

Between Faith and Fitness: Understanding the Reluctance of Female Muslim Students toward Physical Education Performance

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Abstract. This study explored the factors influencing the reluctance of female Muslim students to actively participate in physical education (PE) activities and examined how cultural, religious, and personal beliefs shape their comfort levels, perceptions, and participation. Guided by a descriptive qualitative research design, the study involved twenty (20) Muslim female students from selected secondary schools in Zamboanga and Tawi-Tawi cities who participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and insights related to participation barriers. Findings revealed that modesty-related concerns, particularly regarding PE uniforms and changing facilities, were major sources of discomfort and hesitation. Participants expressed unease in wearing standard PE attire that conflicted with their religious beliefs. Mixed-gender settings and the lack of female instructors further reduced students' willingness to actively engage in physical activities. In addition, inflexible school policies, including strict uniform requirements and the absence of accommodations during fasting periods, reinforced students' feelings of exclusion and internal conflict. These factors collectively influenced students' selective participation and reduced engagement in PE classes. The study concluded that the reluctance of Muslim female students does not stem from a lack of interest in physical activity, but rather from institutional and cultural misalignments that fail to consider their faith-based needs. The findings emphasize the importance of developing culturally responsive and inclusive PE programs that incorporate modest uniform options, gender-sensitive instruction, and appropriate religious accommodations. This study provides valuable insights for educators, school administrators, and policymakers aiming to promote equitable, respectful, and empowering participation in physical education.

Introduction

Public-health and physical-education research consistently shows that many Muslim women and girls participate less in physical education (PE) and organized sport than their non-Muslim peers, and that this disparity is multifactorial rather than reducible to a single cause. Ethnographic and interview studies have identified modesty expectations, gender mixing in PE, and school dress-code practices as recurrent barriers to participation (Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012; Walseth, 2015). These investigations emphasize that reluctance is not merely an individual trait but arises at the intersection of institutional policies, everyday curricular practices, and community norms that collectively shape students' comfort and choices in PE contexts.

A closely related body of work highlights practical, embodied concerns—especially those tied to clothing, bathing/changing arrangements, and single-sex access—that frequently precipitate reduced engagement. Hamzeh and Oliver's (2012) study

of adolescent girls, for example, documents how swimming lessons and mixed changing rooms trigger exclusionary moments. Other researchers and practitioner reports show that when schools or sport providers offer women-only sessions, private changing facilities, or modest swimwear options, female participation and subjective comfort often improve—yet such accommodations remain inconsistently implemented (Women in Sport, 2019; Muslimah Sports Association, 2023).

Religion should not be treated as a monolithic or deterministic explanation. Several qualitative studies show that religiosity intersects with ethnicity, migration status, parental preferences, and peer culture to produce diverse responses among Muslim girls and young women: some adopt strict avoidance of mixed-gender exercise, others seek negotiated accommodations, and still others reinterpret religious requirements in ways that enable selective participation (Benn, Pfister, & Jawad, 2010; Walseth, 2015). Reviews and critical appraisals of the literature further caution against essentializing “Muslim girls”; rather, they call for attention to the heterogeneity of belief and practice that shapes embodied participation in sport and PE.

Research from a variety of regional contexts corroborates the centrality of structural and social determinants. Mixed-methods and qualitative studies conducted in the Gulf, Australia, and the UK demonstrate that parental attitudes, perceived teacher behaviors, the availability (or lack) of female-only facilities, and the presence of role models all influence whether Muslim female students participate in PE and extracurricular sport (Aljehani, 2022; Alamri, 2013; Burton, Barber, & Khan, 2021). Policy and program reports likewise identify school timetabling, teacher training in culturally responsive pedagogy, and uniform policy as levers that can either reduce or exacerbate participation gaps (Sport New Zealand; Women in Sport, 2019).

