

BEYOND THE BUZZWORDS

Muslim Girls Fence, a sports project for Muslim women in London and Birmingham



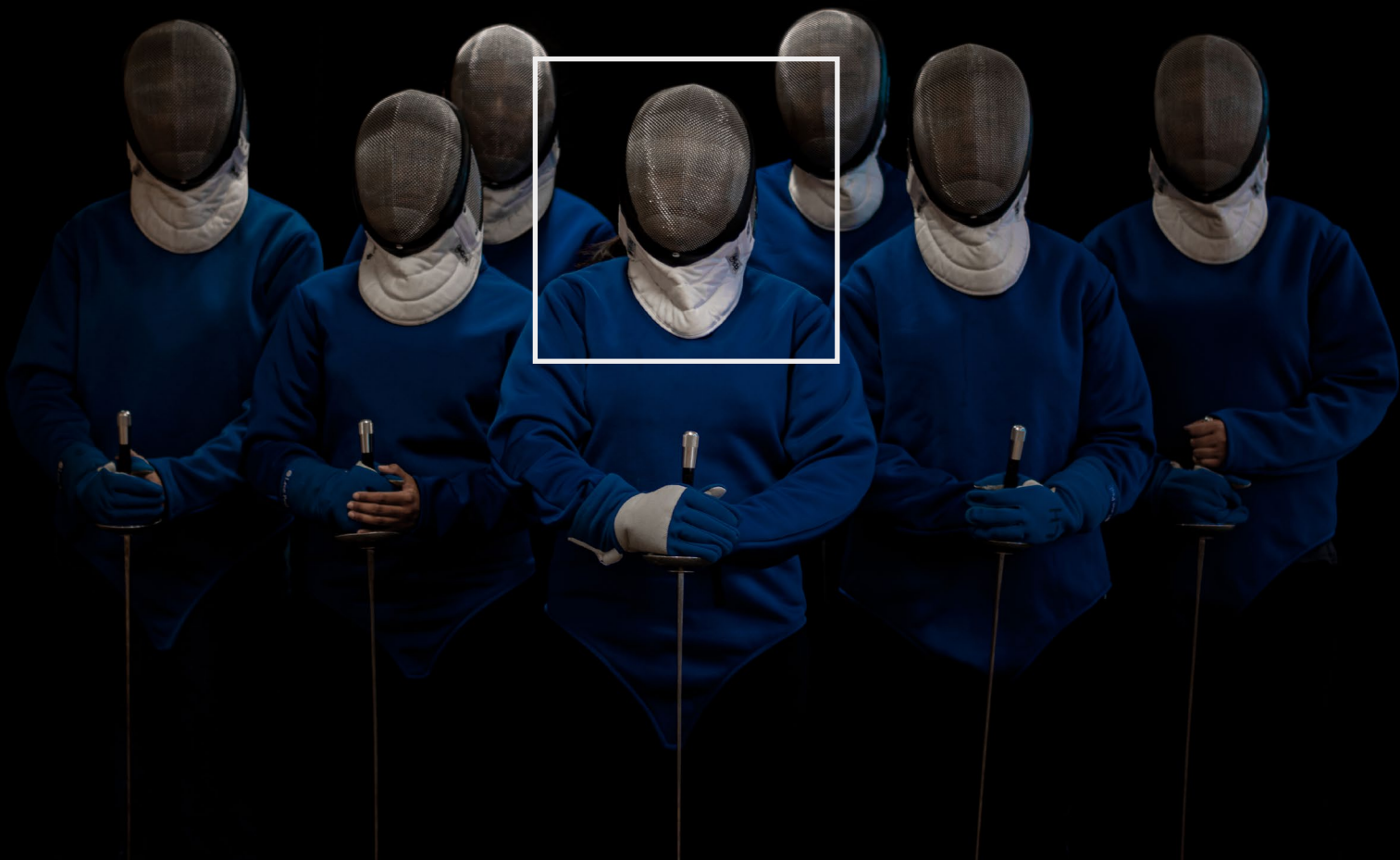
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maslaha

**BRITISH
FENCING**



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Muslim women are among the least heard members of British society, marginalised and often silenced in public discourse. Consequently, they are also among the least well understood, especially by fellow citizens who do not share their social position, cultures or beliefs. It is disturbing to read, in the Muslim Girls Fence project diaries, of the casual and ignorant prejudice faced by the women who took part. A university lecturer makes a female Muslim student the butt of humour fuelled by political bias and orientalist fantasy; strangers question a woman wearing the niqab about her faith and community. These men feel entitled to ask a Muslim woman to justify herself on their terms, and in doing so enact a belief that she is—compared to themselves—a second-class citizen.

Muslim Girls Fence is a partnership developed by Maslaha and British Fencing to challenge these ideas by enabling women to express themselves on their own terms, in private and, through art, in public. The project invites Muslim women to meet in a space where

they feel safe to discuss their unique and shared experience, and create art that speaks for them. In discussing the discriminations they face, participants begin to see the importance of their experiences in bringing about change.

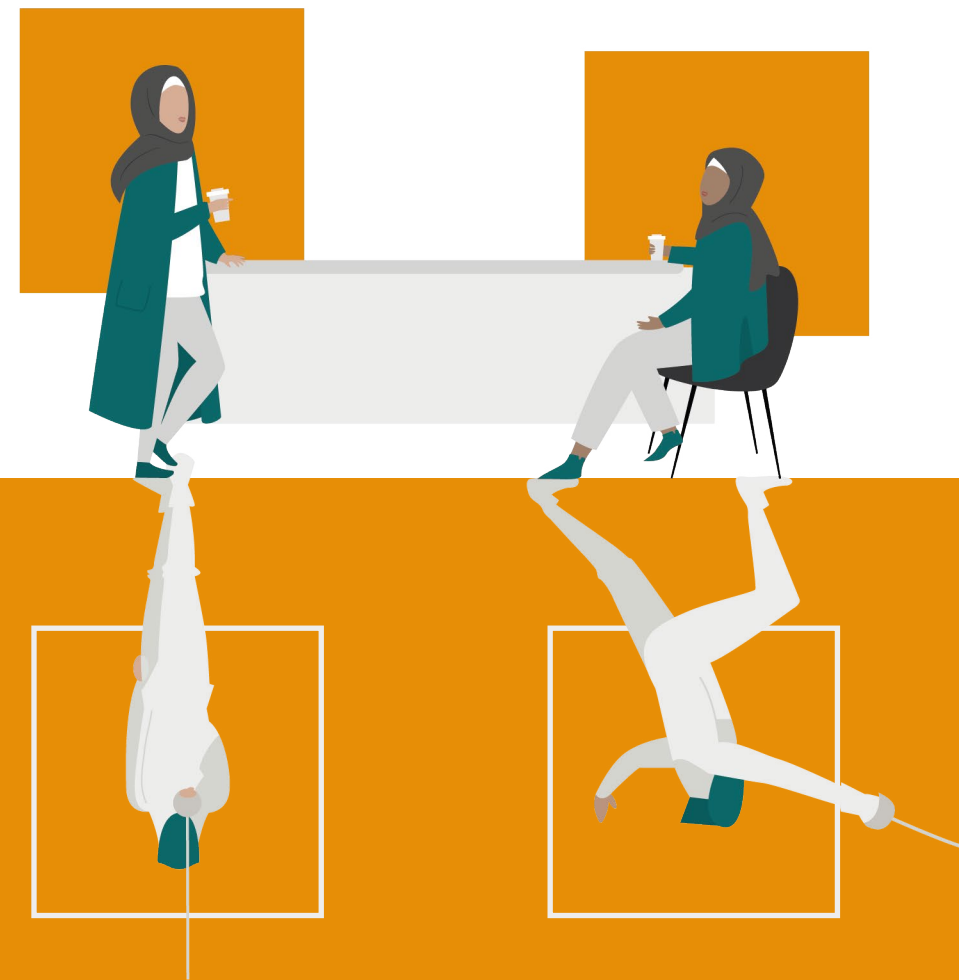
They gain a new sense of self-worth and of what is possible in creating more nuanced ideas of Muslim women and their needs in society and policy.

