activities

Some Muslim communities in Nottingham live in households with large families or joint families.

This can have an impact on storage of bikes and other physical activity equipment within the home.

If women are trying an activity for the first time they may not have the equipment needed.



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Adaptions

- **Borrow bikes or provide storage for bikes and larger equipment.**
- **Provide equipment for sessions.**
- **Offer taster sessions:** activities can be tried before a financial commitment is made.
- **Provide low-cost sessions:** subsidise by funding from grants.



Things to consider:

Female only sessions

For many Muslim women it is important to have opportunities to be active in female only spaces, due to the modesty principles in Islam and some activities requiring the removal of the hijab and skin exposure.

Women only sessions are a necessity/preferable for a variety of reasons; women are able to wear less clothing around other women, allowing them to maintain modesty standards whilst being active. Women who have migrated from Muslim-majority countries are used to gender segregated spaces and feel more comfortable in this environment.

More generally, we know the importance of a workforce that is reflective of the community being engaged. Tutorials such as how to hold a badminton racquet may require direct physical contact from a coach, this may not be well received if it was a man.

The necessity of female coaches is also influenced by the nature of the activity, for example a male delivering Walk Leader training could be relatively well received, however a female swim instructor is essential to engage this community due to religious beliefs around modesty and confidence barriers.

We know there are challenges around a representative physical activity workforce reflective of South Asian and Muslim women and recognise the priority is that deliverers are female.

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Adaptions

- **Offer female only sessions with female leaders:** be unashamedly 'exclusive to be inclusive'.
- **Safe spaces:** consider spaces where activity happens and the changing spaces connected with them are female only, this might include any windows that overlook these spaces, CCTV screens and all staff.
- **Work with venues which can easily accommodate the requirements above.**
- **A representative workforce:** it's important to recognise the diversity of this community and have this reflected and understood within the workforce. For example, first and second-generation women have different life experiences, this understanding helps enable inclusive activity that recognises multifaceted barriers and opportunities to being active.
- **Trusted relationships:** female community connector roles build trust by spending time with the community and are important in supporting women to be more active. Allowing the time for these relationships is essential, informal activities like coffee mornings are good places for this and can develop into signposting to other activities. Women have fed back that connectors can often be the reason why they attend activities.
- **Staff training** – encourage staff to attend cultural sensitivity training.
- **Partner with culturally specific organisations:** partnering with appropriate groups in the community can help raise awareness and build understanding of religious and cultural needs, as well as building trust with the women you are hoping to engage.



Things to consider:

Culturally appropriate places and spaces

Places and spaces have an important role in activity behaviours for South Asian and Muslim women. There is a desire for them to be female only, safe for South Asian and Muslim women and culturally appropriate for physical activity. Some women choose to travel to access suitable provisions which they feel comfortable in. This can be due to lack of appropriate provision where they live and shows that more offers are needed across the city.

Mosques and Islamic centres cater to various Muslim denominations and ethnic backgrounds, for example South Asian Sunnis, Somalis or multi-ethnic people. Some Mosques have community centres or spaces that help enable physical activity sessions, boxing and football for boys and self-defense and badminton for girls for example.

Whilst Mosques are viewed as a 'safe space' for Muslim women, opportunities to use them as a site for activity can be challenging due to the prohibition on playing music within this space. Classes like Zumba for example, may be more appropriate to a community hall.

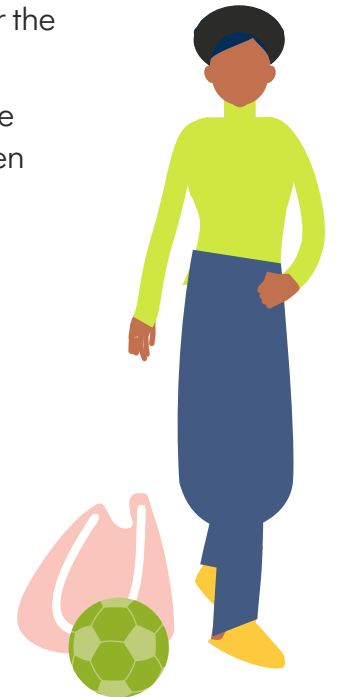
It is important to find a balance between the places and spaces to be active that are appropriate, but also recruiting a relevant female instructor who can instill confidence, motivation to participate and reassurance if there are any concerns.

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Adaptions

- **Consult with faith leaders:** Imams are leaders within Islam and are influential within the community, including around perceptions of health and physical activity. Generally, within Islam, physical activity is encouraged for men and women as part of looking after the mind and body.

However, sometimes culture can impact the wider principles of Islam, leading to women being discouraged from being active.
- **Work with faith leaders:** they can positively influence and share messaging around the benefits of being active to the community.
- **Be unashamedly 'exclusive to be inclusive':** sessions organised specifically for South Asian and Muslim women.
- **Consider taking sessions indoors during winter months.**



Things to consider:

Transport and safety

Perceptions and experiences around safety in public influence how women travel and get around their communities. World events such as the Israel-Palestine conflict and recent riots across the UK have heightened these issues with some women experiencing an increase in Islamophobia whilst being in public. Fears are often of hate-crimes based on the intersection of their religion, ethnicity and gender. These fears worsen during Autumn and Winter when daylight hours reduce.