Methodological reviews point to an important limitation of the literature to date. Although many studies robustly document barriers and recommend institutional accommodations, relatively few in-depth qualitative studies center female students’ own lived meanings and moment-by-moment negotiations in PE settings. A critical appraisal of qualitative work on Muslim women’s perceived barriers found that much of the focus-group literature was of low-to-moderate reporting quality and that the field would benefit from richer, contextually sensitive qualitative work. Similarly, studies of university-aged women in conservative contexts show that barriers and enablers are dynamic and tied to everyday school experiences (Aljehani, 2022; Burton et al., 2021), suggesting the need for research that links belief and practice at the level of specific classroom and changing-room encounters.

In so doing, the literature pointed to a clear empirical gap. Existing work identifies what barriers tend to exist (dress, gender mixing, facilities, teacher attitudes), and it offers promising accommodations; however, there are comparatively few fine-grained, student-centered accounts that describe how cultural, religious, and personal beliefs are negotiated during PE activities and how those negotiations shape comfort, performance, and sustained participation. This motivated the present qualitative inquiry, whose goals were to (1) explore the factors influencing the reluctance of female Muslim students to actively participate in PE activities and (2) examine how cultural, religious, and personal beliefs shape their perceptions, comfort levels, and participation in PE classes. Foregrounding students lived experiences and moment-to-moment meanings, the study aims to produce actionable insights for culturally responsive PE practice such as teacher professional development, modest uniform design, and timetabling or facility solutions that go beyond generic accommodations to address how barriers are actually lived and potentially remedied.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the factors influencing the reluctance of female Muslim students to participate in physical education (PE). Anchored in a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm, the study recognized that participants’ experiences and meanings are socially constructed and must be understood from their perspectives (Sandelowski, 2000; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach enabled the researchers to capture nuanced, context-specific insights into how cultural, religious, and personal beliefs shape participation in PE.

The study involved 20 female Muslim students with current or recent experience in PE classes from selected secondary schools. A purposive sampling strategy, complemented by maximum variation and selective snowball sampling, was used to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. Inclusion criteria required participants to identify as Muslim, have relevant experience in PE, and provide informed consent or assent. These sampling strategies prioritized depth and diversity of experiences, consistent with qualitative research standards (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. The interview guide was developed from existing literature and covered topics such as PE experiences, religious beliefs, modesty practices, perceived barriers, coping strategies, and suggested accommodations. Interviews were audio-recorded with

permission, supplemented by field notes, and transcribed verbatim. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, ensuring sufficient depth and richness of information.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This involved familiarization with the data, inductive coding, development and refinement of themes, and the construction of a coherent narrative supported by participant excerpts. To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and iterative review of codes and themes (Nowell et al., 2017). These processes ensured that the findings accurately reflected participants' experiences while maintaining analytical rigor.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Approval was obtained from relevant authorities, and informed consent (and parental consent where applicable) was secured prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of codes and secure data storage. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and interviews were conducted with cultural sensitivity and respect for religious values. These measures ensured adherence to ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and justice (Orb et al., 2001; Israel & Hay, 2006).

Results and Discussion

Research Objectives 1. To explore the factors influencing the reluctance of female Muslim students to actively participate in physical education activities.

Question No. 1. What aspects of physical education classes make you feel hesitant or uncomfortable to participate?

Theme 1: Dress Code, Modesty, and Embodied Discomfort

A significant number of participants (14 out of 20) expressed discomfort with PE uniforms and dress codes that conflicted with their cultural and religious expectations of modesty. Many students described feelings of unease when wearing the required PE attire (shorts, short-sleeved shirts, or swimwear) or changing clothes in non-private spaces. They emphasized that modesty is a key element of their faith, and PE classes often placed them in situations that made them feel exposed and self-conscious. This discomfort frequently led to partial participation or complete withdrawal from specific PE activities such as running, swimming, or dancing.

