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MUSLIM GIRLS' EXPERIENCES IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN NORWAY

-WHAT ROLE DOES RELIGIOSITY PLAY?

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Abstract

Recent years have seen an increase in scholarly attention to minority pupils and their experience of physical education. UK research identifies specific challenges related to Muslim pupils' participation in PE. In Norway, little research has been undertaken on Muslim pupils' experiences in PE, something this paper hopes to redress in part. In particular, it addresses the role and significance of religiosity to their experience of PE. The work is positioned within third wave feminism; as such it aims to be sensitive to issues of cultural and religious diversity.

The study is based on life-history interviews with 21 Muslim girls aged between 16 and 25. All the girls had attended physical education lessons at school, mostly in mixed gender classes, but with some gender segregated PE as well. In terms of religious affiliation, the girls describe themselves as Muslim, though their degree of religiosity varies. Five wear the hijab.

The general picture drawn by the data shows that the Muslim girls enjoy their PE lessons and the majority preferred gender mixed physical education. Religiosity seems to have little influence on Muslim girls' experience of PE, with the exception of swimming lessons and showering facilities. We can understand the objections of some of the girls to gender mixed PE by looking at the dominance of the male gender, and as such, their experiences are similar to those of non-Muslim girls. However, objections to gender mixed swimming classes are best explained by the girls' gendered religious identities and embodied faith. In term of intersectionality, the study shows that different categories dominate in different PE contexts. As such, what Muslim girls make of PE is not always dictated by religiosity.

Key words

Physical Education, Muslim girls, religiosity, gender, intersectionality, third wave feminism.

Introduction

Recent years have seen an increase in scholarly attention to minority pupils and their experience of physical education (PE) (Zaman, 1997; Benn, Dagkas, & Jawad, 2011; Dagkas, Benn & Jawad, 2011; Farooq & Parker, 2009). UK research identifies specific challenges related to Muslim pupils' participation in PE. Many conflicts between PE teachers and pupils have centred on issues related to religion such as clothing, religious festivals such as Ramadan, dress codes, swimming, diets and fasting, and parents' attitudes to extra-curricular PE (Green, 2008).

In Norway, little research has been undertaken on Muslim pupils' experiences in PE, something this paper hopes to redress in part. In particular, it addresses the role and significance of religiosity¹ to their experience of PE.

Religiosity among Muslims in Norway

While Norway until recently (May 2012) had an established state Church, a Lutheran Protestant denomination, the country is essentially secular. Most areas of public life (law, politics, media) as well as informal social interaction unfold without reference to religious faith, values or affiliation (Østberg, 2003). It is against this background religiosity among Muslims in Norway must be understood.

Despite an increasing, but still small number of converts, Islam is first and foremost understood as an immigrant religion in Norway. The first wave of Muslim immigrants (Pakistanis) arrived in Norway in the late 1960s. The first mosque in Norway opened in 1974 serving Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds, even though the immigrant population at the time was predominantly Pakistani. Today, Muslims can choose to worship at several different mosques, each serving the different branches of Islam or denominations. The exact number of Muslims in Norway is difficult to calculate, but is estimated to be between 100 000 (official membership figures provided by Islamic organizations) and 185 000 (number of immigrants from Muslim countries)(Østby, 2011). The mosques in Oslo are mainly organized along national, ethnic and language lines, as well as theological and political ones. Most of the Muslims in Norway are *Sunni* (80%) (Vogt, 2008), with only 7 out of 37 Muslim organizations in Oslo serving the *Shia* community (Sanden, 2010). The main dividing line

between the *Sunnis* goes between the Deobandi Muslims and Barelvi Muslims; of the two, the latter, a Sufi-oriented group, is the largest (Vogt, 2008).

While religiosity among the older generations tends to follow ethnic identity and sense of belonging, the younger generation of Muslims are more likely to foster a more trans-ethnic identity and have their own trans-ethnic youth organizations such as Muslim Youth Norway and Muslim Student Society. The degree of religiosity among Muslim youth in Norway is an under researched area. Studies conducted for a TV channel in 2006 found that 18% reported visiting the mosque once a week. A similar study in 2007 reported that 36% of Muslim youth visit the mosque less than once a month (Leirvik, 2010).

The Norwegian Physical Education context

PE has been a compulsory subject in Norwegian schools since 1936. The curriculum has changed over the years, and was originally influenced by physical exercises in the military, sport activities offered by the Norwegian sports federation (established in 1861), and the Swedish approach to gymnastics by Per Henrik Ling in 1813. PE was gender segregated in Norway until 1974 when the curriculum (M74) was revised, setting a standard of gender equality in PE. As a result, boys and girls were supposed to do the same amount of PE per week, with similar exercises and in mixed classes (Brattenborg & Engebretsen, 2001). Today PE is the third largest subject in Norwegian schools in grades 1–10, in terms of teaching hoursⁱⁱ (Moen, 2011). According to the curriculum for PE, the purpose of PE in Norwegian schools is to inspire physical activity in all aspects of life and a lifelong enjoyment of being physically active. From lower secondary schools on, the pupils receive a mark for overall achievement based on their competence. Competence goals are not formulated in a way that indicates the pupil's physical strength, running speed, or jumping height. All the same, there is a tradition in PE teaching to test pupils in different ways, physically and technically, to determine strength, agility and endurance. Widespread use of test results as a grading device in PE could be contrary to the goal-related assessment principle as set out in the regulations accompanying the Education Act (Udir, 2012).

