

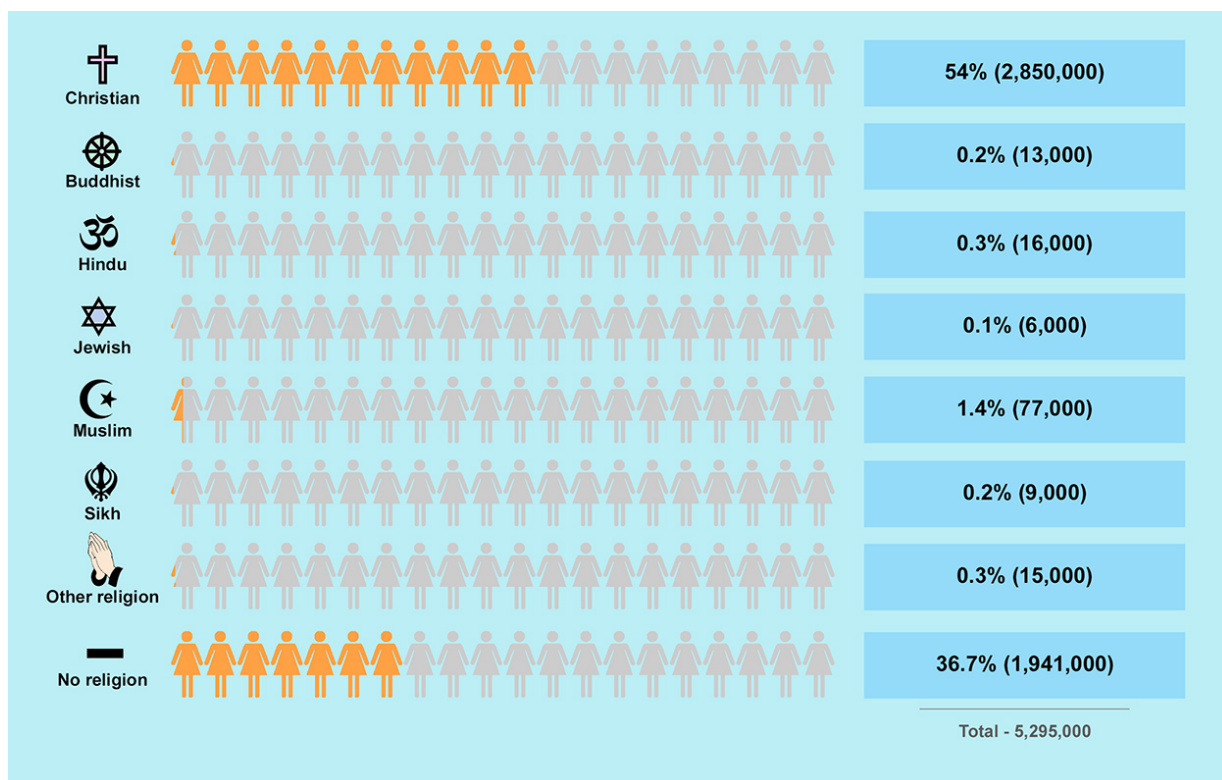
Religion/ belief and sport

About this learning note

This learning note has been developed to provide a broad overview of the important issues around religion and belief in sport, to provide an introduction to the topic. This approach has been taken based on feedback from the research with people in the sporting system in Scotland.

What is the profile of the population?

In Scotland, the 2011 Census shows that over half of the population identifies as Christian. More than a third of the population identifies as having no religion, and 2.5 per cent identify with a minority religion or belief. Although this is a small percentage, this equates to 136,000 people identifying with a minority religion or belief.



Note: A number of people chose not to answer the question about religion within the Census, meaning the figures do not add up to 100 per cent.

What are the important issues?

There is very limited evidence about sports participation in relation to religion and belief in Scotland. Due to the small proportion of people in Scotland identifying with non-Christian religions, it is not possible to undertake robust analysis of trends in relation to participation in sports by religion.

1. Lower participation rates for Muslim women

Despite the lack of evidence, the data available for Scotland does suggest that people with a Muslim faith are less likely take part in sport, with particularly low levels of sports participation among Muslim women¹. This is supported by research conducted by the Equality and Human Rights Commission² which shows that the lowest rate of sports participation is for Muslims. The vast majority of research into religion and sport focuses on the Muslim faith.

2. Higher participation rates for people with no religion

Data for Scotland also indicates that people with no religion are more likely to participate in sport than people identifying with a religion³. However, analysis by the Scottish Government⁴ has highlighted that people with no religion tend to be younger – which could be the reason for this correlation. Younger people are much less likely to be religious and much more likely to be physically active.

3. Issues around sport and sectarianism

In some parts of Scotland there are divisions between different religious groups. This can impact on society and on sport. The historical links of some clubs and the traditional ethnic and religious make up of their supporters have led to them being held as symbols of religious, cultural and political beliefs.