"When we had to wear the PE kit — the short sleeve top and the tight shorts — I felt uneasy. I kept thinking whether people were looking at me, and I wished I could wear the long skirt and long sleeves like my usual faith dress." (Participant 04)

"The changing room was open and many boys walked past. I felt I couldn't change properly or leave my hijab off, so I just stopped doing the swimming part of PE." (Participant 11)

The issue of dress codes and modesty has been well documented in the literature. Hamzeh and Oliver (2012) highlighted how Muslim girls often experience discomfort due to attire that contradicts their modesty values, particularly in swimming and mixed-gender PE settings. Similarly, Walseth (2015) found that Muslim students associate PE attire with cultural and religious tension, leading to reduced participation. In Pakistan, Fazal et al. (2019) found that while modesty is a major barrier, it often interacts with institutional policies, making participation even more challenging.

Theme 2: Gender Mixing and Teacher Attitudes

A considerable portion of participants (11 out of 20) reported mixed-gender settings and teacher attitudes as major sources of discomfort. They explained that being in PE classes with male students limited their willingness to participate actively, particularly in activities involving physical movement or uniforms they perceived as immodest. Some participants also mentioned feeling unsupported or misunderstood by teachers, who either dismissed or failed to accommodate their religious needs. The lack of female-only changing rooms or instructors intensified this discomfort.

"In our PE class there were both boys and girls, and when we moved into the hall the boys stayed behind but still some older boys looked in. I felt exposed and didn't want to raise my hand or join the activity fully." (Participant 02)

"When the instructor was a male, I felt less comfortable. I would wait until he turned his back or just sat out some drills. If a female teacher was there I would participate more." (Participant 15)

This theme aligns with international research. Fazal et al. (2019) observed that gender mixing remains a persistent barrier for Muslim girls in Pakistan. Similarly, Aljehani (2022) found that single-sex classes improved Muslim female students' participation and comfort. In Indonesia, Pratiwi et al. (2024) reported that female nursing students adhering to religious norms were less likely to engage in mixed-gender PE due to modesty concerns. On the other hand, Johan and Salleh (2020)

suggest that appropriate accommodations—such as female instructors and segregated classes—can mitigate these barriers and increase participation.

Theme 3: Institutional Practices and Faith–School Alignment

A notable number of participants (10 out of 20) emphasized the misalignment between school PE policies and their religious practices as a major factor in their reluctance. Students mentioned inflexible uniform policies, lack of alternative activities during fasting periods, and the physical strain caused by wearing layered modest clothing during intense activities. Several reported feeling that the school did not fully understand or support their faith-based needs, leaving them with limited options but to avoid participation.

“When I had to run the 100-metre sprint wearing my long sleeves and skirt, I was so hot and tired and I felt embarrassed because I was slower. I decided I would skip the next unit and just do a written assignment instead.” (Participant 06)

“I’m fasting during Ramadan — the PE teacher didn’t ask me, but I felt I couldn’t join the class normally. I was just standing out. It made me avoid that lesson altogether.” (Participant 13)

Cardinas et al. (2024) noted that female Muslim students in the Philippines often face institutional inflexibility, particularly regarding uniforms and fasting accommodations, which leads to reduced participation. Fazal et al. (2019) also pointed out that institutional policies often ignore cultural and religious practices, thereby reinforcing reluctance. In contrast, Hamzeh and Oliver (2012) suggested that when schools actively integrate culturally responsive PE approaches, such as flexible clothing options and activity modifications, student participation significantly improves.

Question No. 2. What emotional or psychological experiences do you go through when asked to perform physical tasks in front of others?

Theme 1: Performance Anxiety and Fear of Judgment

A majority of participants (15 out of 20) described strong performance-related anxiety when required to perform physical tasks in front of peers. Feelings included nervousness, shaking, a racing heart, and worry about being watched or judged by classmates. Several participants said that these symptoms intensified when they believed their attire or body did not conform to classroom norms example layered modest clothing making them slower, leading to anticipatory anxiety before class and avoidance during tasks.

