



MEND's Easy Read Guide to

Islamophobia in Sport

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**Why do we
need to talk about
Islamophobia in sport?**

In 2021, Former Yorkshire County Cricket Club player, Azeem Rafiq, put a spotlight on horrific accounts of Islamophobia and racism that he had experienced throughout his sporting career that left him contemplating taking his own life.

Following these revelations, investigations have been launched into Islamophobia and racism at cricket clubs across the country.

However, it is not just cricket that we should be concerned with. We need to actively guard against prejudice, harassment, and discrimination across all sports and at every level of the game.

Sport should be something that brings people together in common enjoyment, ambition, and solidarity. It is an opportunity for community building, leadership development, and personal growth.

There is no space for hatred, division, and dehumanisation.

Supporting Muslim identities allows Muslim athletes, coaches, officials, organisers, and fans to confidently develop and reach their potential in their sporting careers and feel secure in their positions as members of society.

This is particularly important in light of the public, institutional, and structural Islamophobia that many Muslims face throughout their lives. Indeed, Muslims were the victims of 45% of all religiously motivated hate crime in 2020-2021, the highest rate of any religious group.¹

Therefore, sporting institutions have a valuable opportunity to support Muslims of all ages in building their confidence and opportunities in ways that will benefit them across every sphere of life.

Home Office (2021). *Hate crime, England and Wales, 2020 to 2021*. [online] GOV.UK.

Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2020-to-2021/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2020-to-2021>.

A soccer game is taking place on a green grass field. In the foreground, a player in a red jersey with yellow accents is seen from behind, looking towards the center. In the middle ground, a player in a white jersey is dribbling the ball, being closely marked by a player in a red jersey. To the right, a referee in a bright yellow shirt is observing the play. Other players in red and white jerseys are scattered across the field. The background shows a chain-link fence and some buildings under a clear sky. The entire image has a semi-transparent blue overlay.

**Who is this
guide for?**

This guide is designed to help sports clubs, institutions, foundations, associations, regulators, governing bodies, and sports media approach Islamophobia and equalities more generally.

It can also be used by athletes, coaches, organisers, officials, volunteers, fans, and families to encourage their local sporting organisations to adopt policies and initiatives that support Muslim athletes to achieve their potential.





What are the legal responsibilities?

The Equality Act 2010 is designed to protect the rights of individuals and ensure equality of opportunity for everyone, thus promoting a fair and equal society.

The Act covers nine protected characteristics, one of which is 'religion or belief.' The Public Sector Equality Duty, created by Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, demands that public bodies, including sports clubs, must give due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and any other unlawful conduct in the Equality Act 2010.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

At the same time, Article 9 of the Human Rights Act 1998 (freedom of thought, belief, and religion) protects the right to put your thoughts and beliefs into action, including:


- The right to wear religious clothing,
- And the right to take part in religious worship.

A woman wearing a red hijab and a black turtleneck sweater is looking directly at the camera. She is in a gym or martial arts studio, with several punching bags hanging in the background. The image has a blue tint.

**What does
this mean?**

In other words, organisations should consider how their culture, environment, policies, or decisions impact people who are protected under the Equality Act. They should:

1. Tackle prejudice, discrimination, and harassment wherever they find it and take steps to prevent it.
2. Think about the barriers that might be preventing protected groups from accessing their services. For example, if not many women are using their services, they should explore why this is and implement initiatives to address this disparity.
3. Put in place measures to address the needs of different protected characteristics. For example, providing space and time for Muslim athletes to pray.
4. Actively take steps to support the advancement of people from groups that have traditionally been disadvantaged. For example, through creating mentorship programs for athletes from ethnic minority backgrounds.

A man with a beard and short dark hair, wearing a dark blue athletic t-shirt, is holding a white and black soccer ball under his left arm. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**What does
this look like
in practice?**



***Having clear
policies on
Islamophobia***

The first step in addressing a problem is knowing what it is that you are talking about. In other words, you have to have a definition of Islamophobia.

Therefore, sporting clubs, institutions, associations, and governing bodies should ensure that they incorporate the APPG on British Muslims' definition into their policies and procedures handbooks:

“Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.”

This definition should be adopted alongside the Coalition against Islamophobia guidelines which can be found at www.coalitionagainstislamophobia.org.

These guidelines are important because they provide clear examples of the types of activities and behaviours that constitute Islamophobia.

The policies handbook should also provide clear information on complaints and investigations procedures, including appeals processes, timelines, and the rights and responsibilities of those involved.

