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How the ‘Beautiful Game’ Turned to Hate: Why Islamophobia has crept into Grassroots Football

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1. Summary

The aim of this report is to examine the nature, scope and impacts of Islamophobia in football at a grassroots level. Drawing on 40 individual interviews with Muslim men and women who play football, we outline their experiences of Islamophobia, both offline and online. The report concludes with a list of key recommendations based on participants' suggestions, which we are calling upon the Football Association (FA) to act upon at grassroots level in order to help counter hate targeted at Muslim football players.

2. Introduction

Hate crime is the umbrella concept used in its broadest sense to describe incidents motivated by hate, hostility or prejudice towards an individual's identity. Definitions of 'hate crime' vary from one country to another. In England and Wales, the central point of reference is the operational definition offered by the College of Policing (2014), which earmarks hate crime as offences that are motivated by hostility or prejudice on particular grounds – race, religion, sexual orientation, transgender status and disability. From this perspective, Islamophobia can be understood as a form of religiously motivated hate crime namely, any criminal offence which is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated wholly or partly by a hostility or prejudice based upon a person's religion or perceived religion that is, their Muslim religion.

In addition, we adopt the definition of Islamophobia provided by the All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims (2018, p. 11): "Islamophobia is rooted in racism, and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness." This definition shows that: a) Islamophobia is a form of anti-Muslim racism. Muslims are targeted because of their minority status in terms of religion but also race. In this case, the notion of 'racism' captures the structural ways in which racial inequalities persist, whereby Muslims face particular economic and political disadvantages both historically and in a contemporary context as ethnic minorities b) victims of Islamophobia can be real Muslims but also those who 'look' Muslim. In other words, Islamophobia is rooted in racism and its victims are not just Muslims but also those who are perceived to be Muslims.

According to the equality and inclusion charity, *Kick It Out* (2019) in relation to discrimination in both professional and grassroots football they found reports rising to 422 in 2018/19, up from 319 in the previous year. Incidents of racism also remained high and constituted 65 per cent of reports (Kick It Out 2019). Faith based discrimination which included Islamophobia and anti-Semitism also rose higher in this period with reports rising by 75 per cent from 36 to 63 (Kick It Out 2019). In the professional game, some of the incidents of discrimination included the targeting of football players such as Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang (Arsenal), Raheem Sterling (Manchester City) and Mohamed Salah (Liverpool). One of the incidents included Islamophobic abuse directed at Liverpool's Mohamed Salah during a match at West Ham's London Stadium where a male could be heard shouting: "Salah you f***** Muslim. F***** Muslim c***. F*** off" (The Guardian 2019).

More recent data from the Home Office also reveal how arrests for racism-related offences connected to football matches in England and Wales are on the rise. According to Home Office (2020), 75 per cent of the matches - 214 (8 per cent) of all fixtures had reported hate crime incidents related to race. Some of the blame has been attributed to groups such as Football Lads Alliance and other splinter groups associated with far-right sympathisers. Many of these groups also operate on secret social media pages and blog sites that endorse violent and racist behaviour. Our report goes beyond the statistics and reveals the nature and impacts of Islamophobia within grassroots football, offering an insight into how the beautiful game of football has turned into a platform of hate targeted at male and female Muslim footballers, both offline and online.

The report key findings are as follows:

- Participants reported experiencing Islamophobia and racism from members of the public and from players from other teams.
- In some cases, incidents of abuse that started offline then moved into the online world (and vice versa).
- Participants' visibility as Black or Asian Muslims was a key trigger for the hate that they received, both offline and online.
- Muslim women who wore the hijab (headscarf) experienced both Islamophobia and racism, as well as misogyny.
- Participants reported experiencing discrimination from the management in terms of career development, progression, promotion and retention.
- The impacts upon victims included emotional, psychological, physical and economic damage. Participants felt reluctant to continue playing football and/or encourage other Muslims to engage with this sport.

3. Research methods

Participants

40 individuals took part in the study. All the participants who took part in the study identified as British Muslims. Specifically, the sample included 28 males and 12 females. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 45.

Design

This was a qualitative study which employed individual interviews with 40 Muslim footballers. Participants' answers were audio-recorded (using a Dictaphone), transcribed, and thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke 2006). In order to ensure participants' anonymity, their names and any other identifying information was anonymised.

Materials

The authors used a Dictaphone to audio-record the interviews with participants. With respect to the verbatim transcription of interviews, the authors used Microsoft Word for the data transcription and NVivo to analyse the data.

Procedure

The data collection took place during 2020. Participation in the study was voluntary. The authors recruited participants through grassroots football organisations coupled with snowball sampling. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the interviews took place online (Skype) and over the (phone) and lasted about two hours on average. Informed consent was obtained for all participants before they took part in the study.

Analytic Strategy

The study was analysed using NVivo software. Specifically, the data from the interview transcripts were subjected to Thematic Analysis (TA), which is a qualitative method used for ‘identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 79). Themes refer to specific patterns of meanings found within the data set. In TA themes can be identified either inductively from the raw data (also called ‘bottom up’ way) or theoretically/deductively from the existing literature (also called ‘top down’ way) (Boyatzis 1998). In this study, the form of TA employed was inductive (data-driven). The authors selected illustrative extracts from the interviews with participants (presented as indented quotes in this report) in order to provide sufficient evidence of the themes within the data, as presented in the following brief analysis.