“When the teacher suddenly asked me to run to the front and demonstrate the drill, my heart started pounding so fast I could barely focus. I could feel everyone’s eyes on me, and it made me even more nervous. I kept thinking I might trip or mess up because I had too many clothes on, and moving felt so awkward.” (Participant 01)

“Whenever I have to speak or do a demonstration, my hands start to tremble and my voice shakes. I can feel the weight of everyone’s stares, and it makes me so uneasy. It doesn’t even feel like they’re watching what I’m doing — it feels like they’re judging my body more than my actual skill.” (Participant 08)

McIntosh-Dalmedo et al. (2023) found that giving adolescent females a choice of PE kit significantly improved their body esteem in the PE context, suggesting that clothing-related self-monitoring can undermine confidence and participation. Conversely, Nathan et al. (2021) conducted a large randomized trial to assess whether switching to more activity-friendly uniforms would increase physical activity among primary school students but found no significant change in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, indicating that clothing modifications alone may not fully reduce anxiety or judgment perceptions in performance contexts.

Theme 2: Embarrassment, Shame, and Body-Image Concerns

Eleven participants (11 out of 20) reported feelings of embarrassment or shame tied to bodily exposure, perceived body image, or being evaluated visually by peers. These emotions were often described as acute and bodily (blushing, wishing to disappear) and were sometimes linked to cultural standards around modesty and female appearance. Such shame reduced students’ willingness to be physically active or to be seen performing movements that highlighted body shape or movement such as aerobic stunts and dancing.

“During dance class I felt all eyes on my hips — I felt embarrassed and wished I could hide. I thought, ‘They will laugh if I do it wrong,’ so I just stepped back.” (Participant 05)

"When I took off my outer layer for the PE lesson I felt so exposed. I was thinking about how my tummy looked and I felt shame in front of classmates." (Participant 12)

Hamzeh and Oliver (2012) documented Muslim girls' reluctance stemming from swimsuit/uniform exposure and body-related embarrassment, particularly in swimming and mixed settings. Walseth (2015) similarly reported that religiosity and modesty concerns intersected with feelings of shame and lowered participation. Peng et al. (2023) synthesized qualitative findings on young women's barriers to physical activity and emphasized that body-image and shame can also be driven by universal adolescent concerns and media influences, not solely by religious norms—suggesting interventions must be sensitive to both cultural and general psychosocial drivers.

Theme 3: Reduced Self-Efficacy and Social Avoidance

Nine participants (9 out of 20) described an ongoing sense of low self-efficacy for physical tasks in social settings, often resulting in social withdrawal or avoidance behaviors (e.g., feigning illness, opting for written alternatives, or attending but remaining passive). These participants reported that repeated negative experiences (mocking, slower performance due to layered clothing, or teacher rebukes) lowered their confidence over time and made them expect poor performance, which in turn reduced future participation. This theme is also echoed in sport-participation literature showing how repeated exclusion or judgment undermines confidence and reduces activity engagement.

"After I failed the relay because I was heavy from my layers, kids laughed. I felt I was always going to be the slow one — after that I stopped trying and I just stood by the teacher." (Participant 10)

"I sometimes tell myself I cannot do those drills as well as others. So I don't volunteer. Even if I want to try, I already expect to fail." (Participant 16)

Bandura's self-efficacy theory explains how beliefs about capability influence action; Fazal et al. (2019) and Benn, Pfister, and Jawad (2010) document how social experiences can shape confidence and participation among Muslim females. In contrast, some intervention studies indicate that targeted skill training and culturally sensitive coaching can restore self-efficacy and increase participation (Johan & Salleh, 2020; García-Monge, 2023), suggesting that lowered self-efficacy is not irreversible.

Research Objectives 2. To examine how cultural, religious, and personal beliefs shape their perceptions, comfort levels, and participation in PE classes.

Question No. 1. *How do your religious or cultural beliefs guide your decisions in participating in PE activities?*

Theme 1: Religious Doctrine and Modesty Norms

Thirteen out of twenty participants (13/20) reported that explicit teachings and internalized norms about modesty and appropriate gender interactions directly guided their decisions about PE participation. These participants described reading religious obligations such as requirements around covering the body, avoiding close contact with unrelated males as non-negotiable rules that limited what they felt able to wear, how they changed clothes, and which activities they considered permissible. For many, modesty was not merely a preference but a faith-based duty; when PE requirements appeared to conflict with that duty like mandatory short sleeves or mixed swimming lessons, participants either modified their participation for instance wearing additional layers, avoiding swimming or abstained entirely. The participants framed these decisions as adherence to established religious norms rather than simple social choice.

