

Breaking the Stigma: Exploring Confidence and Empowerment among Female Muslim Students in Physical Education Performance

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Abstract. This study explored how female Muslim students develop confidence and empowerment while navigating cultural and religious expectations in physical education (PE). Using a descriptive qualitative design, twelve (12) female Muslim senior high school students from Zamboanga City were interviewed through semi-structured conversations. The study examined how faith, cultural identity, and personal experiences shape participation in PE and influence students' sense of self within public physical spaces. Thematic analysis revealed that empowerment develops through multiple interconnected processes. First, students redefined self-worth through achievement and recognition, which strengthened confidence and challenged internalized stereotypes. Second, faith functioned both as a source of motivation and a framework for coping, enabling students to integrate religious identity with physical participation. Third, supportive relationships and inclusive environments—such as teacher accommodation, peer encouragement, and modesty-sensitive practices—facilitated sustained engagement. At the same time, participation remained conditional, as institutional constraints and social expectations could limit involvement despite strong personal motivation. These findings indicate that empowerment among Muslim female students is not solely physical but is deeply shaped by identity, faith, and social context. The study contributes to existing literature by highlighting how students actively negotiate and construct empowerment rather than merely experiencing barriers. It recommends that schools adopt culturally responsive practices, including flexible attire policies, gender-sensitive instruction, and inclusive learning environments, to support meaningful and equitable participation in physical education.

Introduction

Physical education (PE) plays a vital role in promoting not only students' physical fitness but also their confidence, resilience, and sense of belonging. However, participation among female Muslim students remains a complex issue shaped by cultural, religious, and social expectations. Early work by Nakamura (2002) highlighted that Muslim women often navigate tensions between religious modesty and the physical exposure typically expected in sports settings. This tension becomes more pronounced in institutional environments where uniforms, mixed-gender classes, and body visibility may conflict with Islamic values of modesty and gender separation. Rather than representing a direct opposition, these dynamics suggest an ongoing process of negotiation and adaptation between faith and physical activity.

Subsequent research has further examined how Muslim girls negotiate their identities within school-based sports contexts. Hamzeh and Oliver (2012) found that while female Muslim students encounter restrictions related to attire and perceived impropriety, they also demonstrate agency by identifying alternative ways to participate. Similarly, Dagkas, Benn, and Jawad (2011) emphasized that Muslim girls' perspectives are often underrepresented in policy discussions, highlighting

the need for culturally responsive PE practices. These studies suggest that empowerment is not derived solely from participation, but from being recognized, understood, and accommodated within the educational environment.

The global dimension of this issue has also been explored across various contexts. Walseth (2015), in a study of Norwegian schools, found that religiosity influenced attitudes toward certain activities such as swimming, yet many participants still valued physical activity and sought opportunities for social integration. Benn and Pfister (2013), in their comparative research in England and Denmark, likewise demonstrated that teacher awareness and institutional flexibility significantly influence participation among Muslim girls. These findings indicate that empowerment in PE is closely linked to the broader social climate and the capacity of educators to respond to cultural diversity.

In addition to social and cultural influences, structural and material conditions also shape participation in physical education. Studies have shown that rigid dress codes, lack of gender-sensitive facilities, and limited privacy can discourage Muslim girls from engaging in physical activity (Fazal et al., 2019; Shabu et al., 2023). At the same time, research on modest sportswear and inclusive facility design suggests that practical adaptations—such as sport-specific hijabs and culturally responsive environments—can significantly improve comfort, mobility, and participation.

More recent studies have shifted attention toward psychological and social facilitators of participation. Hussain and Cunningham (2023) reported that a strong sense of religious identity, combined with community support, enhances Muslim women's engagement in physical activity. In a similar vein, Chen and Qiao (2024) identified social support as a key mediating factor that strengthens psychological adjustment and motivation. Together, these studies reinforce the idea that empowerment emerges within supportive environments that affirm, rather than suppress, religious identity.