Islamophobia can be found in speech, writing, behaviours, structures, policies, legislation, or activities that work to **control, regulate, or exclude Muslim participation** within social, civic, economic, and political life, **or which embody hatred, vilification, stereotyping, abuse, discrimination, or violence directed at Muslims.**

Common examples of Islamophobia in sports and in wider society include:

- **Physical and verbal abuse directed at Muslims on the basis of their religious identity.** This is sometimes disguised as “locker room banter,” which is particularly insidious as victims and witnesses may feel humiliated and dehumanised but may remain inhibited to complain due to fear of being dismissed or else being further victimised or excluded.
- **Making mendacious, dehumanising, vilifying, demonising, or stereotypical allegations about Muslims.** This includes promoting stereotypes of Muslims as somehow dangerous to society (for example, accusing Muslim men of being violent and misogynistic, or Muslim women of being uneducated and oppressed) or using orientalist tropes of Muslims as “backward,” “uncivilised,” or “un-British.”
- **Dismissing religious beliefs, values, and experiences.** This is often found in peer pressure for Muslims to change their practices to “fit in” with their non-Muslim peers. Common examples include pressuring Muslims to drink alcohol or dismissing a woman’s desire to adhere to a particular form of religious dress (“but my neighbour is Muslim, and she doesn’t wear a headscarf”). This also includes gaslighting or dismissing Muslims’ experiences of Islamophobia (“it’s just banter”).

A man with a beard and earbuds is running on a treadmill in a gym. The image is dimmed and serves as a background for the text.

***Exploring why
Muslims may be
underrepresented***

Accurate data is essential in establishing where gaps in equality may exist and developing effective strategies to address them. In establishing the reasons why Muslims and other groups may be underrepresented, there are a variety of areas to explore.

For example:

- Is there a drop-off in participation between youth/academy and senior/professional levels?
- Is there a disparity between recreational participation and professional representation?
- Is there a pay gap between Muslim colleagues and non-Muslim colleagues?
- Is there representation of Muslims across all levels of the organisation? This includes amongst athletes, coaches, organisers, officials, fans, board members, and trustees.

When answering these questions, it is important to also question why these disparities may exist in these different areas. This question can only be fully answered through asking Muslims themselves for their experiences and perspectives. For this reason, it is important to consider in-depth consultations and engagement surveys with Muslim athletes, coaches, organisers, officials, fans, and families in order to explore their experiences.



***Addressing why
Muslims may be
underrepresented***

If you know that Muslims (or any other protected group) are underrepresented at any level of your organisation, there are things that you can do to address the situation.

You should think about:

1. How you recruit staff, talent, and fans,
2. How you retain staff and talent,
3. How you mentor and develop staff and talent.

Ideas for recruiting staff, talent, and fans:

- **Have honest conversations.** You should consider running a consultation to explore the reasons why Muslims may not join or engage with your organisation. When you do this, remember that Muslims are not a homogenous group. Therefore, you will need to pay particular attention to people that may experience multiple layers of disadvantage. For example, ensure that you consider the specific experiences of Muslim women, as well as considering issues related to class, race, disability, and other characteristics that could impact their ability to access the opportunities at your organisation.
- **Think about the platforms that you use to advertise.** Are you advertising in places that are going to be seen by different groups? Can you proactively advertise in places that specialise in engaging with specific groups? For example, consider asking local Muslim women's organisations to pass on opportunities to their members or followers.
- **Demonstrate that you are committed to equality.** By actively prioritising equality, you can reassure underrepresented groups that they are valued and that there is a home for them in your organisation. For example, have you included the definition of Islamophobia within your handbooks, or adopted the Nujum Muslim Athlete Charter at www.nujumsports.co.uk/pledge, or become a partner in the Islamophobia Awareness Month campaign www.islamophobia-awareness.org?
- **Examine your recruitment practices.** When recruiting staff and talent, you must consider how unconscious biases may infiltrate your selection processes. Things to consider include having diverse and representative selection panels, prioritising unconscious bias training for anyone involved in selection processes, and examining the robustness of current standardised tests and scoring criteria.

Ideas for retaining staff and talent:

- **Accommodate what matters to Muslim staff, volunteers, and athletes.** The next section of this guide will cover some of the things to consider when thinking about what matters to Muslims. Things to think about include prayer, Ramadan, religious dress, Hajj, touching people of the opposite gender, alcohol, and halal food.
- **Support spiritual, mental, and physical wellbeing.** Prioritise the holistic health and wellbeing of your staff and athletes by including wellbeing within regular performance reviews and training staff to recognise and support mental, physical, and spiritual needs and to make counselling and support service referrals where required. This emphasis on holistic wellbeing is particularly important for Muslims as any disruption to any three of these elements (such as those that can be caused by Islamophobia) will necessarily impact their performance and engagement at every level. It is beneficial to develop a relationship with local mosques and Muslim chaplains who can be particularly useful in supporting the spiritual needs of staff and athletes.
- **Create a positive and inclusive culture and environment.** You can create this culture and environment by having a zero-tolerance approach to issues of Islamophobic harassment whilst also normalising and demonstrating sensitivity towards the personal, cultural, and religious differences of your staff, volunteers, and athletes. This includes accommodating practices that matter to them. You should also consider using inclusive consultations to ensure that initiatives and policies are meaningful and that all staff, volunteers, and athletes feel invested. This is a particularly useful tool in developing and implementing policies and practices that support particular groups, for example, Muslim women.