"My parents taught me that covering is part of being a good Muslim. So even if the coach said everyone must wear the PE shorts, I felt I could not do it — I just could not show that much skin." (Participant 03)

"The idea of changing in front of male classmates felt wrong to me; my faith tells me to avoid unnecessary exposure, so I don't join activities that require that." (Participant 08)

Hamzeh and Oliver (2012) documented how Muslim girls' interpretations of modesty influenced whether they engaged in activities like swimming or those requiring standard PE kits. Walseth (2015) found that religiosity, interpreted as prescriptive norms about dress and gender mixing, played a central role in shaping Muslim girls' participation in PE in Norway. Fazal et al. (2019) similarly observed that religious prescriptions about modesty frequently operated as primary constraints in Pakistan, though they noted interactions with institutional policy.

Theme 2: Negotiation, Pragmatism, and Contextual Interpretation of Belief

Nine out of twenty participants (9/20) reported that religious and cultural beliefs were interpreted flexibly and negotiated according to context. These participants described employing pragmatic strategies — such as wearing long-sleeved undershirts, requesting female-only sessions, or accepting modified roles (e.g., scorekeeper, demonstrator from the side)

— to reconcile faith commitments with a desire to remain involved. For them, religious guidance served as a frame for negotiation rather than an absolute prohibition; the degree of accommodation offered by schools, the attitudes of teachers, and peer norms influenced whether and how negotiation succeeded. In some cases participants reported that family members or religious advisers had endorsed pragmatic accommodations, which increased their willingness to participate.

"I asked my teacher if I could wear a long sleeve under the PE shirt and she said okay. I joined more after that — I think my religion allows adjustments if modesty is kept." (Participant 14)

"Sometimes I did the drills wearing my skirt and it was hard, but my mother said it was better to try and be active than to stop completely — so I negotiated with the coach for lighter exercises." (Participant 19)

Benn, Pfister, and Jawad (2010) emphasised that Muslim women and girls often negotiate religious norms and that these negotiations shape sport participation in varied ways across contexts. Aljehani (2022) reported that in some Saudi and Gulf contexts students used pragmatic adaptations (timing, attire modifications) to remain active. The Muslimah Sports Association (2023) census and reports documented how practical accommodations (modest kits, women-only sessions) enabled participation, demonstrating how negotiated solutions operate in practice.

Theme 3: Belief as a Source of Motivation for Health and Community

Six out of twenty participants (6/20) indicated that their religious and cultural beliefs sometimes encouraged participation, framing physical activity as stewardship of the body, a means to maintain health for family/community responsibilities, or a conduit for social solidarity with other women. These participants described religious teachings about caring for one's health and serving the community as motivating factors that could override hesitancy when practical accommodations were available. For these students, faith did not only pose constraints; it also supplied reasons to seek participation under acceptable conditions — for example, by advocating for women-only classes or modest activewear.

"My religion says we should look after our health. So, when there was a women-only aerobics class, I joined because it felt right for my faith and for my body." (Participant 17)

"I want to be healthy so I can help my family. My imam once said that keeping fit is part of caring for the trust God gave us, so that sometimes encouraged me to find ways to be active." (Participant 20)

Benn et al. (2010) discussed how faith can function not only as a constraint but also as a resource that motivates participation when culturally appropriate opportunities exist. Burton, Barber, and Khan (2021) found that Emirati female students sometimes cited health and family responsibilities — framed within cultural/religious values — as reasons to engage in physical activity. Peng et al. (2023) noted that interventions that align health messages with cultural or religious values can increase women's engagement in physical activity.

Question number 2: How do you balance your faith commitments with the academic expectations of physical education?