A review of research and development in the area of PE in Norway revealed a lack of research on PE. Norway is clearly different from neighbouring Sweden and other European countries in this respect, especially the UK, where PE is an established research field

(Jonskås, 2011). Studies of pupils in Norway indicate that PE is one of the most popular subjects. At the same time, a relatively large proportion of the pupils dislike the subject (Säfvenbom, 2010).

Previous research on Physical Education among Muslim girls in diaspora

One of the first studies of Muslim youth and physical activity in Europe was conducted in Belgium. De Knop et al.'s (1995; 1996) Belgian survey revealed that Muslim girls were interested in sport, but were prohibited from taking part by religious and cultural traditions. "Girls are very restricted in their behaviour mainly because parents fear their daughters will be badly influenced through the western way of life" (De Knop et al., 1996). More recent studies confirm parents' tendency to withdraw their daughters from PE lessons and sports (Dagkas et.al, 2011; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012). However, there has been a shift among researchers from perceiving parents and culture as restrictions to focusing on the structural inequalities and barriers caused by the way physical education and sport are organized in Western countries.

The experience of minority pupils of PE in Norway has been studied by a few MA students (Smith, 2009; Eriksen, 2002), but no major research project has so far been undertaken as yet. Most of the research on Muslim girls and PE has been conducted in UK. UK research indicates that PE is characterized by institutional ethnocentrism (Green 2008). In *Understanding Physical Education*, Ken Green (2008) sees a structural difference between minority and majority pupils related to the educational background, income, health and physical fitness of their parents. This is one reason why minority pupils in the UK are less involved in sports and PE. The lack of interest in PE among minority pupils, Green argues, lies in the history of PE as a subject, i.e. the choice of sports that characterize the subject and customs such as collective showers and changing facilities. Many of the conflicts between PE teachers and pupils in the UK have centred on matters such as clothing, religious festivals such as Ramadan, dress codes, swimming, diets and fasting, or parents' attitudes to extra-curricular PE. In a similar vein, Smith's (2009, p.96.) thesis on physical capital and PE among minority pupils in Norway asks whether

"we can trace a potential 'value conflict' in the encounter between the informants [minority pupils] and their socio-cultural background and the heritage left by Fridtjof Nansen, Grete Waitz and the fifty-

kilometre Holmenkollen ski race, which in many ways characterizes a number of aspects of the Norwegian sports culture, and thereby also the national curriculum for PE” (my translation).

Since sports are the main constituent of traditional mode of PE teaching, it should be possible to understand how minority pupils feel about PE by studying research on minority adolescents’ experiences of sports. Three Norwegian researchers have investigated the field. Andersson’s (2002) study of a multi-ethnic sport club in Oslo revealed the different experiences and motivations for sports among girls and boys. The boys interpreted sports in terms of identity, and they tended to stress personal achievement as the main way of gaining the recognition of majority members, enabling integration. The girls, on the other hand, wanted to establish alternative models for Pakistani or Moroccan womanhood in Norway, to become positive role models for other minority girls in the future. While women wanted to transcend ascribed statuses in regard to ethnic and gender boundaries, the male athletes were most concerned with transcending majority stereotypes of minorities by concentrating on personal performance rather than ethnicity. Strandbu (2005) focus on sports among minority girls and stress that research has historically placed excessive emphasis on culture as a barrier to participation of minority girls in sports. Girls’ desire for gender-segregated participation in physical activity and their bashfulness in gender-integrated sports are not caused by restrictive parents who deny their daughters any participation in physical activity, but by internalization of cultural ideas and values. The girls choose not to participate in gender-integrated physical activity, because they don’t see it as a “natural” thing to do. Walseth’s (2006) study examines the participation of Muslim girls in Norwegian sports, and how this participation promotes the integration process. Walseth outlines two main patterns that link the identity formation of young Muslim girls to their participation in sports. First, being a young Muslim girl and active in sports may challenge the boundaries of her ethnic identity (Barth, 1969); and as it turns out, young Muslim girls who place themselves safely within the boundaries of their ethnic identity are not very interested in sports. Participating in competitive sports clashed with the hegemonic ideal of femininity that existed within their ethnic group. Another group in the material consisted of girls who regarded Islam as a more important source of identity formation than ethnicity. Because of the positive attitude to physical activity in Islam, it was important for these girls to take part. Identifying with Islam also meant Islamic guidelines informed how these girls took part in physical activity, exemplified by their use of Islamic sports gear.

