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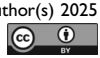

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"Muslims are Leaving Football, They Think 'What is the Point?'": A Qualitative Study on Islamophobia in Grassroots Football in England and Wales

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Abstract

This article explores Muslim players' experiences of Islamophobia at grassroots football. It employs critical race theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework to interpret Islamophobia as a form of anti-Muslim racism in football. The article considers the complexities of intersectionality in terms of race, religion, gender, and the "space" where Islamophobia is manifested, both online and offline. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 40 British Muslim footballers, findings show that Islamophobia in football is intersectional, yet it is normalized and understood as "part of the game." Participants' race coupled with religion was also a key trigger for the hate that they received both online and offline. It will be concluded that grassroots football could be understood as a "racial project" whereby Muslims are stigmatized, oppressed and excluded. To this end, grassroots football becomes a mirror of Islamophobia in wider society.

Keywords

critical race theory, cyber hate crime, football, Islamophobia, Misogyny

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Introduction

Research shows that racism is a long-standing phenomenon in football (Garland & Rowe, 2001). As Kassimeris et al. (2022, p. 824) point out, "From individual fans either throwing bananas or making monkey-like sounds to organized neo-Nazi fans celebrating on the terraces," racism persists in sports and specifically football. More recently, racism in football has moved into the digital world and the two worlds connect. Kassimeris et al. (2022, p. 826) highlight the complexity of racism in football by sharing the scenario whereby "fans who racially abuse the Black players who play for their opponents, yet cheer those who play for their own side," since "the 'acceptance' of Black players and spectators by certain white fans can be contingent upon them demonstrating allegiance to the 'right' club or team" (Burdsey, 2004). To illustrate the double standards for Black and Asian players in football, Kilvington et al. (2022) share the example of Middlesbrough FC fans defending their own player "Mido" when he received Islamophobic abuse (in the words of "Mido, he's got a bomb you know; Mido's got a bomb") from Newcastle United fans but then ripping the Quran during a game in Birmingham to "make confetti."

In this context, football is perceived as a "white experience" (Bradbury & Conricode, 2024; Long & Hylton, 2002, p. 97). Referring to the UK context, Lawrence and Davis (2019) observe that football stadia remain overwhelmingly white male spaces. Research shows that Black and Asian players experience barriers to participation in football (Burdsey & Randhawa 2012; Cleland & Cashmore, 2014; Gibbons, 2016; Ratna, 2013). "Taking the knee," a powerful social and political gesture signaling resistance against racism in sports and wider society has become an enduring feature of sports since 2020 (Dixon et al., 2023). Taking the knee draws attention to racial injustice and shows solidarity with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Yet, there has been ongoing controversy over fans booing players who take the knee as a gesture against racism and/or solidarity with the BLM movement. Cable et al. (2022) argue that football players who publicly challenge racism are likely to see an influx in abuse. This speaks to a longer history around athlete activism whereby players who publicly challenge racism and inequality are often met with hostility (Cable et al., 2022; Kassimeris, 2007).

Almost every team in the English Premier League has at least one Muslim player. Muslim players such as Mohamed Salah have routinely been abused within the stadium and on social media. Hostility targeted at Muslim players is often intersectional whereby they are targeted because of their religion, race and gender. There has been much discussion about the growth of Islamophobia in the UK and globally (Awan & Zempi, 2019; Elahi & Khan, 2017; Hopkins, 2020; Kumar, 2021). However, this discussion has not been accompanied by empirical analysis in sports and specifically in football. There is a dearth of studies examining the experiences of Muslim footballers as victims of bias, prejudice and "hate." As a result, Muslim footballers remain a relatively "invisible" population in research terms, despite their vulnerability to Islamophobic attacks inside and outside the football stadium as well as in the cyber world (Hamzeh, 2017).

This research focuses exclusively on "grassroots" football (by which we mean all organized football outside the English Premier League and the Football League) and was undertaken with 40 Muslim football players. Specifically, the study involved semi-structured interviews with 28 male and 12 female Muslim football players at grassroots level. The findings demonstrate that Islamophobia is intersectional, yet it is normalized and understood as "part of the game." Participants reported experiencing Islamophobia from fans as well as other players (in some cases, from their own teams). Incidents of abuse that started offline sometimes moved into the online world. Participants' race and religion was a key trigger for the hate that they received, both offline and online. Muslim women who wore the hijab (headscarf) experienced "triple penalty" of Islamophobia, racism and misogyny. Participants also reported experiencing discrimination from the management in terms of their career development. When they spoke up, they were accused of playing the "race card." Impacts included emotional, psychological, physical, and economic damage. As a result, participants felt reluctant to continue playing football and encourage other Muslims to engage with this sport.