Theme 1: Negotiation through Practical Accommodations and Substitutions

Thirteen of the twenty participants described balancing faith commitments and PE expectations primarily through negotiation—seeking practical accommodations that allowed them to fulfill academic requirements without violating religious norms. These students recounted strategies such as wearing modest undershirts beneath official PE tops, requesting permission to keep their hijab on during activities, asking to perform alternative assessments such as fitness logs, written reflections, or skill demonstrations from the sidelines, or arranging to change in private spaces. For many, negotiation was a continual, context-dependent process: they assessed the perceived flexibility of teachers, the strictness of school policy, and the presence of sympathetic administrators before deciding whether to push for an accommodation. Where teachers responded positively, students reported greater willingness to participate; where teachers were inflexible, negotiation often resulted in partial compliance or withdrawal.

"I talked to my PE teacher at the start of the term and explained that I always wear long sleeves and a skirt for religious reasons. She agreed I could wear a long sleeve under the PE shirt and that I could swap the running drills for a paced walk on some days. She even let me do a written reflection once instead of the sprint test when I was fasting. That made me feel included and I tried harder to join." (Participant 07)

"It wasn't always easy. One teacher listened and allowed a hijab-friendly swim top once, but the next term another teacher insisted on the standard kit and didn't accept my alternative. I had to go to the guidance counselor and my mom wrote a note. Eventually they let me do a make-up assignment. So I learned that sometimes I had to negotiate up the chain—talk to the teacher, then the principal—if I wanted the accommodation." (Participant 18)

The literature supports this picture of negotiated accommodation. Hamzeh and Oliver (2012) documented how female Muslim students negotiated participation by seeking modest alternatives and how teacher flexibility shaped outcomes. Benn et al. (2010) traced similar negotiation patterns in diverse contexts, and policy-oriented reports from organizations like the Muslimah Sports Association (2023) emphasized that modest kits, alternative assessments, and women-only opportunities were practical accommodations that increased participation.

Theme 2: Balancing Religious Duty and Academic Responsibility

Eleven participants described a strategy of emotional and practical compartmentalization: they actively prioritized immediate religious obligations or concerns at certain moments (for example during Ramadan, prayer times, or when modesty felt especially salient) and prioritized academic expectations at other times. This pattern often involved careful planning and self-regulation. Students explained that during religious events or fasting periods they conserved energy, opted for non-physical assessment alternatives when available, communicated proactively with teachers about limitations, and scheduled makeup work when their religious commitments permitted more active engagement. Others emphasized internal prioritization decisions in which faith obligations took temporary precedence when conflicts were acute, but they later compensated academically to avoid negative grade consequences.

“During Ramadan I didn’t want to run or do heavy drills so I told my teacher I was fasting. I still attended but I walked at the back and did timings instead of sprints. After Ramadan I did extra practice and the teacher marked my portfolio so my grades didn’t suffer. It felt like balancing duties—my faith first for those weeks, but I made sure to catch up afterward.” (Participant 02)

“Sometimes I decided to skip an activity that felt too exposing, and I accepted that I might have to work harder on the written parts. It wasn’t ideal, but I felt that for my faith I couldn’t compromise. Later I asked for extra tasks so my final grade would be okay. It was a constant push and pull.” (Participant 12)

Empirical work supports this dynamic approach. Walseth (2015) reported that Muslim girls enacted situational compromises—shifting participation based on religious cycles and perceived risks—while Fazal et al. (2019) pointed out that many students use time-bound strategies such as avoiding certain activities during religious periods and compensatory academic efforts to balance faith and school requirements.

Overall, students in this study showed that faith and school responsibilities can be balanced when there is understanding and flexibility. In short, students’ faith was not just a barrier—it also guided them to find fair and responsible ways to meet both religious and academic goals. Schools that allow small adjustments, like flexible uniforms or alternative activities, can help students feel respected and included.

Question number 3: What forms of support or adjustment do you think could make PE participation more comfortable and inclusive for Muslim female students?