Recent research underscores the struggle Muslim girls continue to fight to combine their right to religious freedom and physical activity and participation in sports (Jiwani & Rail, 2010). One particular challenge in the West is the lack of gender-segregated sports facilities and of recognition of the hijab as part of the sporting gear (Guerin, Diiriye, Corrigan, & Guerin, 2008; Dagkas et.al., 2011; Benn et al., 2011; Jiwani & Rail, 2010; Ahmad, 2011; Wray, 2002).

Jiwani & Rail's (2010) study shows how Muslim girls refuse to choose between their religious identity as Muslims and their right to participate in physical activity. Moreover, Benn et.al (2011) and Wray's (2002) studies illustrate how Muslim girls' faith is embodied and how physical education and sports challenge the women's right to embody their faith. As one of the girls stated, "I cannot participate comfortably without hijab." (Benn, 2011, p.26). Wray's (2002) study of Pakistani women in the UK highlights the importance of gender segregated physical activity. One of the study respondents said she was afraid of men entering the class. "And you know this is a problem for Muslim ladies. And they feel shy 'somebody looking at me'. Every ladies they need exercise but they feel shame, just shame, they're shy" (Wray, 2002, p.132).

The theoretical tools provided by Bourdieu (1977, 1984) can help us grasp this phenomenon. In his publications Bourdieu showed how ways of being and embodiment can be understood in light of the conditions under which they were established. His concept of *habitus* indicates a behavioural disposition which again is strongly marked by the conditions under which it is established, but which are experienced as "natural" by the actor. Similar perspectives have been presented by Østberg (2003). Her study illustrates how Islam is embodied during early socialization. Norwegian-Pakistani children learn in early childhood how to pray, that they are not supposed to eat pork, that different standards apply to girls in terms of modesty etc.

However, Hamzeh and Oliver (2012) questions what they call simplistic acceptance of "religious accommodations". Their participant research tries to capture how Muslim girls negotiate physical activity. Their findings indicate that the discourse on the wearing of the hijab by Muslim girls could be interpreted in multiple ways and is negotiable by them and their parents. There is a need, they suggest, to go beyond the simplistic acceptance of religious accommodations dictated by authoritative community leaders, and engage directly with young Muslim girls and their parents.

The focus on including and integrating Muslim girls into PE and sport is seen in conjunction with the feminist agenda of empowering women, and giving women the opportunity to enter arenas previously reserved for men. A controversy in this respect has been that this feminist project has been led and dominated by white western feminists. An example of initiatives promoting Muslim women's participation in sport is the "Atlanta plus" project run by a French feminist (Amara, 2012). She argued for the exclusion of Muslim countries from the Olympics if they did not participate with female athletes. Her perspective has been influential and during the London Olympics 2012, and after considerable pressure from the International Olympic Committee, every team had at least one female athlete representing the country. Elsewhere, an Iranian woman initiated the "Solidarity Games", an alternative Olympics for Muslim women who are not interested in participating in gender mixed Olympics. With this controversy in mind, I will present the feminist position on which this study is based.

Third wave feminism

Feminist theory is grounded on the premise that women, illegitimately, are discriminated against by social and political structures. There exist several theories aiming at explaining women's subordination. One (among many) ways of categorizing feminism is through different waves of feminism. While feminists in the early "first wave" worked for abolition and voting rights, second wave feminists emerged in the late 1960s concentrated on wage equity and developed "gender" and "sexism" as key categories (Heywood & Drake, 1997, p. 23). The idea fostered by the explosion of second wave radicalism, whereby anyone could 'join' the women's movement, encouraged a kind of inclusiveness and the emergence of subgroups that were established to allow critical space for lesbians, women of colour and working class women. These subgroups criticised feminism for ignoring the experiences and needs of non-western women. The existence of 'post-colonial feminism', 'black feminism' and 'Muslim feminism' can be seen as a response to white feminists' lack of focus on issues like race, religion and colonial domination.

Third wave feminists are often perceived as the generation which led the widespread rejection of essentialism, undermining the kind of fixed gender identity on which the first two were based (Spencer, 2007). In terms of identity, the third wave prefers contradiction,

multiplicity and difference. As such, it seems to be inspired by postmodern and poststructuralist theorisations of identity and difference. In terms of gender research, third wave feminists have focused less on the reproduction of gender and more on the fluidity of gender and new forms of femininities. In this respect sport is often seen as an important means of challenging traditional notions of femininities (Azzarito, 2010; Heywood, 2007).