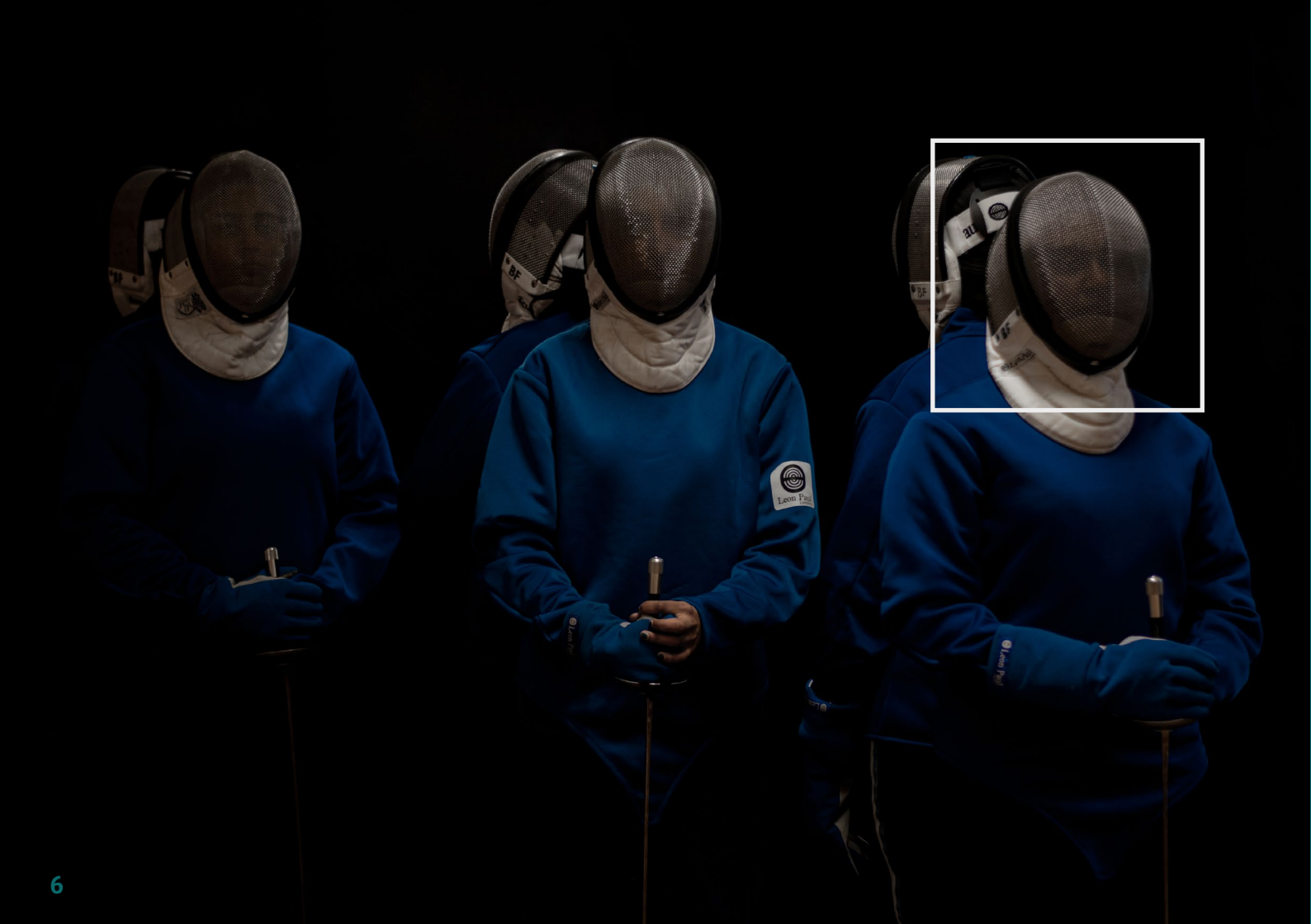
It does that while also introducing them to the ancient art of fencing, which Maslaha has found to be an effective way to build community, challenge expectations, exercise and have fun.

Muslim Girls Fence is complex. The project connects activities—sport, art and discussion—that are usually practiced separately. It is offered to Muslim women, but is also open to all women. Its list of objectives ranges from the concrete (increased levels of fitness and wellbeing) to the aspirational (changing perceptions in the mass media). All this is complex, but it works. It was the success of a pilot

schools project in Walthamstow, and subsequent ongoing work in schools in London and Birmingham since 2015, that encouraged Maslaha and British Fencing to develop the idea into a larger community programme.