Ideas for mentoring and developing staff and talent:

- **Sensitive on-boarding.** On joining your organisation, it is good practice to consult Muslims on their faith-related needs. This sends a positive signal of inclusion and helps negate any potential issues before they occur.
- **Prioritising representation.** It is important that organisations prioritise diverse ethnic, religious, and gendered representation at all levels of the organisation, including within the senior leadership and management. Therefore, organisations should also consider how they promote diversity amongst their staff, board members, and trustees. This diversity gives greater visibility to a variety of lived experiences, which translates into greater understandings of the experiences of athletes, staff, volunteers, and fans.
- **Emphasising mentorship programs.** The power of role models cannot be understated. As such, you should ensure that you prioritise mentorship and shadowing programs and opportunities.
- **Investing in development opportunities.** This can take the form of targeted interventions and opportunities for specific groups you have identified as needing additional support or ensuring equal access to development training with regular check-ins throughout the year to monitor individual progress.

A photograph of a young Black woman wearing a dark hijab and a light-colored long-sleeved top. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. She is leaning on a dark metal railing. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be an outdoor setting with a building. The text is overlaid on the image in a white, bold, italicized font.

***Accommodating
what matters to
Muslim athletes***

Religious dress

All Muslim men and women are required to dress modestly. For men, this includes covering the body between the waist and the knees. Men may wear a beard as well. Women are required to cover the hair and the body between the neck and the ankles.

However, there is a great deal of diversity in Muslim religious dress, which is influenced by differences in religious interpretations, cultural practices, political factors, expression, and social pressures. For example, some women may choose not to cover their hair but may still be uncomfortable wearing tight clothing or short skirts and low-cut tops; others may be happy to wear tight or revealing outfits, while some may choose to wear loose-fitting and long clothes as well as covering their face with a niqab.

Consequently, sports institutions should consider their kit and how they can make adjustments to accommodate the needs of their Muslim staff, volunteers, and athletes. Simple accommodations include having options for looser fitting clothes, long sleeves, leg coverings, and hijab as part of their kit requirements. However, it is always a useful practice to discuss individual requirements with your Muslim athletes.

Halal food

Halal means permissible, so when we discuss halal food or halal meat, we are talking about what Muslims are allowed to eat.

Muslims are prohibited from eating pork or drinking alcohol. They must also only eat meat that has been raised in an ethical way and slaughtered according to religious practice. This is similar to kosher requirements for Jewish communities.

Things to consider include:

- **Communal meals and snacks when training, competing or touring:** if the only food available is meat-based or has been mixed with pork products or alcohol, many groups, including Muslims, Hindus, and Jews, will likely be unable to partake. It is always advisable to have a vegetarian/vegan and alcohol-free options available that are kept separate from the meat options. This not only applies to staff, volunteers, and athletes but also to fans. Indeed, providing vegetarian and halal options for spectators is likely to encourage a wider fan base.
- **Communal kitchens:** Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu (as well as ethical vegetarians) may be uncomfortable storing their lunches in fridges next to pork, alcohol, or non-halal meat products or using utensils that have been used for such products. Potential solutions include providing a designated vegetarian fridge and/or vegetarian utensils; having enforced policies on washing up and storing utensils; and insisting that all food is stored in sealed containers and on labelled shelves and spaces in fridges designated for vegetarian, halal/kosher, and non-halal meat.
- **Nutritional plans:** It is good practice to discuss individual nutritional plans with Muslim athletes that accommodates a halal diet as well as fasting (which will be discussed further below)

Prayer (salah)

All Muslim adults are required to pray five times a day at times dictated by the rise and fall of the sun. Therefore, the times of these prayers vary depending on the time of year as the days lengthen and shorten. Salah also requires the believer to perform wudu (ritual washing) before praying. Men are also required to attend communal prayers on Fridays (jummah).

The benefits of providing a multi-faith prayer space and reflective, meditative, and prayer time benefit athletes of all faiths. Studies have repeatedly demonstrated the value of meditation, mindfulness, and contemplative practice for people combating stress, improving social and academic skills, and generally promoting mental wellbeing. The University of Surrey found that participants who engaged in mindfulness showed a 58% reduction in anxiety and a 40% reduction in perceived stress.