4. Findings

Nature and scope of Islamophobia in grassroots football

Participants reported that they experienced hate crime from members of the public and players from other teams, as well as discrimination from the management. However, the scope of this problem was ‘hidden’ because victims were afraid to speak out.

Muslim footballers are suffering in silence because of discrimination. They are waiting for an opportunity and if the opportunity comes, they are not confident enough to go forward with their ambitions. Kamran

In my own personal view, there is Islamophobia in football, the older you get, the more aware you become of it. Mohammed

One of the key findings in this report is the link between victims’ religion and race with regards to the hostility that they suffered. For example, participants noted how football fans shouted Islamophobic and racist slurs, as indicated in the following quotes.

*The fans are the worst, they will directly make you feel unwelcome and use verbal racist abuse. We’ve had fans of the other team shouting ‘burn the Quran’. We’ve been called ‘Talibans’ and ‘P*** bombers’, also f***** Muslims, Muslim c****. Dawud*

I've been called a black monkey, I've had fans doing monkey signs. I've received pictures of bananas on my twitter account. Farhan

Islamophobia is a gendered type of hate crime, and Muslim women who took part in this study, described how wearing the headscarf made them a target of hostility from football fans online as well as from other football players offline.

I receive racist and misogynistic posts on my Facebook account. They call me ISIS bitch and Bin Laden's daughter. Hannah

I mean, I get picked last and other women players are rude to me because I wear the scarf. They often underestimate me. They are holding Muslim women footballers back deliberately. Sarah

The root causes of Islamophobia within football

According to participants, there are a number of root causes of Islamophobia within grassroots football including a lack of representation of Muslims in football (especially in the Premier League), 'trigger events' (e.g. Islamist terrorist attacks) and negative reporting of Islam and Muslims in the media.

There aren't many Muslim professional players and you need to ask yourself why. That affects us throughout the grassroots level where it comes down to. Abbas

The main reason for the backlash Muslims face in the world is the media and the so-called Islamist terrorist attacks that are happening in the UK and across the globe. Louis

Asian men like me who are brown and have a beard go into predominantly white areas to play football, in these areas they associate being brown and having a beard with being a terrorist. Their first feeling when they see us is negativity and hate because of the propaganda of the media perpetuate. Bilal

With respect to the profile of the people who abuse them participants noted that it was mainly white, British people (often young individuals) as indicated in the following quotes.

You are asking me about who these people are? I would say they are mainly white British people. The person that shouted abuse at me was with his dad and mom who are both white and looked like they were in the 50s. Rahman

Some of the abuse is done by kids believe or not. I coach an under 15's side and they also yell and shout abuse. They must have learnt that language from somewhere. Faris

The real life impacts of Islamophobia in football

Islamophobic hate crimes can incur a number of different ‘costs’ following a victimisation experience that involve emotional, psychological, physical and financial liabilities. From this perspective, the impact of Islamophobic hate crimes may exceed that of ‘normal’ crime because of victims’ perceived and actual vulnerability due to their affiliation to Islam. Participants suffered a range of psychological and emotional responses to Islamophobia in football, from lowered self-confidence and insecurity to depression, isolation and anxiety.

I face racism, sexism and Islamophobia. There are times I go home after a match and I cry. Huma

I felt depressed after the last incident. I started seeing a counsellor as a result. Kyle

The impacts go beyond emotional and physical to people actually wanting to leave this sport and stop playing football.

When you stand up to those things, you are left with a bitter taste. You fall out of love with the game. Muslims are leaving football, they feel it’s not worth it, they think ‘what is the point?’ You feel you are not appreciated, you feel no one is there to support you. Hamza

For a number of participants who were playing at the grassroots, they highlighted the financial cost involved.

We can’t get well known sponsors. As I have been searched and stopped at airport I know the bias is against me because of the way I look. Malik

How grassroots football can change - Recommendations for action

Our aim throughout this report has been victim focused and as such, this section is used to empower the people we interviewed by giving them a platform whereby they can make suggestions on what should be done to help prevent Islamophobia and racism in grassroots football. In particular, we want to bring those who have experienced Islamophobia together to collectively share their views, beliefs and attitudes in terms what recommendations they view as being important to them. The consensus view amongst participants was that more support was needed from the FA as well as having more Muslim role models in football; however, some participants felt powerless and argued that ‘nothing would change’.

We need more support from higher up. The FA must take the lead in countering Islamophobia in football. Ibrahim

You need more role models and the leagues need to take action that makes youngsters leave the streets to come and join the main game. Craig

The FA does not pay any attention to the abuse we suffer as Muslim players. Sarah

Some participants felt that tougher sentencing would be essential to deter people from being Islamophobic and racist, as well as having campaigns to educate people, as indicated in the following quote.

Bro, you need a new campaign alongside racism because that is working and the leagues take that seriously but Islamophobia they don't. So you need to work that part of the puzzle out. I think they need to use a campaign like 'No to Islamophobia'. Yusef

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6. Further information

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