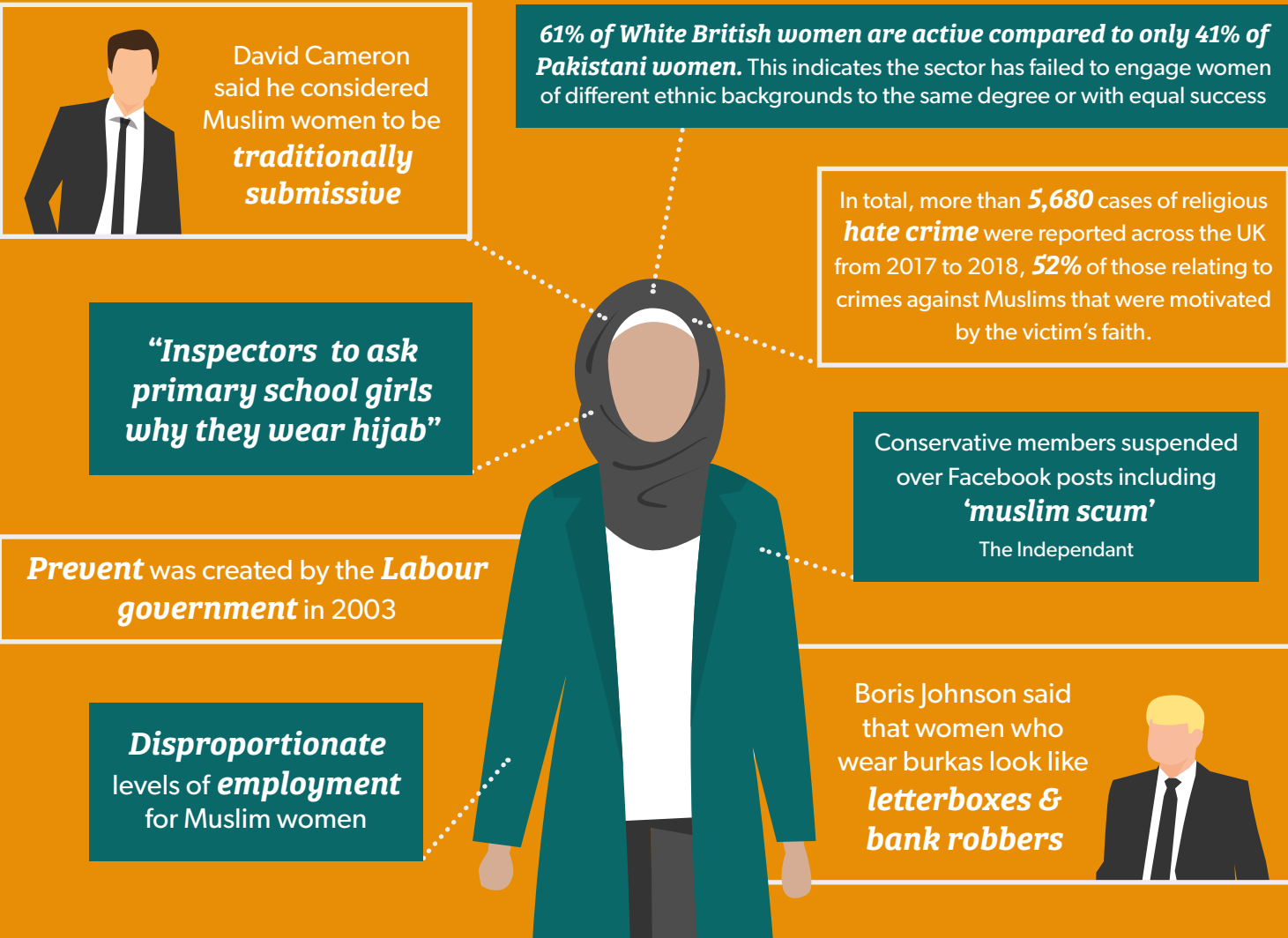
Supported by Comic Relief and the Mayor's Fund, Google and Sport England, the new programme is different in several ways. It is community-based, welcomes a wider age range, and places more focus on creative ways of opening discussion about the participants' lives. Two projects, in Tower Hamlets (London) and Digbeth (Birmingham), are complete. This report is a chance to pause, take stock and consider what is working (and why) and what might be improved (and how).





2

MUSLIM WOMEN + SOCIAL EXCLUSION



2.1

SOCIAL EXCLUSION OR SOCIAL INCLUSION?

In 1997, when the newly-elected Labour government established the Social Exclusion Unit, it introduced a novel concept to British policy. The SEU described social exclusion as:

A short-hand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environment, bad health and family breakdown.¹

Social exclusion is a valuable tool for understanding the structural and multi-dimensional factors in poverty and disadvantage. But the SEU's loose definition did little to recognise that those factors are neither natural nor inevitable. On the contrary, its statement that people 'suffer from [...] problems' suggests the focus on symptoms rather than causes that has long shaped attitudes to poverty in Britain. Today, the Social Exclusion Unit (which was absorbed into the Cabinet Office in 2006 before being abolished in 2010) looks like a missed opportunity

to rethink exclusion as something that exists not despite, but because of, policy decisions. Social exclusion has now disappeared from UK public discourse, perhaps because it does not provide an effective analysis of the weaknesses and unforeseen side-effects of public policy.

Emerging in France during the 1980s, the concept can be understood as an analysis of how policy that benefits most people can incidentally, often unintentionally, disadvantage others. The exclusion experienced by some minorities may

be a consequence of how majorities organise to meet their interests. With this understanding, social exclusion is better described as:

A social process within a whole society rather than a way of categorising individuals and groups within that society.²

A simple example of this is the use of steps to enable people to move between levels in buildings and public space. A convenient solution for most people,





2.1

SOCIAL EXCLUSION OR SOCIAL INCLUSION?

they literally exclude people with limited mobility, pushchairs or heavy luggage, among others. The provision of ramps, lifts and escalators, as required by the Equality Act 2010 (among others), is an example of social inclusion expressed in a policy response.

Legislation to increase the accessibility of buildings was relatively uncontroversial, but social exclusion can result from more contested political choices too. Radicalisation is an especially sensitive issue that illustrates how differently majority and minority groups can be affected by, and so perceive, the same policy. The Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 imposes a legal obligation on every public sector employee to look out for signs of radicalisation in their students, clients, patients and others to whom they provide services (the Prevent Duty).³ In practice, Muslims are much more likely to be referred under the Act,⁴ and many see it as stigmatising behaviours and traits that are culturally ordinary.⁵ As a result Muslim people can be anxious about interacting with their teacher or

nurse. Many feel monitored in everyday situations, unable to express opinions as others do. This produces forms of self-censorship, making people police their own behaviour in pursuit of security. Subsequently fewer Muslim voices are heard and there is less understanding of their lives. Regardless of the intention of the reporting measures currently in force, this is how they are felt by some of those they most affect. The Prevent Strategy is understood and experienced very differently by Muslims and non-Muslims.

In complex and diverse societies, such as Britain today, social exclusion can take many forms, with new instances emerging as unintended effects of an increasingly regulated and contested social sphere. Racism and Islamophobia, like sexism, are structural forms of exclusion which touch many people's lives, and have an intersecting imposition upon Muslim women specifically. They can be the result of the institutional racism described by Sir William Macpherson in his report on the investigation into murder of Stephen Lawrence:

The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.⁶

That definition was written in 1999; today it would recognise all protected characteristics of 2010 Equalities Act, including religion.⁷ Because of their race, religion and gender Muslim women are disadvantaged, wittingly or unwittingly, by social, economic, political and cultural institutions that fail—inadvertently perhaps—to provide appropriate services. Difficult as it is to identify or address all these processes, initiatives countering structural exclusion are a pragmatic response to everyday marginalisation. They can also produce narratives and cultural artefacts that can speak to the imagination of society as a whole.

MUSLIM GIRLS FENCE AS A SOCIAL INCLUSION INITIATIVE

Muslim Girls Fence is such a counter to social exclusion, aiming to change the conditions of injustice that many Muslim women experience. It was initiated in 2015 as a partnership between Maslaha and British Fencing, and took its inspiration from the achievements of Ibtihaj Muhammad, the first female Muslim-American athlete to win an Olympic medal.⁸ Muhammad, who won bronze in the Team Sabre at Rio, has spoken about how wearing the same kit as everyone else in the sport allowed her to feel truly part of the team for the first time.⁹ The physical, intellectual and creative demands of fencing have also proved attractive to women who do not feel engaged by other sports. Maslaha saw its potential to make a space for Muslim women to explore feelings about identity, representation and discrimination based on gender, race and faith in enjoyable, creative ways. By combining art, self-expression and fencing, they found a novel pathway to voicing their experience on their own terms.

The resulting project is innovative because it addresses complex issues, and seeks to do so at three interconnected levels: practice, policy and the public imagination. At its heart is the relatively low level of participation in community-based sports activity by Muslim women. That is often rationalised by resorting to unverified assumptions about their lives and interests. The reality is much more nuanced and concerns practical and intangible barriers to access, ranging from cost, timing, and location, to how the offer is marketed. These barriers do not affect Muslim women alone. There are reasons why people of colour and non-Muslim women might also feel that the local gym is 'not for them'. However, Muslim women face a particular combination of economic, social and other barriers to participation in community sport, none of which relate to being 'inactive', 'housebound' or 'not allowed'. It is worth adding that there are people in every culture and part of the world who passionately enjoy sport, and people whom it leaves entirely cold.