At the same time, structural and environmental barriers continue to limit participation. Shabu et al. (2023) identified the lack of gender-segregated facilities, insufficient privacy, and persistent cultural stigmas as significant deterrents. Johan and Salleh (2023) further emphasized that the design of sports facilities can either enable or constrain participation, suggesting that inclusive environments must consider modesty, safety, and cultural sensitivity. These structural conditions play a critical role in shaping whether Muslim girls can engage in PE without compromising their beliefs.

From a sociocultural perspective, Dennaoui, Kolt, Guagliano, and George (2024) found that family support, peer networks, and cultural identity significantly influence adolescent girls' participation in physical activity. Similarly, Sofian, Omar-Fauzee, and Abd-Latif (2010) highlighted the continued influence of cultural expectations and family perceptions on Muslim women's attitudes toward sports. These studies collectively demonstrate that confidence and empowerment are not solely individual attributes but are socially constructed through interactions within family, peer, and institutional contexts.

Moreover, participation is deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts. Family expectations, peer relationships, and community norms have been shown to influence Muslim girls' engagement in physical activity, reinforcing the idea that empowerment is socially constructed rather than purely individual (Dennaoui et al., 2024; Sofian et al., 2010).

To further contextualize the development of confidence and empowerment among female Muslim students, this study is informed by key theoretical perspectives on behavior, identity, and agency. Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977) explains how individuals' beliefs in their capabilities influence their participation and persistence in activities such as physical education. Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 2000) highlights the process through which individuals gain control, develop critical awareness, and take action within their social environments. In addition, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides insight into how group membership and cultural identity shape attitudes, behaviors, and a sense of belonging. Together, these frameworks offer a lens for understanding how female Muslim students navigate the intersection of faith, gender, and participation in physical activity.

Despite the expanding body of literature on barriers and participation, limited attention has been given to the empowering experiences of female Muslim students who actively challenge stigma and engage in physical education. Stride and Allen (2024) noted that existing research predominantly focuses on constraints, leaving a gap in understanding how Muslim students develop confidence and self-worth through participation. Addressing this gap requires a shift from deficit-based perspectives toward narratives of agency, resilience, and identity negotiation.

In response, this study aimed to (1) explore how female Muslim students develop confidence and empowerment while participating in physical education classes, and (2) examine the cultural, religious, and social factors that influence their motivation and self-assurance. Rather than portraying Muslim students as passive recipients of restriction, this research positions them as active agents who negotiate and redefine their identities through participation in physical activity. By doing so, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of empowerment and offers insights into how inclusive and culturally responsive practices can foster confidence, equity, and meaningful engagement in physical education.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore how female Muslim students develop confidence and empowerment while navigating cultural and religious expectations in physical education (PE). A descriptive qualitative approach was selected because it allows for a rich and detailed understanding of participants' lived experiences within their natural context without imposing abstract theoretical interpretations. Consistent with qualitative inquiry, the study focused on how participants constructed meaning from their experiences, particularly in relation to identity, participation, and self-perception (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This design was deemed appropriate as the study aimed to capture nuanced personal narratives rather than measure variables or test hypotheses.

The study involved twelve (12) female Muslim senior high school students from selected schools in Zamboanga City, Philippines. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that participants possessed relevant lived experiences aligned with the research objectives. Inclusion criteria required that participants (1) identify as Muslim females, (2) be currently enrolled in PE classes, (3) have experience participating in physical activities, (4) be willing to share their experiences, and (5) provide informed consent, including parental consent where applicable. The sample size was considered sufficient as data saturation was achieved, wherein no new themes emerged from subsequent interviews. Zamboanga City was selected as the research locale due to its culturally diverse population and significant Muslim community, providing a meaningful context to examine the intersection of faith, gender, and physical education.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit in-depth narratives about participants' experiences of confidence and empowerment in PE. The instrument consisted of open-ended questions that allowed flexibility in probing responses while maintaining alignment with the study's objectives. The interview guide was validated by experts in education and qualitative research to ensure clarity, relevance, and cultural sensitivity. Data collection was conducted in a private and comfortable setting within the school premises to encourage openness and trust. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and field notes were taken to capture nonverbal cues and contextual details. All recordings were transcribed verbatim, and pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities. Data were securely stored in password-protected files to maintain confidentiality (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative data. The researcher engaged in repeated reading of transcripts to achieve data familiarization, followed by systematic coding of significant statements related to confidence, empowerment, and cultural negotiation. Codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflected shared participant experiences. To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed member checking, allowing participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations, and peer debriefing with research advisers to minimize bias. The analysis followed established procedures of rigor, including theme refinement and validation. Ethical standards were strictly upheld throughout the study, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity, in accordance with established qualitative research principles.