You can accommodate prayer by:

- **Providing appropriate time, space, and facilities to perform wudu and salah for staff, athletes, volunteers, and fans at the allotted times.**
- **Supporting staff and athletes to attend Friday jummah at a local mosque when they are not travelling or competing.**

Interacting with people of the opposite gender

In Islam, there is a concept of mahram and non-mahram. A mahram is a member of your family who you would therefore not be permitted to marry. A non-mahram is someone you are not related to and who you could conceivably marry. Muslims are generally prohibited from making avoidable physical contact with non-mahrams (similar to practices found in orthodox Jewish communities).

As such, many Muslim men and women may not be comfortable shaking hands with someone of the opposite gender or making physical contact with members of the opposite gender in team-building exercises and social activities. Choosing not to shake hands with someone of the opposite gender should not be seen as disrespectful. On the contrary, in Islamic culture, it is a mark of respect to recognise the other person's personal space.

Instead, an appropriate greeting is to place one's hand on the chest and lower the head. Senior club members can lead by example in normalising this type of greeting when they encounter Muslim athletes of the opposite gender and by considering the types of team bonding and social activities that may be more inclusive to avoid physical contact between genders.

Hajj

Hajj is a religious pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, which occurs once a year and lasts for five or six days during the last month of the Islamic calendar (which does not coincide with the Gregorian calendar, so the precise dates change each year). All Muslim adults must complete the pilgrimage at least once during their lifetime if they are financially and physically able.

As this is often a once-in-a-lifetime experience due to the financial constraints, clubs can support Muslim staff and athletes by excusing them from training for the time period of the Hajj if they have the opportunity to go.



Alcohol

Alcohol is forbidden in Islam, and many Muslims may feel uncomfortable in settings where alcohol is present. Therefore, many Muslims may feel uncomfortable at celebrations and social events in settings with alcohol present.

Some Muslims may also be uncomfortable wearing club apparel branded with sponsors who are associated with industries and practices that are religiously prohibited to them, such as alcohol and gambling (which is also prohibited for Muslims).

It is, therefore, good practice to encourage a range of social activities that are not always predicated upon alcohol or in settings that serve alcohol. An awareness of the sensitivities around alcohol should also be discussed with Muslim athletes in relation to branded clothing as well as occasions where celebrations or media engagements may involve the drinking, distribution, promotion, or spraying of alcohol.


Similarly, sports institutions should consider how alcohol culture may exclude fans from engaging with the organisation. For example, providing alcohol-free areas for fans may encourage the engagement of Muslim fans and women and families.

Fasting and Ramadan

Muslims are required to fast during the daylight hours of the Islamic month of Ramadan as well as occasional smaller fasts throughout the year. Outside of daylight hours in Ramadan, Muslims will usually spend their time praying and reciting the Qur'an. Ramadan is concluded with the Eid celebration, during which time Muslims traditionally spend the morning praying and the afternoon with family and close friends.

Obviously, sporting is a physically demanding pursuit where marginal gains can make a difference and accommodating fasting can be difficult. However, where possible, you can support your Muslim athletes by:

- Being flexible with training times to fit in with their energy levels and their religious and family commitments.
- Speaking with Muslim players, nutritional specialists, sports scientists, and physiotherapists about adjusting diets, training programmes, and recovery sessions.
- Allowing time for Muslims to break their fast at sunset.
- Avoiding intensive training or social events in the evenings.
- Accommodating absences for Eid.



***How do I get
my local sports
institutions to
prioritise tackling
Islamophobia?***

1. Have conversations with other Muslim athletes, coaches, organisers, officials, volunteers, fans, and families to collect a wider range of experiences.

2. Ask to speak to your institution's human resources representatives and the senior management team.

3. Take them through this guide and explain to them:
a. The dangers of Islamophobia,
b. What forms Islamophobia takes,
c. The benefits of supporting Muslim athletes and creating an inclusive culture.

4. Discuss the specific changes that you would like to see in terms of policies, practices, and culture.

5. Recommend that they endorse the Nujum Muslim Athlete Charter www.nujumsports.co.uk.

6. Encourage them to actively participate in the Islamophobia Awareness Month campaign www.islamophobia-awareness.org.



I have spoken to my local sporting institution, and they have refused to prioritise tackling Islamophobia.

Or

I have experienced Islamophobia in my local institution.

What can I do?

Contact

Nujum Sports

www.nujumsports.co.uk

Islamophobia Response Unit (IRU):

theiru.org.uk

Muslim engagement
& development

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    /mendcommunity | www.mend.org.uk