If a particular group is underrepresented in sport (or art, or education or law) the reasons should be sought in the factors that might exclude them, however unintentionally, not in the people themselves.

Even when they aim for social inclusion, practices in the sports sector frequently fail to reduce exclusion. In some cases, they still correspond to Macpherson's definition of institutional racism.



MUSLIM GIRLS FENCE AS A SOCIAL INCLUSION INITIATIVE

Initiatives developed as ‘sport for women’ or ‘sport for girls’ unconsciously model their offer on the figure of a white, non-religious, woman, overlooking other needs and experiences. When they do try to address the needs of Muslim girls and women, projects regularly misinterpret their target audience. Seeing ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ as barriers to participation, they focus unduly on self-belief, ambition and confidence. Such simplifications place the responsibility on Muslim women to change and do little to remove the actual barriers to participation that they face. Indeed, they sometimes reinforce harmful stereotypes about Muslim women’s attitudes and lifestyles. This is how social exclusion can happen, even with the best of intentions.

In contrast, Muslim Girls Fence starts by listening to what women say about the barriers that prevent them from participating in sport, which include the venue, facilities and timetable, as well

as social conventions. By working with local partners, it identifies spaces that are accessible, can accommodate prayer and offer women-only facilities: that may not be a sports venue. It challenges the assumption—common in and beyond the sports sector—that integration is simply a matter of social mixing. Rather, as participants have told Maslaha, it is a complex process influenced by issues as varied as gentrification, lack of free, accessible community spaces, and hostile media representation. Muslim Girls Fence does not have, or still less claim to have, all the answers to these problems. But because listening to Muslim women is at the heart of its process, it is able both to include them in exciting sport and arts activity and question some of the limiting assumptions common in the sports and public sectors. The programme aims to open up pathways towards full inclusion of women in sport, without underestimating the very real challenges that presents.

In creating a safe, welcoming space where Muslim women can enjoy sport

on their own terms, and share ideas and experiences creatively, Muslim Girls Fence works against structural social exclusion. It creates opportunities that the women find rewarding and strengthening, and creates a model with valuable lessons for sports organisations and public policy. If the effect on what Maslaha calls the public imagination is difficult to quantify, it is reasonable to believe that the images and stories that come from the project enrich discourse about the place of Muslim women in Britain today and makes their image more complex, nuanced and accurate.





3

MUSLIM GIRLS FENCE COMMUNITY PROJECTS

3.1 FROM SCHOOLS TO COMMUNITY

Muslim Girls Fence began in 2016 with schools sessions in Walthamstow. From the start, it has been a partnership between Maslaha and British Fencing. Both organisations saw it as a way to challenge stereotypes and build pathways to inclusion by combining an introduction to fencing with creative work about identity, racism and self-image. The pilot sessions were successful and led to longer schools programmes in London and Birmingham. Students appreciated the project's opportunities, and feedback was very positive: as one of the participants explained:

'Fencing is a very technical sport. You have to be aware of where your feet are facing, how far apart they are, your posture. It gives me power. It makes me feel like I have strength, and I am powerful and I am strong and resilient.'¹⁰

Both Maslaha and British Fencing wanted to build on the experience, and funding was secured from Comic Relief, Sports England and Google to take the idea out into the community, with projects in London and Birmingham in 2019 and 2020.



3.2 MUSLIM GIRLS FENCE BIRMINGHAM

The Birmingham Muslim Girls Fence project took place on Monday evenings from February to April 2019 at Impact Hub, in Digbeth. Fourteen women took part, of whom half came to most or all the sessions. Of those who dropped out, some decided that it wasn't for them, while others had difficulties freeing themselves from domestic, work or education commitments. All the women described their ethnicity as Asian, mixed or other. It was a relatively young group, with only four women over 24 years old. One mother and daughter came together but mostly the group did not know each other before the project.

The project was led by Alaa Alsaraji with Robina Begum as fencing coach. Sarah Ali was chosen as the artist to work on helping the women create photographic self-portraits in fencing gear and in whatever other style they wished. In the early workshops the group explored ideas about representation, community and belonging through discussion and art activities such as collage, drawing and photography. In weeks 5, 6 and 7, the

focus moved on to self-representation and telling a story through a photograph. The women began writing personal narratives and poetry. In weeks 8, 9 and 10, off-site photoshoots were arranged with smaller groups, and in the last week, after a break at Easter, there was a photoshoot of the women in fencing kit.

In August 2019, the photo portraits from the Birmingham Muslim Girls Fence project were exhibited at Centrala under the title *Can You See Me?* Alongside the self-portraits, which vary widely in

tone and style, were photographs of the women fencing and personal texts written by the participants. The exhibition was presented at a celebration event on 15 August; it was then open to the public for two weeks. It is being exhibited in a local leisure centre, and formally gifted to the City of Birmingham.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY SARAH ALI



Can You See Me?

Persistent negative media stereotyping, combined with counter-extremism policies that are operating to stigmatize young Muslims, mean that more than ever Muslim women find themselves spoken for as opposed to spoken to. This exhibition aims to reinstate Muslim women as their own storytellers, and to open up a space for Muslim women and women of colour to articulate and express their identity on their own terms. In a climate where public imagination around Muslim women is being ever constricted and manipulated, this exhibition is an opportunity to reclaim a narrative and tell honest stories focused on aspiration, creativity and very real lived experiences.

'Can You See Me?' is an exhibition by Muslim Girls Fence Birmingham, in partnership with Impact Hub Birmingham and Youths2Legends. As part of the project we held a series of creative workshops with Muslim women and women of colour, exploring issues around identity, representation and misrepresentation of Muslim women in society. The result of these conversations is a photo series, created in collaboration with photographer Sarah Ali, which involves a series of 'self-portraits' curated by the participants themselves. By sharing their experiences of being a Muslim woman/woman of colour in the UK today, they challenge reductive narratives and the overwhelmingly negative image of Muslim women reinforced in mainstream media.

Ahlaam Moledina
Instagram @ahlaa.m



Whole

Women of colour are not the one-dimensional supporting characters that we are portrayed to be. We do not exist simply on the sidelines and in peripheries. We are whole and within our resistance, there is humanness. There is sisterhood, and curiosity, and adventure. There is more than what we're limited to.

Aliyah Qazim
Instagram @aliyahsbakes



Liberated By My Standards

There is a binary regarding Muslim women and the view of them in the media and society. She is either the stereotype of being oppressed, submissive and domesticated OR she is the absolute opposite, 'liberated' by western standards. This image represents who I am; a young Muslim who has chosen to wear her hijab, who embraces her rich, ethnic heritage and who likes being in the kitchen. You may choose to judge me and categorise me as a 'stereotypical' Muslim woman, but I'm not an object that can be judged at first glance and be labelled instantly. I'm my own person with my own preferences and desires. In labelling and stereotyping, you're stripping a person of their identity, dehumanising them to nothing but an object stacked on a supermarket shelf, right next to the spilled bag of plain flour...