Many feminists are sceptical about the whole idea of the third wave. There is no clear agreement as to what third wave feminism is even about, critics say, and the wave model closes more feminists' debates than it opens. For example, in their eagerness to define their feminism as something different from previous feminism, they often end up strongly implying that third comes last and is best. Moreover, it has been argued, and I agree with this critique, that third wave feminism needs to move beyond the personal and the confessional (Gillis, Howie & Munford, 2007).

When I still advocate a third wave feminist perspective on Muslim women's experiences in PE, it is because I perceive third wave as a new type of feminism that is led by, and has grown out of, the challenge to white feminism posed by women of colour (Short, 1994). According to Sandoval (1991), the recognition of a differential consciousness is vital to the third wave and provides ground for alliance with other decolonizing movements for emancipation. Thus, an important aspect of third wave feminism is to analyse gender as only one of many markers which embed women within social hierarchies of domination. This understanding echoes the principle of "intersectionality".

Intersectionality

Flintoff and Fitzgerald & Scraton (2008) argue that although the concept of intersectionality is established within debates around sport, there has been much less attention to debates around intersectionality and difference in PE. Most PE research focusing on difference has had, what Flintoff et al (2008) call a "single issue" approach, where the focus is either on gender, race or disability, rather than addressing the complexity of their interrelationships. A theoretical shift away from fixed identities and essentialism towards diversity and difference requires a parallel shift in focus away from the single issue approach. Cole (1994) and Azzarito (2010) argue that third wave feminism should focus on exploring power relations among sport,

gender, sexuality, nature, the body, race, social class and on reconceptualising relations among these categories. An example of PE research with an intersectionality approach is Azzarito and Solomon's (2005) study of the intersection of gender/race/social class in PE. By using feminism/poststructuralism as a theoretical framework, they deconstruct historically dominant gender, race, and social class discourses around the body in sports and physical education. The paper highlights how dominant discourses such as 'playing like a girl', the stereotype of the African American female as 'the Other' and stereotypical views of African American physical superiority and intellectual inferiority in PE classrooms involve both embedded socially constructed realities, and historical contingency.

To sum up, intersectionality means to analyse the intersection of different social markers, for example gender, social class and ethnicity, instead of focusing on one social marker to the detriment of all the others (Anthias, 2001; Watson & Scraton, 2001). One has to acknowledge how gender, ethnicity, social class, sexuality and religion are intertwined and should be understood in connection with each other. This paper will extend the analysis of gender issues to the intersection of gender, ethnicity and religion.

Method

This article is part of a wider study on Muslim girls' experiences of and involvement in physical activity and sports (Walseth & Fasting, 2004; Walseth, 2006; 2008). A central question in the study was how involvement in sport affected integration processes and how girls' experiences of sports and physical activity change during their lifetimes. This called for a qualitative approach using life histories. The way of dealing with life history interviews has been mainly influenced by the sociological approach to life histories, a central intention of which is to obtain an insight into the working of a culture (Plummer, 2001).

The sample

The study is based on life-history interviews with 21 Muslim girls aged between 16 and 25. The girls are second-generation immigrants in the sense of being either born in Norway, or having moved to Norway with their parents. Half of the group was sampled through their

former status as pupils at an elementary school in Oslo; the other half through their participation in sport clubsⁱⁱⁱ.

The girls I interviewed come from nine different countries, most from Pakistan (7), and Turkey (5) but also from Morocco, Iran, Syria, Somalia, Gambia, Macedonia, and Kosovo. Most of the girls were 18–20 years old at their first interview and most were only interviewed once; a minority were interviewed two or three times.

The girls have different degrees of involvement in physical activity and sports. Some are elite athletes while others are inactive and have never participated in any kind of organized physical activity. All the girls had attended physical education lessons at school, mostly in mixed gender classes, but with some gender segregated PE as well. In terms of religious affiliation, the girls describe themselves as Muslim, though their degree of religiosity varies. Five wear the hijab.

The interviews

The interview guide consisted of three parts. The first covered personal information, date of birth, family size, parents' education and background, etc. In the second part of the interview the informants were asked to relate their life story (a comprehensive life story). Influenced by Plummer (2001), their comprehensive life stories were obtained by requesting the informants to describe their lives as if in a book, dividing it into different chapters.

The third part of the interview had a more thematic focus, with the researcher asking about topics of interest related to the purpose of the study and which might not have been mentioned earlier, exemplified by questions concerning PE (topical life stories). The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The Maxqda qualitative data software was used for the text analyses.

The interviewer–interviewee relationship

I regard the process that is often called 'data collection' as a two-way process where data are produced, rather than collected, through a dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee. The data produced thereby are influenced by the researcher's background, the researcher's experiences and his/her location. Donna Haraway (1988) uses the concept 'situated knowledge' when she makes reference to this idea: all knowledge is produced from a position. Factors influencing one's position might be age, gender, ethnicity, religious

affiliations, residential area, friends etc. (Gullestad, 1998). Therefore, it seems meaningful to position myself as a researcher and interviewer.