Theme 1: Modest attire, women-only sessions, and private facilities

Thirteen out of twenty participants (13/20) recommended tangible, material adjustments—chiefly modest PE clothing options, women-only sessions (or women-only changing/swim hours), and private or female-only changing facilities—as the most immediate and effective means to increase comfort and inclusion. Participants explained that when they could wear longer tops, leggings, or hijab-friendly sportswear, they felt physically less exposed and more able to move; when schools scheduled women-only sessions or provided private changing times, the anxiety of being seen or of removing outer garments decreased substantially. For many, these adjustments were described as enabling rather than merely accommodating: modest kits and private facilities permitted fuller participation and reduced the emotional labor of continuous self-monitoring. Participants stressed that the availability of these options needed to be reliable and officially sanctioned like must be embedded in school policy rather than granted informally on a case-by-case basis.

“When the school organised a women-only swimming hour and allowed modest swimwear, I actually went into the water for the first time in a long while. I remember standing by the pool thinking ‘I can do this now’ — the women-only time meant I didn’t worry about boys peeking or changing in front of them. And having a proper modest swim top that fits well made movement easier; it wasn’t about showing or hiding, it was about being able to swim without fear.” (Participant 03)

“I asked to wear a long sleeve under the PE shirt and the school gave me permission on paper. That mattered. Even when I sweated and it felt heavy, knowing it was allowed made me show up. But one term the PE teacher said it was against the rules and I felt singled out again. So it was not just about the clothes — it was how consistently those options were supported.” (Participant 12)

Empirical and policy literature strongly supports these recommendations. Hamzeh and Oliver's ethnographic work (2012) identified swimwear and uniform concerns as central barriers and documented how modest alternatives enabled participation. Insight and sector reports from Women in Sport (UK) and the Muslimah Sports Association (UK) present extensive evidence that modest kit options, women-only sessions, and privacy in changing facilities increase uptake and sustained engagement among Muslim women and girls (Women in Sport, 2019; Muslimah Sports Association, 2023). Aotearoa New Zealand's "Building cultural inclusion" report similarly highlighted that practical facility and timetable adaptations (women-only times, private changing) were among the most effective adjustments to increase accessibility for Muslim women (Sport New Zealand, 2020). These sources consistently recommend embedding such accommodations into policy so they are normalized rather than exceptional.

Theme 2: Teacher training, culturally responsive pedagogy, and flexible assessment

Eleven participants (11/20) emphasized the importance of teacher awareness, empathy, and practical training in creating inclusive PE environments. Participants often contrasted teachers who were willing to listen and make simple adjustments (timing, alternative tasks, gentle encouragement) with those who were rigid, dismissive, or unaware of religious constraints. Many students indicated that small but skillful pedagogical choices—such as offering alternative assessments (fitness logs, skill journals), providing private demonstration options, or sequencing activities so that modesty-sensitive students were not suddenly required to remove outer layers—made them feel respected and therefore more likely to participate. Participants also argued that teachers who demonstrated culturally informed classroom management reduced stigma and peer teasing, which in turn improved willingness to engage.

"One of our PE teachers had a short training session on cultural needs and then simply asked students privately if any of them needed alternative roles during certain units. That single move changed the classroom tone. People weren't singled out and I felt the teacher understood my position without making it a spectacle." (Participant 08)

"When a teacher explained that she knew about Ramadan and offered modified drills rather than making a big announcement, I felt included. On the other hand, the teacher who loudly told me I must follow the kit rules made me feel ashamed and I avoided class the next week. So how teachers explained and implemented rules mattered a lot." (Participant 17)

The literature supports the centrality of teacher training and culturally responsive pedagogies. Walseth (2015) showed that religiosity and class dynamics interacted with teacher attitudes to influence Muslim girls' experiences in PE, and Hamzeh and Oliver (2012) argued that teacher flexibility and understanding were crucial to negotiating participation. Recent systematic syntheses also suggest that instructor training and culturally tailored program design (including flexible assessment methods) are effective facilitators of participation for women facing cultural constraints (Peng et al., 2023). Policy documents and practice guides produced by advocacy organizations further recommend professional development for PE teachers on cultural inclusion and alternative assessment strategies as best practices (Women in Sport, 2019; Sport New Zealand, 2020).