Simran Lalli
@simranjaya



There Is No Such Thing As Fixed Identity

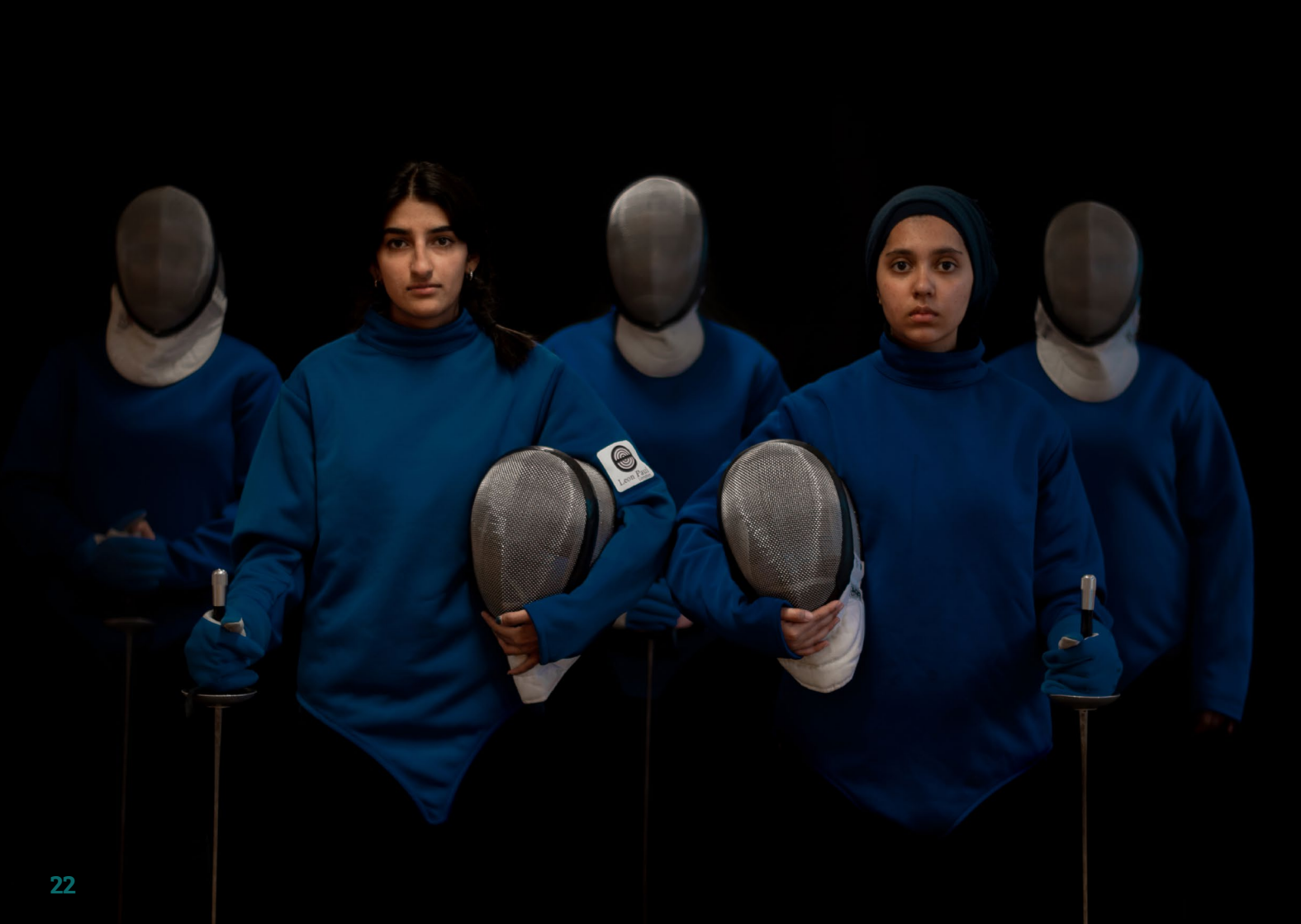
I grew up in a predominantly white area. As a young child it did not bother me, I cared about what all children care about, playing, laughing, the structures of our society unbeknownst to me. When I was 9 I felt self-conscious about my arm hair. I asked a friend on the play ground if she could see it. 'Yes' she said with child-like honesty. At 10 a girl at a party yelled 'Paki!' at me. I did not fully know what it meant but it made me uncontrollably

angry and I slapped her across the face. As I grew older I was constantly met with questions to constantly remind me that my race factored into people's perception of me 'But where are you REALLY from?' and 'Has your marriage already been arranged?'. It was tiring. I tried desperately to subvert these perceptions but in doing so turned my back on parts of my identity. Like a lot

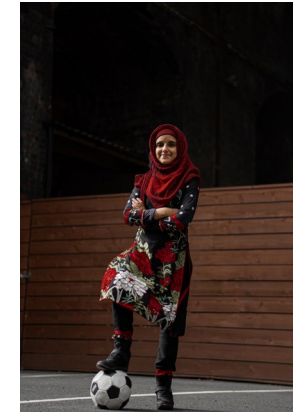
of immigrants I felt like I was stuck between two clashing worlds.

But with time I have come to realise that for me Indian and British culture do not clash but coexist, intertwine to form me I do not have to pick and choose and discard traits to prove my Britishness or my Asianess or my femininity or intelligence.

Our cultures and experiences are in constant flux so no one can define them for you - truly understanding this has been the best gift to myself.



Amber Mahmood



Sanna Ali
Instagram @apaali



Can You See Me?

What do you first see?
Me or my hijab?
The colour of my skin,
Or the shades of my
clothes?

What do you see next?
The game that I play,
Or the player behind the
game?

Do you see me for me,
Or do you choose what you
Want to see?

What do you see?
A brownie, a lightie, or just
another...
p***

Do you see me for me?
Another human being who
laughs at comedy,
Celebrates every victory,
Cries when someone close
dies,

Or just another person who
Smiles at the beautiful sky?

Embracing Skins

They shed, one by one.
Leaf after leaf. Turn after
turn.
Sheared and plucked, on
after the other.
Until it was enough.

It was time.
To grow.
As we wanted.
Flourish,
as we wanted.

Bloom,
as we wanted.

So we are donning
and wrapping our
ethnicities,
painting and
embracing our
identities,
wearing our hearts
onto our sleeves.
Standing strong.

Standing tall.
To stand out.
Not to blend
in.
Not to
camouflage.

To grow anew,
Whilst
strengthening
our roots.
Embracing our
roots.
Grounded and
Rooted.
Embracing our
roots.

The second Muslim Girls Fence community project began two weeks after the Birmingham one and followed a similar pattern, with weekly sessions at Brady Arts and Community Centre in Tower Hamlets. It was specifically advertised to women over 16 'from all backgrounds' and that might explain the more diverse response: four of the 13 women who took part identified as White English, one as Mixed and one as Black African. The pattern of attendance was similar to Birmingham, with about half the women being very committed, a few dropping out and others struggling to make every session. The demands of families and work, while central to their lives, meant that they often had little time or choice about doing things for themselves. Living on a low income is itself a powerful factor in social exclusion.