Being a member of a majority doing research on a minority could be criticized because it is arguably difficult for outsiders (majority) to capture the experience of minorities (Carby, 1997). This view seems to be based on an essentialist understanding according to which, for example, women or gay men share certain experiences only because they are women or gay.

Ann Phoenix (2001) asked how difficult it would be to understand in advance exactly what the impact of different aspects of social location will be on the research relationship. The impact of 'race' and gender, she argues, within particular pieces of research cannot easily be predicted. Prescriptions for matching the 'race' and/or gender of interviewers and interviewee are thus too simplistic. In the study presented here, the researcher and the researched do not share the same ethnic background (location). Moreover, being a white researcher doing research on minority ethnic groups has been criticized for its contribution to the maintenance of existing power relationships (Watson & Scraton, 2001; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). The fact that researchers are free to choose whatever issues they consider to be most important and to present the results in the way they find most conducive makes the power relationship between the researcher and the researched unequal. Researchers with a majority background doing research on minorities have also been criticized for their contribution to stereotypes and the homogenization of minority women's experiences. The stereotypes presented by white researchers are seen by black feminists as a kind of white ethnocentrism (Mohanty, 1988; Amos & Parmar, 1997). Despite these challenges, I agree with Flintoff and Webb (2012) in that we cannot afford to use the politics of identity as an excuse for not engaging with people that are differently situated from us.

In the study presented here, the researcher and the researched share the social location of gender. However, being a young woman of, for example, Pakistani origin, and being an adult woman of Norwegian origin are two quite different things. Our shared location of gender probably influenced the level of intimacy in the interview context. However, I do not feel that our shared location of gender gave me a better understanding of their experiences, which goes to show how closely connected gender is with culture. Conversely, our shared experiences and interests were more important when it came to understand their stories. The fact that I had studied Islam for some years was important in the interview setting. Most important, it created trust between us, due to the interviewer's knowledge, indicated her genuine interest in the subject.

Ethics

The project was carried out according to the research ethics guidelines issued by the National Research Ethics Committee for Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH, 2006). Informed consent was sought from participating pupils. One of the challenges in this study was to preserve participants' anonymity as I had promised to do. As a consequence, I use synonyms in describing the experiences of the girls.

Results and analysis

The following section presents the Muslim girls' experiences of PE. The data have been analyzed using the principle of meaning coding and categorization (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The results are presented and organized according to three themes/ categories in the interviewguide: "attitudes towards PE", "gender segregated PE", and "gender segregated swimming". Additionally, the fourth category, "Othering", was revealed as a result of an open and "grounded" approach to coding.

Attitudes towards Physical Education

The general picture drawn by the data indicate that Muslim girls in Norway enjoy their PE lessons. Their reason to enjoy PE lessons are familiar to other person and PE researchers since it is similar to mainstream ideas on sport and physical education: "We need PE, especially when we don't exercise in our leisure time. If I don't exercise I feel lethargic, I don't feel well." (Asma). PE lessons, Asma argues, are good for the social environment in the classroom. "In PE classes you get to know your classmates in another way, we have to cooperate, and when you play on a team with people you don't know enough to talk to, you get to know them better." Noora underscores the need for physical activity and variation during the school day: "After many boring and serious lessons I think it's fun to play. It's nice to have the opportunity to scream and make a noise." (Noora)

When I asked them if their attitudes to PE had changed from primary to secondary school, most of the girls said they enjoyed PE more in primary school. They changed their attitude to PE because the secondary school PE curriculum had changed. The girls dislike the pressure associated with secondary school PE lessons and testing of physical skills. These are

some of their experiences. “I don’t like getting marks based on how fast I run. It’s like being judged based on your size, the bigger you are, the slower you run. I really hated these tests.... Apart from that, I love PE.” (Layla). “I preferred PE in primary school. I don’t like the pressure now. If you get a bad mark in PE it can ruin your average mark.” (Aisha).

A study of PE in Sweden shows that even though PE teachers tend to view the goals of PE to be enjoyment and lifelong interest in exercising, the grounds for assessment seem still to be skills or abilities that can be measured (Redelius, Fagrell & Larsson, 2009). This contradiction can also be found in Norwegian schools (Udir, 2012). Growing calls to justify PE marks from pupils and parents has led to more testing in PE in recent years. The consequence is seen in the Muslim girls’ growing dissatisfaction with PE in secondary schools.

Teachers’ attitudes towards Muslim girls also affected how the girls perceived PE lessons. Lama says:

”The two first year we had a male teacher and in my group of friends [all immigrants] there was a boy who was very lazy and never attended PE lessons. I feel the four of us were placed in the same category; we looked lazy. I don’t know what the teacher was thinking, but I felt we were put in the same category: ‘immigrant youth too lazy to do PE’.”