Families often encourage travelling in groups or car sharing rather than using public transport. Families of older Muslim women often prefer for them to be chaperoned by family members rather than travelling alone on public transport. Fears are due to language barriers in first-generation women coupled with the fear of getting lost and not being able to communicate.

This, alongside the general dislike for wet, cold weather can impact activity levels and getting around in general. In the summer months, walking is more appealing as the days are longer, enabling women to go out later in the day without compromising feelings of safety.

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Adaptions

- **Private transport:** local partners can work together to arrange and fund private transport (where needed) to activities for groups of women who don't feel comfortable travelling alone. Building this into funding bids is a consideration that needs addressing.
- **Travelling together:** encourage women to meet and travel together to sessions on public transport.
- **Sharing lifts:** encourage lift-sharing for other local women attending sessions.
- **Activities where people live:** consider offering activities in areas where South Asian and Muslim communities are living.



Things to consider:

Food and faith

Typically, people of Islamic faith don't eat pork and only eat meat that is Halal which should be a consideration if offering food. It is also common for Muslim communities not to consume alcohol. Holding sessions where alcohol is being served could be seen as inappropriate, emphasising the need to include the community in any plans to develop your provision.

Ramadan can feel like a challenging time to think about being physically active. It is a sacred month and a time when families fast from sunrise to sunset and so can feel lacking in energy. Encouraging some activity can be very beneficial to help increase focus and energy and improve digestion. There are many benefits to maintaining some activity during Ramadan.

For more information and resources on how to stay active during Ramadan, visit the **Ramadan Recharge** page.

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Adaptions

- **Hold activities in spaces where there is no alcohol being served.**
- **Encourage participants to remain active around Ramadan:** Ramadan can be a time to detox, set goals, take advantage of having more spare time and introduce activity into daily routines eg. walking to mosque each day instead of driving.

Things to consider:

- Decrease intensity of sessions, short intervals work best
- Regular breaks
- Hold sessions at an appropriate time of day – avoid salah/prayers.
- Best times to exercise in Ramadan are one hour before breaking fast, or after breaking fast.
- Avoid participants becoming too hot or thirsty.



Things to consider:

Lack of representation or awareness

Muslim women need to see more 'people like me' to build confidence around being active.

Marketing and communications - Feedback has highlighted that activity opportunities that women would like to engage with are not marketed effectively to communicate to this audience. Feedback on promotional materials include:

- Information is typically in English.
- Images are not typical of ethnically diverse participants/representative of the groups they want to engage.
- Material is not promoted widely enough, often limited to small networks such as Facebook and Instagram groups.
- Where it is promoted is not necessarily reached by the community.



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Adaptions

- **Tips on marketing and comms to maximise engagement.**
 - Deliverers understand their local demographic, including languages spoken
 - Imagery clearly demonstrates the activity on offer to overcome language barriers
 - Imagery representative of the different demographics within a community
 - Use only necessary words to avoid messages getting lost in translation. Use images to illustrate where possible.
 - Activities are promoted in a variety of places: including where diverse communities are. For example, Mosques, schools, GP surgeries, hospitals, community centres and local community business hubs.
- **Trusted relationships:** spend time informally building trust and find out what activities are being asked for.
- **Representative workforce:** to help build a better understanding of the community and enable inclusive activity through their own lived experience and understanding of multifaceted barriers and opportunities to being active.

Things to consider:

Language

It is important to consider that some South Asian and Muslim women are not proficient in English and this can create a barrier to participation in activities. There are many different languages spoken by South Asian and Muslim women in England.

Most of the South Asian Muslim women living in England speak English as a first language.*

However, it's worth noting that around **7% of our Indian women, 10% of our Pakistani women and 15% of our Bangladeshi women do not speak English well or cannot speak English at all.**

***source:** This Girl Can - Let's Get Out There, Cultural Guidance and Understanding

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Adaptions

- **Collaborate with community leaders and translators:** develop multilingual materials and resources (see page 12).
- **Culturally appropriate workforce:** who can communicate in relevant languages where possible.
- **Encourage women to share opportunities within their networks:** including peer groups, religious groups and schools.

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Final Reflections

Creating inclusive physical activity spaces for South Asian and Muslim women requires a thoughtful, community-led approach that prioritises genuine engagement and understanding.

Success comes through listening to your local community, building trust, preferably through representation and working in partnership, ensuring spaces meet cultural and religious needs. The key is to remain flexible in your approach, respectful and to recognise that this work is an ongoing journey that requires long-term commitment and regular adaptations.

By focusing on removing barriers – whether they're related to cost, language, transport, or timing, you can give people the time to build their confidence in an active and social space. The key is working alongside the community rather than simply for them, to create welcoming spaces where South Asian and Muslim women feel truly empowered to engage in physical and social activity.

Remember that whilst this guide provides a framework, every community is unique, and the most successful work is that which responds to local needs and works in partnership with trusted groups and people.

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