The Tower Hamlets sessions were facilitated by Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, for Maslaha, with Mercedes Baptise Halliday as coach. The artist was Isabel Castro Jung. Like Sarah Ali, she came to several sessions once the project was



underway, working with the group on creation of The Lovecoat a collective garment to be worn by several people at the same time.

The sessions began with discussion and creative activities, followed by fencing, and ending with a period of winding down and reflection. They covered similar topics as in Birmingham: self-image and the nature of stereotypes, perceptions of Islam and Muslim women, and the representation of Tower Hamlets as a diverse community. The theme of community—how it is imagined, expressed and nurtured—ran through the workshops and was made tangible in The Lovecoat. A patchwork of textile self-portraits, it symbolised the individual within the community. The women enjoyed discovering fencing, with its skill and physical activity. It challenged everyone's expectations, not only of Muslim women, but also of their ideas of the sport and its social profile.

In June 2019, the Muslim Girls Fence group presented their work with films, spoken

word performances and discussions at Rich Mix, under the title Who Defines Tower Hamlets? The event was enriched by films, spoken word performances and discussions around the question. The Lovecoat was exhibited, along with paintings and writing produced during the sessions, and visitors were invited to contribute to the display.

Who defines Tower Hamlets?





4

OUTCOMES AT GRASSROOTS LEVEL

4.1 FENCING + PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

It is reasonable to expect a Muslim Girls Fence course to have positive results for the participants because the ethos of the project is educational and collaborative. The nature of the sessions was reflective and women were encouraged throughout to share their ideas and feelings (including about the activities). There is, therefore, a substantial body of documentation recording what the women who take part felt about a range of issues.

Muslim Girls Fence has succeeded in engaging women in fencing, as well as giving them the confidence to try other sports and physical activity. Several had come specifically to learn about it and, having enjoyed the experience, said they would like to continue the sport afterwards. Not everyone enjoyed the sessions, though, and some women decided that fencing was not for them. But those who stayed with the course did enjoy the physical activity.

'It's the one thing that gets us through Monday – we're like, we're gonna go fencing on Monday!'

Fencing was fun but difficult, providing moments of bonding as the women grappled with its demands. They liked the sense of progression as they improved and the sport's competitive side. Aware of fencing's image as an elite sport, they enjoyed proving to themselves and others that fencing could be for anyone. They valued learning as a group, and practicing sport with women who were becoming friends. Fencing provided a reason to meet and a framework for other conversations.



4.2 DISCUSSIONS + SAFE SPACES

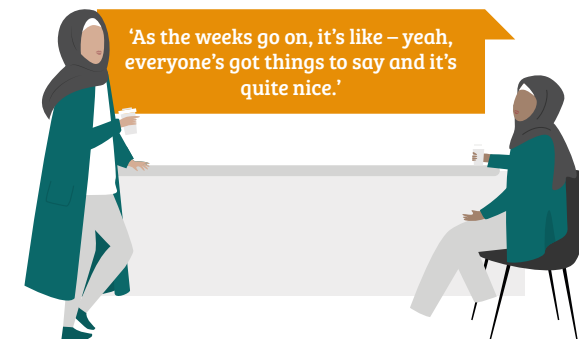
"I have never felt so safe to speak what I think"

The discussions provided a different kind of challenge. As already touched on, Muslim women are often wary of expressing their opinions in the current context, so one of the project's aims is to provide a safe space where participants can explore their ideas. The term 'safe space' has become a trigger for contemporary socio-political divisions. Some people see the idea as emblematic of unwillingness to engage in robust debate. But your idea of what constitutes robust debate and what is threatening may be very different if you feel that others do not accept you as a person. It is one thing to have your arguments rebutted and quite another to feel they are rejected because it is you who is making them.

The instances mentioned in the Foreword, mentioned by Muslim Girls Fence participants, show how unthinkingly a person's experience, knowledge and even identity can be ignored as having no value. It is not easy to talk about how racism affects you to someone who has no experience of it, and who may feel defensive if you raise the subject. When your faith is entangled with divisive political issues, how do you know when it is safe to talk about it? These difficulties are so deep, so internalised for many people, that even in the sessions it took time to build trust.

'When we had the first lesson it was a bit like – what do we discuss? That whole idea was a bit weird – well, not weird, but you're not used to that idea of sitting round in a circle and talking about Tower Hamlets.'

It is easy to sympathise with this woman, unused to a discussion that might have seemed intellectual and political about the place where she lived. Not everyone has the confidence or the practice in debate that others take for granted, and the point of Muslim Girls Fence is to help some of those who don't, to acquire it. Gradually, even those who'd come to do sport, valued the process of talking:



All the women valued having a safe space in which to share opinions, feelings and stories on their own terms. Despite the media image that Muslim women live separate lives, the participants spoke of rarely being in a group without white people, and so having few opportunities to discuss their experiences as women of colour without having to explain or defend themselves.

'I love the space, the safe space, I feel free and comfortable to talk about anything.'

'The opening of a safe space for women of colour is incredibly needed.'

'The discussions that we have felt like a safe environment to share our feelings.'



4.3

CONFRONTING RACISM + ISLAMOPHOBIA

'You don't get spaces like this where you can discuss the sorts of things we discuss here.'

Participants spoke of the pressure to conform to someone else's idea of what a Muslim woman should be. Although that idea may be ill-informed and inarticulate, the person expressing it takes it to be true because, as a member of the dominant majority, they assume their opinion to be superior to that of someone from the oppressed minority, even when it is an opinion about the other person. It is exhausting to live with the pressure to meet other people's misplaced expectations and some participants spoke of preferring to be in groups or spaces where they are in the majority. In pushing Muslim women out of public spaces, prejudice can undermine the very 'integration' it demands of them.

Participants also spoke of feeling trapped into a single identity by other people's expectations and language. The importance of religious or gender identity may vary from person to person and over time. But there are other important aspects of identity too, including culture, home, occupation, education, class, wealth and tastes. If these are dismissed, people's diversity is unrecognised and their actions easily misinterpreted. When policy-makers see only one aspect of people's identity, they can make far-reaching errors that prevent their objectives from being realised. One participant spoke about feeling that young Muslim women are seen as having no aspirations or even an autonomous future. She used the phrase 'dreamless youth' to describe this fantasy, but suggested that it was so insidious that it ended up being fulfilled as those it targeted internalised its values.

In Birmingham, there was discussion around the city being called a 'no-go zone' in the media. The label was seen by participants as a way of Othering an entire city, excluding it from the nation as a whole, whilst prioritising the comfort of white, middle-class people who might assume that Birmingham was hostile if they were not part of an ethnic majority. The media would not describe the V&A Museum as a no-go zone, but Muslim Girls Fence participants spoke of feeling excluded by such institutions, where class and racial signals would make them stand out because of their clothes, accents, interests etc. The invisibility of such forms of exclusion is another example of how the safety and priorities of Muslim women are marginalised in public discourse.

'I feel that by not speaking about the community I'm living in I wasn't really able to experience the full understanding of how much I've grown into my area – and by talking about it I'm actually reflecting on what I've achieved and how I can make the community better and I can take so much information back and give it back to my community.'