Lama’s experience is similar to those found by Hargreaves (2007) and Lovell (1991), who stress how discourses of Muslim girls as “the other” portray Muslim girls as passive and uninterested in PE.

Gender segregated Physical Education

As other researchers have pointed out, there is a need for gender segregated sporting facilities for Muslim girls. Gender segregation at secondary level, either in separate schools or separate departments in mixed-sex schools, are essential to maximising participation for many Muslim parents and pupils (Benn & Dagkas, 2006). Based on the above mentioned research I have scrutinized my data to see if Muslim girls participating in this study express a desire for gender-segregated PE lessons.

Compared with the UK studies, the attitude of the Norwegian Muslim girls to gender segregated PE was different. Eighteen of the 21 preferred gender mixed physical education. Their arguments are all similar to Nur's and Haidi's.

"I think gender segregated physical education is boring. A lot of the girls are not active in PE. It's boring to have PE with girls that can't even kick the ball." (Nur)

"I prefer gender mixed PE. I like to compare myself with the boys, to show how strong I am.... If I see a boy who's better than me, I think I want to beat him. I get motivated." (Haidi)

However, three of the girls prefer gender segregated PE and their arguments concerned the boys' dominance in PE.

"I prefer gender segregated PE because the boys dominate when we for example play football. When we are girls only we get the ball more often. When the boys are there, we get marginalized." (Sumeye)

Similar sentiments are expressed by Turkan.

"I don't like PE. It's boring. I don't like ball games, which is what we do all the time. When we play basketball I hide. I stand on the side. I think the boys are too violent when we are playing. Once they dribbled the ball so hard it hit my head."

Sumeye's and Turkan's views are not typical of Muslim girls only. Despite of the government's promotion of gender equality in PE, some girls still perceive PE as a male domain. As Næss (2000) concludes, Norwegian PE lessons suffer from a lack of gender equality. Nielsen (2009) concludes in her study of Norwegian schools and gender issues that PE lessons reproduce gender more effectively than any other aspects of school life. These Norwegian studies are supported by several international studies which found continued stress in PE on reproducing male dominance and hegemonic masculinity (Larsson, Fagrell & Redelius, 2009; Redelius, Fagrell & Larsson, 2009; Connell, 2008; Hills, 2006). In this respect, the views of Muslim girls on gender mixed PE seem to be more informed by gender and male dominance than religiosity.

However, Aisha does feel intimidated in PE lessons with boys.

"I think it's best to have gender segregated PE, then the girls can behave like they want to. If there are boys in the class it feels different. If you want to scratch your foot or your backside it doesn't matter, but if there are boys you can't be so intimate."

The sense of shyness in gender mixed PE is more likely to arise when the girls take swimming lessons as part of the PE curriculum.

Gender segregated swimming classes

When I asked the girls where there was a need to separate swimming classes for boys and girls, the answers were more ambiguous. Half of the group prefers gender segregated swimming, while the other half like mixing with boys. Thana learned how to swim in third grade; she wears bikini, which her parents accept.

When asked if feel shy wearing bikini in front of boys? She laughs and replies: “Sometimes, when I have had too many chocolates”. Sumeye attends gender mixed swimming classes at school. She is tired of other Muslim girls telling her it’s not good for Muslim girls to swim together with boys. She says:

“Some girls don’t participate in swimming classes because they don’t want to wear swimsuit in front of boys. I am a bit critical to that position because the same girls are wearing tights without long jackets so your bottom isn’t covered. They are saying it’s not good for Muslim girls to swim, but they are hanging out in the city centre and they’re dating boys. I’m just wondering if they’re good Muslims themselves. It’s just an excuse. I don’t care. I know they’re not better Muslims than me.”

The ethnic differences between the girls who prefer gender mixed swimming lessons and those who don’t, are quite palpable. Five of the seven girls with a Pakistani background preferred gender-segregated swimming, while only two of the fourteen girls in the other ethnic groups did likewise. Aisha attended swimming classes in primary school even though her parents were uneasy at the prospect. Now, at secondary school, she doesn’t participate in gender mixed swimming classes. When asked why, she replies:

“No way. I don’t know why but they are boys! It is so unnatural for us, boys are supposed to be kept at distance!... I don’t know why, it’s just something in my head, I think it has to do with our way of thinking and how we are raised.”

Turkan shares the same opinion. She joined swimming classes at the age of 10, but cut swimming out at secondary school. When asked why she says:

“May be I have forgotten how I do it, maybe I have to learn it again. And I don’t want to wear a swimsuit in front of the boys. I use to wear a swimsuit and a t-shirt. It’s because of my religion, I am not supposed to expose my body, you are not supposed to be so open and show it to other people.”

Asma talks about her sense of bashfulness in connection with swimming as part of the PE lessons.