Results and Discussion

Research Objectives 1. To explore how female Muslim students develop confidence and empowerment while participating in physical education (PE) classes.

Question No. 1. What specific experiences or moments made you feel empowered while participating in sports or physical performances?

Theme 1: Redefining Self-Worth Through Achievement

Participants described empowerment as emerging from moments of observable achievement, such as successfully performing a skill, being selected for a task, or receiving recognition from teachers and peers. These instances served as turning points, providing evidence that they could meet performance expectations while maintaining their religious and cultural identities. Public acknowledgment—through praise or applause—was particularly influential, as it shifted participants' self-perception from hesitation to confidence. In this way, achievement functioned not only as skill development but also as social validation that challenged internalized stigma.

"When I was chosen to perform the routine at the school assembly... it felt like something inside me changed — from being quiet and watching, to wanting to be part of the team." (Participant 01)

*"There was one lesson when I finally nailed the long jump... I felt seen for what I could do, not what I had to cover."
(Participant 08)*

These findings are consistent with studies highlighting the role of recognition in fostering confidence and participation (Dagkas et al., 2011; Chen & Qiao, 2024; Dennaoui et al., 2024). However, they also suggest that achievement alone is insufficient for sustained empowerment. Without supportive structures and inclusive environments, the positive effects of recognition may be limited (Stride & Allen, 2024; Shabu et al., 2023).

Theme 2: Integrating Faith and Physical Participation

A second pathway to empowerment involved participants integrating their faith with their participation in physical education, reframing sport as compatible with their religious beliefs. Empowerment emerged when students adopted strategies that allowed them to engage without compromising modesty, such as modifying attire, requesting female-only spaces, or interpreting physical activity as part of caring for the body. These adjustments reflected not mere compliance but active negotiation, enabling participants to align their religious identity with physical participation and develop a sense of identity coherence.

"I used to think sport was something I couldn't do because of how I dressed... that small change meant I could do the things I loved while keeping my faith." (Participant 05)

"I realized I could be both faithful and strong." (Participant 12)

These outcomes support prior research showing that participation increases when PE practices are aligned with religious values and supported by responsive environments (Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012; Walseth, 2015; Chen & Qiao, 2024). However, they also indicate that such integration is context-dependent. In settings where institutional flexibility is limited, attempts to reconcile faith and participation may be unsuccessful, resulting in exclusion or partial engagement (Shabu et al., 2023; Fazal et al., 2019; Stride & Allen, 2024).

Theme 3: Supportive Relationships and Inclusive Spaces

The third theme highlights the critical role of supportive relationships and inclusive environments in fostering empowerment. Participants consistently described how encouragement from peers, teammates, and especially teachers enabled them to participate more confidently in physical education. These relationships provided both emotional support—reducing anxiety and building motivation—and practical support, such as accommodating attire or facilitating inclusive practices. Through this relational support, participants felt more confident to take risks, assume leadership roles, and actively engage in activities they might otherwise avoid.