Research conducted by ScotCen⁵ found that the majority of people in Scotland felt that sectarianism is a problem. Most (88%) of those interviewed identified football as a contributing factor, and over half (55%) said they thought it was the main factor.

¹ Active Scotland Outcomes: Indicator Equality Analysis, Scottish Government, 2015

² EHRC and Sporting Equals (Undated) *Equality and human rights in sport and physical activity*.
[www.ageuk.org.uk/Documents/EN-GB/EHRC_Web\(1\).pdf?dtrk=true](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/Documents/EN-GB/EHRC_Web(1).pdf?dtrk=true)

³ Scottish Government Equality Outcomes: Religion and Belief Evidence review, April 2013, found at:
<http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/04/3276/1>

⁴ Active Schools Outcomes Framework Equality Analysis (not yet published)

⁵ http://www.scotcen.org.uk/newsmedia/pressreleases/2015/february/ssa2014_sectarianism_pr/

What do we know about the problem?

Barriers

1. Barriers for Muslim women

There is a lot of research into barriers to participation for Muslim women. In general, Islam promotes good health and fitness and encourages both men and women to engage in physical activity to maintain healthy lifestyles. However, there are aspects of the religion which affect how sports can be practised. For example, women following their faith cannot engage in mixed gender sport and the dress code also requires consideration.

Research conducted with Muslim girls in the school environment has demonstrated that the girls were put off participating in sporting activities to the point where some were skipping classes. Clothing requirements and changing facilities were the main barriers⁶.

Interestingly, research has found that Muslim women have different attitudes to sport in different countries. In traditional Muslim countries attitudes are actually far more positive towards PE than in the UK. Young Muslim women in the UK seem to have very negative views regarding PE in schools⁷.

Muslim women's attitudes towards sport are also affected by a lack of visible role models. Celebrating and promoting these positive images is key to developing long term attitudinal change and increasing participation levels⁸.

Kulsoom Abdullah

The female weightlifter Kulsoom Abdullah was initially barred from the US championships, because she wanted to compete in clothing that would cover her elbows and knees - in accordance with her interpretation of Islamic rules of modesty for women. Officials were concerned that such clothing would obscure the view of the judges to assess whether she had achieved a proper "lock" of the elbows and knees, which is essential for a weight-lifting competition.

Subsequently, Kulsoom Abdullah proposed to wear a tight fitting unitard under the compulsory competition costume, which would allow the judges to assess whether her elbows and knees were properly locked while lifting weights. The International Weightlifting Federation agreed and Kulsoom Abdullah then registered for the US Championships⁹.

⁶ Carroll, Bob and Hollinshead, G (1993) 'Ethnicity and conflict in physical education.' British Educational Research Journal, 19(1),59-76.

⁷Muslim Women in Sport, Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation and Sporting Equals, January 2010

⁸ Muslim Women in Sport, Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation and Sporting Equals, January 2010

⁹ http://www.altmuslimah.com/2011/07/the_dress_code_barrier_for_muslim_women_in_sports1/

What can we do about it?

Ensuring that Muslim women have opportunities to participate in sports will require practical consideration of:

- women only sessions – with female coaches and tutors;
- flexibility in clothing choice; and
- single sex and safe changing facilities.

It will also require work to ensure that Muslim women and their families can see the positive benefits of sports participation, and feel confident that the environment is safe, welcoming and respectful of religious beliefs. This should build on training and awareness raising work to ensure that clubs recognise the barriers that Muslim women can experience, and the positive ways to address these barriers.

Example

Sporting Equals has conducted research¹⁰, looking at how 'faith centres' or places of worship for different religious groups can play an active role in offering sport and physical activity to the community. Sporting Equals developed a model which aims to bridge the gap with disengaged communities by connecting sports provision to the local community at a grassroots level, by using the local mosque or church as a gateway for access. Sporting Equals has worked with a number of faith centres and places of worship to hold community wellbeing events and to make links with partner organisations to offer sports activity to the local community.

Example

Nil By Mouth is an anti-sectarianism charity in Scotland. In April 2015, the charity worked with sports coaches at Ayrshire College to teach them about sectarianism in order to provide them with the insights, techniques and strategies they will need in the workplace. The campaign director for Nil By Mouth, spoke with groups of Sports Coaching and Development students to help them understand what sectarianism is and the consequences it has on society. He stressed how important it was for them to know how to deal with difficult situations once they are in coaching jobs¹¹.

¹⁰ The role of faith centres in the provision of sport and physical activity, Sporting Equals, June 2012

¹¹ <http://nilbymouth.org/2015/sports-students-spurred-to-tackle-sectarianism/>

Find out more...

Useful sources for finding out more include:

- guidance from Sports Coach UK about engaging Muslim women - <http://www.sportscoachuk.org/sites/default/files/Muslim%20women%20in%20sport%20-%20WSFF%20&%20sporting%20equals.pdf>
- the documents referenced throughout this Learning Note – as footnotes; and
- the full research report on equality in sport, produced for **sport**scotland in 2015.