“We can go swimming at school if we want to, but I haven’t. I don’t know if it’s because I have become shy. I don’t feel comfortable in a swimsuit. When I was younger it was not a problem, but now I am more shy.... My parents don’t want me to participate either, but I don’t think it’s because of that.... You know, Kani [her friend] wasn’t allowed by her parents either, but she joined in without her parents knowing it. She wanted to swim, and I still think she does swim. So, I had the opportunity, but I couldn’t take it. Not because my parents told me, but because I didn’t feel comfortable.”

Their views agree with what Benn et.al (2011) research in the UK, persuaded them to conclude. Muslim girls, they suggests, embody their faith. Educational researchers and practitioners need to accept and respect the diversity of Muslim women’s opinions in terms of how they choose to participate in physical activity. Strandbu (2006) agrees; the girls’ desire for gender-segregated physical activities and their sense of shyness in gender-integrated sports are not caused by restrictive parents who deny their daughters physical activity at school, but by an internalization of culture and religiosity. The girls choose not to participate in gender-integrated physical activity, because, to them, it is not a “natural” thing to do. The perspectives provided by Bourdieu (1977, 1984) and his concept of ‘habitus’ can help explain why most of the Norwegian-Pakistani girls in the study felt uncomfortable about sharing swimming facilities with boys.

“Othering”

Although most of the girls had no need for gender segregated PE, and half of the group didn’t need gender segregated swimming classes either, they stressed that “other Muslim girls” might want both.

“There are some girls in my class, Pakistani girls, who don’t do PE. They are more religious than others, and only wear skirts, I don’t think they like being active. They never wear trousers, so I’m not sure if it would be possible for them to have PE, you can’t run in a skirt.” (Saera)

“I think some girls don’t perform at their best when boys are around because they’re afraid of them, in case the boys noticed them, [thinking] she runs badly, so I think the girls are more withdrawn when they have PE with the boys.” (Asma)

“We had problems at secondary school because some girls refused to remove the hijab, they didn’t want to take a shower. If you threw the ball to them they didn’t catch it. They were very serious and religious girls, from Pakistan... These girls are very “locked up”, introverted, and they don’t talk much. They don’t dare change cloths in front of other girls because they are not used to it.... It’s difficult to talk to these kinds of girl because they wouldn’t understand the situation, they’ve absorbed what their parents taught them about what “the right answer” is, and it’s impossible to change their mind.” (Hala)

Some of the girls compare themselves with “other Muslim girls” and thereby reflect that they relate to the given cultural differences. Other Muslim girls might prefer gender segregated PE, they suggest. Nevertheless, some of the 21 interviewees fit the description of “the others”, in the sense that they “don’t like PE”, “sit on the side-lines”, “are not active”, “play truant. Saera’s statements are interesting because she talks about “the others”, and at the same time she admits not being active in PE in secondary school. She skipped the classes, and as such herself fitted the description of “the others”. When asked why, she does not mention religiosity as a reason. Rather, she highlights her age and the general rebelliousness of youth. Saera says:

“I didn’t like PE at secondary school. I tried to skip it. I brought a note from my parents, saying I felt ill and a lot of nonsense.... I don’t really know why, it was just for fun. I didn’t want to have PE, change clothes; I didn’t want to do anything. I didn’t care.”

Turkan is also one of the “other Muslim girls” inasmuch as she doesn’t like PE, wears the hijab, and according to her own description “I stand on the side.... I’m not active, I try to hide”. However, Turkan doesn’t stress her religiosity as a motivating force. According to her the boys are too violent and they take up too much space and don’t send the ball in her direction. The class play ball games too often, which she doesn’t like because she doesn’t have the skill.

The active girls explain “other Muslim girls” lack of participation in PE with reference to religiosity, while inactive girls stress boys’ dominance and their own lack of skills in PE. This tendency is comparable with Eriksen’s (1997) findings in his study of the attitudes of young people to outdoor activities. In his study, the majority explained the absence of immigrant youths from outdoor activities by citing what they believed were

cultural and religious barriers. The young immigrants explained their lack of involvement by lack of resources, gear and skills.

The Muslim girls' description of "other Muslim girls" as too religious and shy to participate in PE might contribute to "stereotyping", "othering" and exoticism, and may be an expression of their absorption of western gaze and western discourses on Muslim femininity. Hargreaves (2007) describes how the Muslim girls' body remains portrayed not only as a covered body, a 'silent' body, but also as an oppressed and constrained female physicality. According to Said (2003), it's difficult to understand the western tendency to dominate, restructure, and maintain authority over the Orient without employing Foucault's notion of discourse. The example of the male teacher who placed all the immigrant pupils in the same category "as not interested in PE", as well as the girls' understanding and generalizations of "other Muslim girls" who are too religious and shy to participate in PE can be seen as an internalization of western discourses.