"I started going to extra practice because my friend encouraged me... I felt like I had a right to that space." (Participant 03)

*"One teacher said to me... 'I can see your effort; that's what matters.'... that quiet support made me volunteer for a solo."
(Participant 11)*

These results align with existing research emphasizing the importance of culturally responsive teaching and social support in enhancing participation (Benn & Pfister, 2013; Dagkas et al., 2011; Chen & Qiao, 2024; Dennaoui et al., 2024). However, they also suggest that such support is not always consistently available. Studies have shown that unsupportive teachers or negative peer interactions can undermine participation, highlighting that empowerment is highly dependent on the presence of inclusive and affirming environments (Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012).

Question 2: How does participation in physical education influence female Muslim students' self-perception and identity in public and physical spaces?

Theme 1: Physical Autonomy and Increased Self-Efficacy

Participants described a shift in how they viewed their bodies and capabilities after engaging in PE. Initially shaped by expectations of modesty and restraint, they began to see themselves as capable, skilled, and confident in occupying physical space. This transformation reflected increased self-efficacy, as they became more willing to try new activities, persist through challenges, and take active roles in class.

"At first I thought my body was only for home... I still cover, but I am not invisible anymore." (Participant 02)

*"I realized my body could be strong and still be mine under the hijab... I tried out for the inter-class team, because I could."
(Participant 10)*

These reports suggest that participation in PE can enhance both confidence and autonomy among Muslim female students. As physical competence improves, students begin to redefine their identities—not as limited by modesty, but as capable individuals who can balance strength and faith within public and physical spaces.

Theme 2: Reframed Religious Identity: From Tension to Integration

Participants described a shift from viewing physical activity as conflicting with their faith to understanding it as compatible with, and even supportive of, their religious identity. Through participation in PE, they began to reinterpret movement and physical expression as part of caring for the body, aligning with values such as stewardship and dignity. This reframing was supported by practical adjustments (e.g., modest attire, female-only settings) and personal strategies such as prayer and intention-setting, allowing them to integrate faith with physical participation.

"I started thinking of PE as caring for my Amanah... I remind myself I am doing it for my health and for God." (Participant 06)

"I realized I could perform in a way that respected my faith and still be proud... it honors the body God gave me." (Participant 04)

These insights align with studies showing that Muslim girls can negotiate participation in ways that align with their religious values (Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012; Walseth, 2015; Hussain & Cunningham, 2023). However, this integration remains context-dependent, as limited institutional flexibility may hinder such reconciliation, resulting in continued tension or reduced participation (Shabu et al., 2023; Stride & Allen, 2024).

Theme 3: Public Presence, Representation, and Role-Modeling

Participants described a shift from private participation to a stronger sense of public presence and responsibility. Through PE, they gained opportunities to be seen, recognized, and take on leadership roles, which led them to view themselves as representatives of Muslim women in public spaces. This transformation extended beyond personal confidence, as participants began to see their visibility as a way to challenge stereotypes and inspire others, particularly younger girls.

"Those small conversations made me feel responsible — like I could show other girls that being Muslim didn't mean staying small in public." (Participant 07)

*"That changed how I saw myself... not as someone who should hide, but someone who could stand in front and guide."
(Participant 19)*

These data support research indicating that participation in sports can enhance visibility, leadership, and social influence among Muslim girls (Benn & Pfister, 2013; Dagkas et al., 2011; Dennaoui et al., 2024; Chen & Qiao, 2024). However, they also suggest that public visibility can be complex, as it may expose students to increased scrutiny in less supportive environments (Stride & Allen, 2024).

Question 3: *How do you deal with feelings of self-doubt or judgment from others during PE sessions?*

Theme 1: Cognitive Reframing and Faith-Centered Coping

Participants managed self-doubt through cognitive reframing grounded in religious meaning. They interpreted physical activity as an expression of stewardship, gratitude, or responsibility, which helped reduce internal conflict and lessen the impact of external judgment. Practices such as brief prayer, intention-setting, and focusing on personal progress enabled them to shift from anxiety to purpose, sustaining participation despite negative perceptions.