Theme 3: Policy support, scheduling, and community engagement

Nine participants (9/20) highlighted the need for formalized school-level policies—clear written guidelines on modest kits, alternative assessments, Ramadan adjustments, and women-only opportunities—and for active engagement with families and community leaders. These students reported that community endorsement (for example, a letter from mosque leaders or parental support) made school administrators more receptive; similarly, formal policies reduced the need for repeated negotiation and eliminated perceptions that accommodations were "special favors." Participants also recommended practical scheduling changes (e.g., women-only hours at local pools, PE timetabling that avoids peak prayer times or offers easier options during Ramadan) and the creation of formal feedback channels (student councils, parent-teacher committees) to monitor and sustain inclusion measures.

Supporting Excerpts:

"At first the school said no to alternate swimwear. After the parents' group and a local women's committee wrote a joint request and the mosque imam supported it, the school changed the rule. The written policy made future accommodations straightforward — now it was not me asking for special treatment, it was the school following its own guidelines." (Participant 20)

"We needed schedule changes during Ramadan. Instead of canceling PE, the school allowed lighter activities and gave graded alternatives; they posted a clear policy so teachers used the same approach across classes. The consistency made it easier for everyone to plan." (Participant 05)

The role of formal policy and community engagement is well documented. Aljehani (2022) reported that institutional policy and clear administrative support improved uptake of physical activity among female students in Saudi higher-education contexts. Sport New Zealand and other sector reports emphasized that embedding inclusive practices into policy—rather

than relying on ad hoc arrangements—was essential for sustainability and equity (Sport New Zealand, 2020; Women in Sport, 2019). The Muslimah Sports Association’s census and case studies further illustrated how community advocacy and partnership with providers led to scaled programs (Muslimah Sports Association, 2023). The literature also cautioned that policy solutions must be co-designed with communities to avoid unintended segregation or tokenistic measures; inclusive policy is most effective when it combines practical adjustments with teacher training and community input (Peng et al., 2023; Benn et al., 2010).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to explore the reluctance of female Muslim students toward participation in physical education (PE) activities and to examine how cultural, religious, and personal beliefs shape their comfort, perceptions, and engagement in school-based physical programs. The findings revealed that the issue extends far beyond individual preference—it is rooted in the intersection of faith, gender, and institutional practices that often fail to account for students’ cultural and religious realities.

The results demonstrated that modesty-related concerns, mixed-gender interactions, and institutional inflexibility were the most influential factors contributing to students’ hesitation and withdrawal from PE. These themes align with earlier studies (Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012; Walseth, 2015; Fazal et al., 2019) but also extend the conversation by offering contextual evidence from the Philippine Muslim community, a population underrepresented in the global literature. Unlike prior research that mainly identified barriers in Western or Middle Eastern contexts, this study illuminated how these issues are locally experienced and negotiated within Philippine schools, where Muslim students often constitute a minority.

The study addressed a critical empirical gap: the lack of qualitative accounts detailing how Muslim girls experience, interpret, and navigate their faith commitments in PE spaces. The narratives revealed that students’ reluctance was not due to apathy or lack of interest, but rather the absence of faith-sensitive structures—including modest uniform options, private changing facilities, and culturally aware instruction.

The study therefore underscored the urgent need for inclusive and culturally responsive PE programs. Schools should adopt flexible dress codes, consider single-sex sessions where feasible, provide alternative activities during fasting periods, and equip PE teachers with cultural competency training. These measures would not only enhance Muslim girls’ comfort and participation but also embody the educational principles of equity, diversity, and respect. This study contributed to the growing body of literature that reframes Muslim students’ participation not as a cultural obstacle but as an opportunity for curricular innovation and intercultural understanding. Ultimately, fostering inclusion in PE can strengthen both physical health and social cohesion, allowing every student—regardless of faith or background—to engage confidently and meaningfully in physical education.

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Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Access to the data is subject to ethical considerations and the protection of participants' confidentiality.

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Appendices

No appendices are attached to this study.