Concluding discussion

The findings from this study on Muslim girls and PE underscore the importance of analyzing experiences in line with the concept of intersectionality. Some of the girls' reluctance to mix with boys in PE classes can in this study best be understood in light of their dislike of male dominance in PE. As such, their gender identity seems to be the most important dimension to understand their attitudes and response to PE. In contrast, their embodied identities as females and Muslims seem to be the key dimension for understanding their reluctance to mix with boys in swimming lessons, exemplifying how pupils' responses to PE are always a product of the intersection of their various social markers. Flintoff et al. (2008) question how the interrelationships between different axes of oppression should be conceptualised. I agree with Flintoff et. al (2008) who suggests that additive accounts to which several different axes of oppression such as ethnicity and religion are "added" to those of gender, can be misleading. In the present case, the notion of Muslim girls being oppressed "in triplicate" is misleading. I also agree that structures of gender, religiosity and ethnicity are experienced simultaneously. Nevertheless, the findings of this study, I suggest, underscore that different structures or categories dominate in different contexts, including PE contexts, and every category doesn't have to be equally important at all times. As such, what Muslim girls make of PE is not

always dictated by religiosity; their position as girls in a male-dominated space seems as important for their response and experiences.

Previous research has discussed the role of PE as an arena for the reproduction and as a challenge to traditional gender roles and gender discourses. Azzarito (2010) describes new hegemonic notions of femininities, 'Future Girls', who are sport-driven and seem to remain embedded in white upper middle class discourses of the successful physicality. According to Azzarito (2010), images of girls who belong to religious minorities are marginalized from the discourse of the 'future girl'. In this study, the discourse of Muslim girls as passive is challenged by active Muslim girls who love to compete against the boys in PE, and reproduced by the girls in their description of "other Muslim girls". Male dominance in PE and the dominance of western values in swimming classes seem to lead some Muslim girls to reproduce the discourse of Muslim girls' bodies as passive and constrained.

The findings of this study differ moreover from British findings on Muslim girls and PE. The Norwegian pupils seem less reluctant to mix with boys in PE lessons. This probably has several reasons and possible explanations. First and foremost, Norwegian and British government policies on multiculturalism are different. Multiculturalism which allows different faith communities to adhere to their religious identity as Muslims has featured in British integration policy for a long time. As a consequence, UK was the first European country to establish an Islamic bank (the Islamic bank of Britain, 2004), the hijab can be worn without restrictions as part of official uniforms (like police uniforms), and in multicultural cities like Leicester and Birmingham it's quite common to see women on the streets or in the universities wearing the hijab or niqab (face veil), though a recent ruling has stopped the wearing of the niqab by school teachers. In Norway, Islam is recognized as a religious institution and mosques and religious centres receive funds from the state (which is not the case in UK). All the same, religious symbols may not be attached to official uniforms in Norway (police uniform regulations do not allow the wearing the hijab); women are not allowed to wear niqab in educational settings like the university; and it is quite uncommon to see women wearing the niqab on the streets. The differences in policy on multiculturalism may have affected pupils' demands and wishes with regard to PE.

The findings presented in this article reveal some diversity of views and position in the selected group of Muslim girls. The girls were not sampled for the study on levels of religiosity, but on their former status as Muslim pupils at one of the most culturally diverse

secondary schools in Oslo and on participation in activities at sports clubs. They are all Muslims, but some are more concerned with religious questions than others. This diversity within the sample may be different to UK studies like Benn et al. (2011) and Dagkas et al. (2011) where the girls were recruited due to their withdrawal from PE. It also explains the different stories.

In conclusion, then, religiosity seems to have little influence on Muslim girls' experience of PE, with the exception of swimming lessons and showering facilities. We can understand the objections of some of the girls to gender mixed PE by looking at the dominance of the male gender, and as such, their experiences are similar to those of non-Muslim girls (Larsson, Fagrell & Redelius, 2009; Redelius, Fagrell & Larsson, 2009; Connell, 2008; Hills, 2006). However, objections to gender mixed swimming classes are best illuminated by the girls' gendered religious identities and embodied faith. In term of intersectionality, the study shows that different categories dominate in different PE contexts. As such, what Muslim girls make of PE is not always dictated by religiosity. Despite the Muslim girls' positive attitudes toward and experience of PE in the classroom, to facilitate their enjoyment in PE and lifelong interest in exercising, schools must ensure that PE teaching is less about testing physical skills, less male dominated and more sensitive to Muslim girls' embodied faith.

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ⁱ We distinguish in this paper between Islam as a religion (official Islam) and belief in Islam as a manifestation of religiosity (unofficial Islam) (Kamrava, 2006).

ⁱⁱ The pupils have around 700 hours PE during 1-10th grade (Udir, 2012).

ⁱⁱⁱ Due to the goal of the wider study it was important to have a sample of Muslim girls that had been involved in sport clubs, few of the girls recruited through the school had been involved in sport clubs, I therefore started to sample participants through the sport organizations.