"Once I started timing my laps and keeping a small diary of progress, I stopped listening to the whispers. I say 'I did three more laps than last week' and that is stronger than whatever someone else thinks. My faith makes it easier — I tell myself fitness is part of being responsible for my body." (Participant 09)

"There was a day when someone shouted at me for covering up during warm-ups. I almost cried, but then I remembered what my mother told me: 'Do what you can with dignity.' I told myself their words don't define me, and that helped me finish the drills." (Participant 05)

These findings align with research showing that faith-based reframing and psychological coping strategies can reduce the effects of stigma and support continued participation (Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012; Hussain & Cunningham, 2023; Chen & Qiao, 2024). However, such strategies may be insufficient in highly restrictive environments, where structural barriers can still limit sustained engagement (Stride & Allen, 2024).

Theme 2: Selective Participation and Practical Modifications

Another coping strategy involved selectively engaging in activities while making practical adjustments to maintain participation. Students modified movements, requested alternative tasks, used modest sportswear, or positioned themselves in less visible spaces to reduce discomfort and scrutiny. These approaches allowed them to remain involved in PE while managing concerns related to modesty and judgment, reflecting a balance between participation and personal boundaries.

“During drills I would stay at the back or on the left where the boys didn’t look as much. I asked the teacher if I could do a modified version of the drill (less arm movement). He agreed. I know I missed a bit technically, but I could still build fitness without the staring.” (Participant 02)

“When Ramadan came, I told the teacher I would do less reps and focus on technique. I felt respected and could keep showing up rather than disappearing from class.” (Participant 13)

Prior studies similarly describe such adjustments as practical ways Muslim girls sustain involvement in physical activity (Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012; Benn & Pfister, 2013; Johan & Salleh, 2023; Fazal et al., 2019; Cardinas et al., 2025). While effective in maintaining engagement, these adaptations may also limit full participation and skill development when broader institutional support is lacking, potentially reinforcing unequal experiences in PE (Shabu et al., 2023).

Theme 3: Mobilizing Social Support and Assertive Boundary-Making

Another key coping approach involved drawing on support systems while asserting personal boundaries. Participants turned to peers, teachers, and family members for encouragement and advocacy, while also requesting adjustments such as private changing spaces or female-only activities. This combination of support and assertiveness helped reduce anxiety and enabled more confident participation, both emotionally and practically.

“I told my best friend how the boys laughed when I missed the drill. She said: ‘Come with me after school and we’ll practice together.’ That changed everything. Practicing with her I felt safe to try again. Later she told the coach about our practice and he began to give small encouragements in class. That doubled my courage.” (Participant 03)

“My older sister came to the school meeting and spoke up about the uniform. The school listened and allowed a modified top option. It felt empowering that my family could advocate — and teachers started noticing me more as a student, not just ‘the girl who covers.’” (Participant 07)

Existing research highlights similar patterns, showing that peer support, teacher responsiveness, and family involvement enhance confidence and inclusion in physical activity (Chen & Qiao, 2024; Dagkas et al., 2011; Benn & Pfister, 2013; Dennaoui et al., 2024). In contrast, limited or inconsistent support often leads to withdrawal or reduced participation, indicating that empowerment is closely tied to the presence of reliable social and institutional backing (Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012; Stride & Allen, 2024).

Research Objectives 2. To examine the motivational, cultural, and structural factors that shape participation among female Muslim students in physical education.

Question No. 1. *What factors motivate female Muslim students to participate in physical education despite cultural and religious constraints?*

Theme 1: Faith as Moral Motivation and Stewardship

Engagement in physical education was often driven by faith, with students viewing physical activity as part of their religious responsibility. Exercise was framed as *amanah* (trust) or stewardship of the body, transforming participation from a school requirement into a meaningful act aligned with worship, health, and service. This perspective strengthened intrinsic motivation and helped sustain participation despite concerns about modesty or judgment.