Creative activity was central to the process, easing conversation and enabling other forms of expression. The projects succeeded partly because participants enjoyed themselves, whether they were fencing, talking or making art. It was easier to talk about fear or anger while painting or gluing something. Difficult issues can be brought up in an oblique way, and feelings that people can't or don't want to put into words can be expressed visually. Art can also circumvent rational thought, so that people find themselves expressing ideas they didn't know they had until they see them emerging from their work. Most of the women enjoyed the creative activities, and some found a renewed interest in art.

'The art sessions reminded me of my love for art, so I'm actually seriously considering some regular art lessons.'

Producing work for public display was another step into being heard, which the participants valued greatly. The self-portraits and texts produced in Birmingham were especially strong in this



respect because the idea and media were approachable, but the symbolism of The Lovecoat as a statement of community was also evocative.





'It's so much easier to go to a group session if you've got a friend or a sister or somebody, but turning up on your own and, you know, making an effort with other people [...] you know, it's a learning curve...'

'Just a group of people coming together, you know, with nothing in common [...] that's daunting, isn't it? You know, meeting – and then realising that we have lots of things in common and passion for your community, the place you live in.'

4.5

BUILDING COMMUNITY

The project also sought to unpack the common assumption that, as Muslim women, the participants would have a lot in common: no one would expect a group of Christian women to have the same tastes, interests, values and life experience simply because they follow the same religion. The participants (mostly) had faith in common, but otherwise they differed in all the ways that people do, and for many coming to the sessions alone took them out of their comfort zone.

As the project progressed, a core group of eight to ten women began to establish a sense of friendship and community, just as the process intended. They kept in touch through social media outside the sessions, and one woman said it 'feels like family now'. Their social networks have expanded in other ways too. One of the Birmingham participants shared her love of baking in the creative tasks, and since the end of the project she has run baking workshops with Impact Hub and catered for the exhibition at Centrala.



There have been other indications of how much participants feel they have changed through the experience. One woman said that she felt better able to 'speak to my children with confidence', while another spoke of being much more confident to engage with and enjoy sport. Several said that their view of the community and wider society had developed. Some had new interest in their relatives' early lives and experiences of migration. Others were engaged with how things might be improved in the local area,

'One thing I will take away from the project is that my experiences are not invalid or unrelated'

'It's sort of made me realise that I need to focus a lot more on myself and my needs, and not just everybody else's at home.'

How far these changes in self-image, confidence and activity levels are sustained beyond the completion of the course remains to be seen. The current model could be developed in its next iterations to help support the progress made during the course.

'Honestly joining MGF at Impact Hub has helped me so much. My confidence in sport has increased massively, I have amazing new friends and I have so much support, love and opportunities that I could never imagine.'





5

INFLUENCING POLICY + THE PUBLIC IMAGINATION

Through grassroots projects, Maslaha aims to influence policy in areas that particularly concern Muslim people. In addition to the outcomes for participants, Maslaha wanted to explore what wider impact a project like Muslim Girls Fence could have. The team identified several different ways in which the work might do this, that fall into three broad areas:

- **Transforming the sports sector through more complex understanding of the barriers Muslim women face in accessing sport;**
- **Supporting Muslim women to participate or collaborate in other projects that impact their communities or wellbeing locally and nationally;**
- **Challenging public discourse about the lives, values and contribution of Muslim women in Britain.**

These are large, complex aspirations that are advanced by taking the experience of projects into discussions with policymakers and, as discussed in the next section, by making artwork that can nourish the public

imagination. But they are not as separate as they might at first appear. In practice, it is often when projects such as Muslim Girls Fence catch the public imagination that policy makers turn to Maslaha for advice.

Maslaha's partnership with British Fencing on this project has enabled both organisations to develop a fruitful dialogue about reaching out to Muslim communities and the broader issue of sport and social change. This has contributed to the adoption, by British Fencing in 2018, of a new strategic objective to accommodate the social impact of projects such as Muslim Girls Fence. Now included in the organisation's strategy is the objective:

Maximise the wider benefits of fencing and the positive impact it can have on people's lives.¹¹

This focus on the wider value of fencing is a significant move towards an ethos of social inclusion. It is particularly notable in an organisation with targets for participation linked to funding from Sport England. The partnership between Maslaha and British Fencing makes it possible to identify the influence that Muslim Girls Fence has had on the sport's governing body's thinking about its work.

The project is also a showcase of new ways of working towards social inclusion in sport. Maslaha and British Fencing have been invited to speak at events supported by the Mayor of London, Comic Relief and Beyond Sport, disrupting simplistic understandings of topics such as 'social integration' and 'inactive communities'. As a result the organisation has a platform to question existing models and the assumptions that underlie them, with evidence-based knowledge drawn from its projects. Maslaha argues that it is vital to address the increasing pressures faced by Muslim women as a result of cuts to public services, racism, discrimination and social exclusion, pressures that contribute

to mental health problems and cannot be resolved by community projects and sports programmes, however good.

In other words, the barriers that prevent Muslim women from enjoying sport are not merely the kind that can be removed through 'outreach' and community programmes. Instead of 'categorising individuals and groups', policy-makers need to consider how their decisions and plans lead to the social exclusion of minority groups, including Muslim women.

There is clearly still a long way to go, but projects like Muslim Girls Fence are valuable in demonstrating both the complexity of the problems and how progress can be made towards solving them.



5.2

THE PUBLIC IMAGINATION

The third strand of Maslaha's work is seeking to influence and shape public debates and media narratives about Muslim communities. Perceptions of Islam are a critical dimension of contemporary public life and policy, influencing decisions in international relations, war, security, migration and much else. For millions of Muslim people living in majority non-Muslim countries, that is felt in everyday life—in whether they get a job or a promotion, in discriminatory treatment by service providers, in micro-

aggressions from strangers or colleagues, in being constantly reminded that they are not seen in the same way as their white, non-Muslim neighbours. One of the goals of Muslim Girls Fence is to give participants space to share their experience of this, and to question how they, their communities and their cultures are depicted in media narratives. The gendered nature of racism and Islamophobia means that women are disproportionately affected by such discrimination and its resulting exclusion.

Maslaha sees art as an important way of opening new vistas on these issues because it offers an alternative reference and point of view that is unapologetic about being complex, while sparking an imaginative and emotional response that is often missing in public discourse. At the outset, that can be down with the three words 'Muslim Girls Fence'. This intriguing proposition immediately challenges assumptions and invites questions.



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The idea has attracted the interest of mainstream television like the One Show and Blue Peter, allowing Maslaha to present new, more complex ideas about Muslim women to mass audiences. It has reached media outlets as different as Al-Jazeera and The Daily Telegraph, and been invited to give evidence to the House of Commons Women's and Equalities Select Committee as a result.

The events, exhibitions and artworks also communicate new ideas. The images of Muslim women produced in Birmingham are a striking counterweight to the generic photographs repetitively published in the press. It is reasonable to believe that the self-portraits created by participants in the Birmingham project contribute to challenging the dominant and largely negative stereotypes of Muslim women. These photographs show multifaceted and complex women challenging prevailing biases and reductive representations of their lives through telling their own stories on their own terms. The accompanying texts are even more overtly challenging

to the conventional image of Muslim women. By giving the participants the time, resources and skills to create these complex, beautiful self-portraits, and ensuring that they are seen and shared in a public space such as a gallery, Maslaha is adding material to the other side of the scales. Sport England representatives are now supporting a tour of the photo exhibition.