"I started telling myself that taking care of my body was like a trust from God. When I run now I think about being strong for prayers and for my family. That thought pushes me to attend, even when I feel shy about my hijab in class." (Participant 02)

"My imam once said, 'Good health helps you worship.' After that I kept thinking this is not against my faith. Doing PE felt like doing something for Allah — not against my modesty. It changed how I signed up for extra practice; it wasn't just for marks anymore." (Participant 09)

Related studies show that religious identity can motivate participation when activities align with faith-based values (Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012; Walseth, 2015; Hussain & Cunningham, 2023). Still, motivation alone may not be enough in restrictive settings, where structural barriers can limit full engagement despite strong personal commitment (Shabu et al., 2023).

Theme 2: Cultural Identity, Visibility, and Collective Responsibility

Motivation was also shaped by cultural identity and the desire to represent Muslim women positively in public spaces. Participation in PE carried social meaning, as students saw themselves as examples for others—especially younger girls—while challenging stereotypes and claiming visibility in underrepresented spaces. This sense of collective responsibility strengthened commitment and encouraged sustained participation.

"When I finish a drill wearing my sports hijab and someone says, 'Wow, she kept up,' I feel like I'm doing something for the girls back home who never see this. I want them to know it's possible." (Participant 05)

"Being seen as a Muslim girl doing sport felt heavy at first, like I represented a whole idea. But once I accepted it, I was motivated to succeed — not for myself only, but for other girls who might follow." (Participant 08)

Research similarly shows that visibility and representation can enhance engagement and aspirations among Muslim girls (Dagkas et al., 2011; Benn & Pfister, 2013; Dennaoui et al., 2024). At the same time, public participation may invite scrutiny in more conservative contexts, indicating that visibility can both empower and expose individuals to social pressure (Fazal et al., 2019).

Theme 3: Negotiation and Conditional Motivation

Motivation emerged as conditional, shaped by ongoing negotiation between faith, cultural expectations, and institutional conditions. Engagement increased when activities accommodated religious needs—such as modest attire, female-only spaces, or flexible scheduling—but declined when such support was absent. In this sense, motivation was not fixed; while faith and identity provided the drive to participate, actual involvement depended on how responsive the environment was to these needs.

"I wanted to join the team, but when the coach insisted we wear the standard uniform I asked if I could wear a longer top. He said maybe later. I waited and gradually I lost the energy to push. My motivation wasn't gone — it was waiting for the right conditions." (Participant 10)

"During Ramadan I wanted to keep going but it was hard. I told the teacher I'd do modified drills; she helped. That made me feel supported and kept my motivation alive." (Participant 12)

Previous studies similarly highlight that participation improves when students can negotiate conditions that respect their beliefs (Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012; Walseth, 2015; Chen & Qiao, 2024). In contrast, limited flexibility within schools may restrict engagement, even among highly motivated students (Stride & Allen, 2024).

Question 2: What challenges related to modesty or societal perception do you encounter, and how do you overcome them?

Theme 1: Negotiating Modesty in Public Physical Spaces

Maintaining modesty during movement-intensive activities emerged as a persistent challenge, particularly when PE uniforms conflicted with Islamic standards of *haya*. This created discomfort and heightened self-awareness, as students felt exposed while performing in public settings. Rather than withdrawing, many adapted by modifying attire, using sports hijabs, or requesting accommodations, allowing them to remain engaged while preserving a sense of dignity.

"Wearing the PE uniform made me very self-conscious. It was too short, and I could feel people staring. I started wearing leggings underneath and a long-sleeved shirt inside even if it was hot. It wasn't comfortable, but it made me feel dignified."
(Participant 07)

"It's not easy when everyone is wearing shorts and you're the only one covered. You feel different, but over time I told myself it's part of who I am — I can still play and follow my beliefs." (Participant 03)

Prior research similarly shows that Muslim girls often negotiate participation through clothing adjustments and alternative arrangements (Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012; Walseth, 2015; Stride & Allen, 2024). In less flexible environments, however, such conflicts may lead to withdrawal, underscoring the importance of supportive policies in sustaining participation (Fazal et al., 2019).

Theme 2: Challenging Stereotypes and Social Scrutiny

Stereotypes and societal expectations posed ongoing challenges, with students often perceived as less capable or overly restricted due to their religious identity. These assumptions came from peers, teachers, and even community members, creating pressure around public participation. In response, many chose to confront these views through performance, using their abilities to challenge misconceptions and assert their competence.

"Some people think if you wear a hijab, you can't move fast or play hard. I remember one boy saying, 'You'll trip on that scarf.' Instead of arguing, I played harder and proved him wrong. That felt empowering." (Participant 05)

"Even within my community, some older people said girls shouldn't be doing PE. But I reminded myself that being active doesn't make me less of a Muslim; it just shows we can balance faith and fitness." (Participant 09)

Existing studies highlight similar tensions, where Muslim girls navigate both cultural expectations and gendered stereotypes in sports (Dagkas et al., 2011; Benn & Pfister, 2013). While visibility can invite scrutiny, it can also foster empowerment—especially in supportive environments where confidence is reinforced rather than questioned (Dennaoui et al., 2024; Shabu et al., 2023).

Theme 3: Faith-Driven Resilience and Adaptive Strategies

Faith functioned as a key source of resilience, helping students manage discomfort and sustain participation despite challenges related to modesty and social judgment. Rather than acting as a restriction, it was framed as a guiding principle that encouraged patience (*sabr*), intentionality (*niyyah*), and self-respect, allowing participants to reinterpret physical activity as meaningful and aligned with their beliefs.

"Every time I feel embarrassed, I whisper a prayer. It reminds me that modesty is not only about clothing but about how I carry myself. That realization helps me face PE with dignity." (Participant 08)

"It's tiring sometimes to explain to others why I dress this way, but my faith gives me peace. I just focus on doing my best — that's my way of showing that modesty and strength can coexist." (Participant 12)

Research similarly shows that religious identity can support persistence and psychological adjustment in the face of stigma (Hussain & Cunningham, 2023; Chen & Qiao, 2024). At the same time, relying solely on personal resilience may be insufficient without supportive environments, highlighting the need for institutional responsiveness alongside individual coping (Fazal et al., 2019).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored how female Muslim students develop confidence and empowerment through participation in physical education (PE), with particular attention to the role of faith and cultural identity in shaping their experiences. The findings show that empowerment is not immediate but develops through a combination of achievement, identity negotiation, and supportive environments. As students experienced moments of success, integrated their faith with physical participation, and received encouragement from peers and teachers, they began to redefine themselves as capable and confident individuals within both physical and social spaces.

The results further highlight that empowerment is sustained through multiple interconnected factors. Faith served as a source of motivation and resilience, enabling students to cope with self-doubt, social scrutiny, and modesty-related

challenges. At the same time, supportive relationships and inclusive practices—such as flexible attire, teacher sensitivity, and peer encouragement—played a critical role in enabling participation. However, motivation and engagement were often conditional, as rigid policies and unsupportive environments could limit students' ability to fully participate despite strong personal commitment.

Rather than focusing solely on barriers, this study contributes to existing literature by emphasizing how Muslim female students actively negotiate, adapt, and construct empowerment within PE contexts. It highlights that confidence and self-worth are shaped not only by individual effort but also by the extent to which educational environments recognize and accommodate diverse identities. These findings suggest that empowerment emerges most effectively when personal agency is supported by inclusive institutional practices.

In light of these findings, schools are encouraged to adopt culturally responsive approaches, including flexible uniform policies, gender-sensitive instruction, and open dialogue around faith and participation. Future research may extend this work by examining the perspectives of teachers, parents, and administrators to better understand how institutional structures influence student experiences. Strengthening these support systems can help ensure that physical education becomes a more inclusive and empowering space for all students.

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Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data underlying the findings of this study may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Access will be granted in line with ethical standards and measures to ensure participants' confidentiality.

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Appendices

This study does not include any appendices.