The artworks produced during the two community projects exist as an act of speech in the world. They have been seen by gallery visitors in London and Birmingham, and the ripples are likely to continue spreading for months, even years to come. The effect on the ideas, feelings and opinions of those who see it cannot realistically be assessed, but it may nonetheless be profound.





6 CONCLUSION



6.1

AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH



‘A couple of years ago, I wasn’t as proud or as confident or as secure in what I believe in. Now I can stand up for what I believe in, and I can say why I believe in it.’

People experience social exclusion when policies that may effectively meet the needs and interests of most people produce unforeseen outcomes for people whose lives are different. It affects large numbers of people but, because it affects them differently, it is often unnoticed or ignored. Muslim women living in Britain face particular difficulties when their needs are not understood or taken into account by policymakers. Realistically, no one can foresee every possible consequence of public policy, which is why consultation and dialogue are such important safeguards. So are projects that actively promote social inclusion, partly for the benefit they bring to individual participants and communities, but also because they help highlight the structural racism and

Islamophobia that create barriers to full, free and equal participation.

Positive change requires us all to see the tangles that constrain us and our fellow-citizens, and work together to loosen the knots strand by strand. Muslim Girls Fence seeks to contribute to that process, to be another pair of hands working to free us. And it is correct to say ‘us’ because non-Muslims are also ensnared in the attitudes and policies that affect Muslim women so negatively. The anxiety, even fear, that the presence of others can produce is a constraint too.

There is nothing neat or obvious about linking a niche sport with contemporary art, and inviting a particular section of the community to use the activity as a way to explore and share sensitive issues about

identity, representation, ideology and justice. No one would invent the Muslim Girls Fence model from a blank piece of paper. But it has evolved over several years in partnership between Maslaha, British Fencing and others because it has shown itself to be an effective way of opening up the tight knot of issues faced by Muslim women living in Britain today. There are others, but the lesson of this experience is, above all, that simplistic ones do not work. Central to the problems Muslim women face is the naive nature of the policies that are supposed to enable their inclusion.

6.2 PROOF OF CONCEPT

The Maslaha and British Fencing team behind the two pilot Muslim Girls Fence community projects deserve all credit for the innovative idea and its exemplary execution. Both projects were well conceived, planned and delivered, and the appreciation of the participating women is testament to how valuable they found the experience. The concept behind Muslim Girls Fence can now be considered to have been well tested and its validity to be established. The innovative, experimental nature of the pilots meant that it was important to do this rigorously, and both were exhaustively documented at every stage. Indeed, without such thorough record-keeping, an external report such as this would have been impossible. However, the cost of such intensive evaluation is substantial in staff time and financial resources. It need not be repeated with every iteration of the project. Muslim Girls Fence is a very effective programme, and the team's focus should now move to building a lighter-touch evaluation process that ensures future learning can shape how the project develops without being burdensome.





6.3

THE FUTURE

There can be no doubt that Muslim women face specific and complex barriers that contribute to their experience of social exclusion. They arise as the consequences of historical and political choices and processes which, even where they do not directly concern Muslim women, discriminate against them through 'prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping'—in Macpherson's words—which target and disadvantage them, as well as from actions, such as the public speech of politicians and commentators, that often directly concerns and condemns Muslim women. Barriers also arise from social, economic and political aspects of their lives, over which they may have varying degrees of control. If the causes are varied, the outcome is much less so. It is that many women lead constrained lives with fewer choices and opportunities than are enjoyed by other citizens. Can a small project, such as Muslim Girls Fence, possibly change this?

Clearly, there is a huge imbalance between the multiple factors of social

exclusion and local initiatives such as those which Maslaha is able to support. Nonetheless, the two Muslim Girls Fence pilot projects described here show that this approach is not only a valuable route towards social inclusion for the participants, but also highlights the barriers and roots of exclusion in the first place. It adopts a multidimensional response to a multidimensional problem. Muslim Girls Fence achieves several things at once:

- **It engages women who are underrepresented in the cultural life of the community;**
- **It creates safe spaces in which women can collectively explore their experiences of racism, Islamophobia, misogyny and their local area, as well as their identity, creativity, opinions, problems and hopes;**
- **It makes physical activity accessible to women who may not be attracted by existing community sports opportunities and programmes;**

- **It gives participants the means to build skills and social networks, and so enhance their confidence;**

- **It creates artistic work that broadens and enriches the representation of Muslim women and women of colour on their own terms in public space.**

The result of this interlinked process is to open new routes to social inclusion for the women who take part. The lasting outcomes cannot be predicted because they depend largely on the wishes and situations of individual women and because the numbers who participated in the project are too small to identify patterns. But the evidence of the pilot projects show that positive results can be expected for those who complete the course.

There have been some difficulties and disappointments too, mainly with attendance and maintaining contact; they could be anticipated in an experimental project such as this. One response would be to develop Muslim Girls Fence

as a programme rather than a one-off project. Maslaha is now exploring ways of developing the model as established course or club in certain areas. This is not an unrealistic goal: after all, much sport and arts activity happens on just this kind of year-round basis. But it would require financial commitment from enlightened backers.



6.4

A LAST WORD

There is nothing obvious about Muslim Girls Fence. Perhaps that is one of its strengths: its unexpectedness makes those who encounter the project set aside expectations and assumptions. It is complicated, and it works because Muslim women's lives are complicated too, especially here, in Britain, in the early 21st century. But at the heart of this complicated project, Muslim Girls Fence, is a profoundly simple idea: listening to each other is the beginning of everything. Through the discipline of fencing, the creativity of art and the politics of discussion, there is a safe space in which women can meet, speak and simply be themselves. Their only obligations are to each other, and they arise, freely accepted, from solidarity and community.





A NOTE ON THE REPORT

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¹ Quoted in Jehoel-Gijsbers. G., and Vrooman, C., 2007, *Explaining Social Exclusion, A theoretical model tested in the Netherlands*, The Netherlands Institute for Social Research/SCP, The Hague, p.11

² Madanipour, Ali, Cars, Goran & Allen, Judith (1998) *Social Exclusion in European Cities: Processes, Experiences and Responses*, London; p. 11

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance/revised-prevent-duty-guidance-for-england-and-wales>

⁴ 'In 2017/18, of the 7,318 individuals referred, 3,197 (44%) were referred for concerns related to Islamist extremism and 1,312 (18%) were referred for concerns related right wing extremism' Home Office, 2018, *Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, April 2017 to March 2018*, Statistical bulletin 31/18, p. 4. (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/763254/individuals-referred-supported-prevent-programme-apr2017-mar2018-hosb3118.pdf)

⁵ 'The phrase 'culturally ordinary' is used here in the sense suggested by Raymond Williams in his essay, 'Culture is Ordinary'. see Williams, R., 1989, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy Socialism*, London

⁶ The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, Report of an Inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny, February 1999, Para. 6.34; see https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/277111/4262.pdf

⁷ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/equality-act/protected-characteristics>

⁸ <https://www.ibtihajmuhammad.com>

⁹ http://www.muslimgirls_fence.org/about.html

¹⁰ Throughout this report, quotes in orange are taken from the words of participants in Muslim Girls Fence.

¹¹ <https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2020-01/sport-for-all.pdf?6Lj9XFHhwVzcv7GBSPeRZHS2hvjIU6d>



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