This article is divided into four sections. First, it provides some contextual background on Islamophobia and racism. Second, it establishes a theoretical framework introducing critical race theory (CRT) and intersectionality in football. Third, the article details the methodology underpinning the study. The fourth section explores empirical data from Muslim football players exploring both their experiences, and reflections on the reasons and impacts of Islamophobia in football. It will be concluded that grassroots football could be understood as a "racial project" whereby Muslims are stigmatized, oppressed and excluded. To this end, grassroots football becomes a mirror of Islamophobia in wider society.

Islamophobia and Racism

The Runnymede Trust (1997), an independent research and social policy agency, report on Islamophobia, highlights the vulnerability of Muslims to physical violence and harassment, as well as discrimination in employment. As a result, Muslims are unable to play a full part in mainstream society. Runnymede Trust revisited the issue of Islamophobia, 20 years after the first report on Islamophobia in 1997. The new report examined the multifaceted impact of Islamophobia on equality of access, opportunity and outcomes for British Muslims (Zempi & Awan, 2016). As the Runnymede Trust (2017) report shows, across policy domains, from employment, education and criminal justice to housing, healthcare and criminal justice system, Islamophobia has a significant negative impact on the life chances and quality of life enjoyed by British Muslims (Hickman et al., 2012).

Following two years of consultation, in November 2018, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims published a report titled "Islamophobia Defined: the inquiry into a working definition of Islamophobia." In this landmark report, the All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims (2018, p. 11) proposed the following definition of Islamophobia: "Islamophobia is rooted in racism, and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness." This definition is adopted in

the present study. It suggests that Islamophobia is a form of anti-Muslim racism. This definition is adopted in the present study on the basis that 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 minorities. Alexander (2017) believes that anti-Muslim discourses are built upon these racist and Orientalist ideas that hinge upon post-war mass migration where Muslims suffered from racist stereotypes that branded them as "coloured" following colonialism. Tryer (2008) goes a step further and argues that the emergence of Muslim identities has been met with an attempt to recenter the issue of "race" and at the same time it has rendered Muslims as invisible. For Tryer (2008) the problems lie with the failure of legislation to define Islamophobia as a form of racism. Moreover, the ECRI General Policy Recommendation No. 5 (revised) on preventing and combating anti-Muslim racism (2021) specifically calls discrimination and exclusion of Muslim as a form of racism. Using issues such as economic exclusion and lack of employment among young Muslims, they argue this makes Muslims more vulnerable, isolating them from wider society. Similarly, Carr and Haynes (2015) argue that the State must do more to address the issues of anti-Muslim racism because Muslims are caught in a "clash of racializations"—in that they are being excluded and racialized because of their identity as Muslims.

There is a distinction between racism and Islamophobia on the basis that although Islamophobia stems from racism, it carries with it an added layer of bias and prejudice which is hate towards Islam and Muslims (Hussain & Bagguley, 2012; Laruccia & Martyniuk, 2016); however, it is important to note that although these concepts are distinct, they are also conflated in relation to Muslims' narratives of Islamophobia (Kilvington et al., 2022). According to Modood (2000), "new racism" (cultural racism) goes beyond biology and uses religion and culture to homogenize Muslim communities. Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1983, p. 67) state that "racist discourse posits an essential biological determination to culture but its referent may be any group that has been 'socially' constructed as having a different 'origin', whether cultural, biological or historical." Along similar lines, Gilroy (1987, p. 43) argues that the new forms of racism have "the capacity to link discourses of patriotism, nationalism, xenophobia, Englishness, Britishness, militarism and gender difference into a complex situation which gives 'race' its contemporary meaning." Indeed, in a post-9/11 climate Islam is perceived as a dangerous religion and culture. Muslim communities are homogenized into one group and the characteristics associated with Muslims namely violence, misogyny, terrorism and incompatibility with Western values are treated as if they are innate (Garner & Selod, 2015). Physical markers of "Muslimness," such as wearing religious clothing for Muslim women and/or having a beard for Muslim men render them vulnerable to manifestations of Islamophobia both in-person and online. In particular, the wearing of the Muslim veil has become a visual representation of "Muslim difference" in the UK and elsewhere in the West. Indeed, Muslim women disproportionately bear the brunt of Islamophobia (Allen, 2014; Awan & Zempi, 2019; Easat-Daas, 2020; Zine, 2022). Causal explanations of this differential experience often include the fact that women may bear more visible markers of "perceived

Muslimness" (APPG British Muslims, 2018), such as wearing hijab or niqab (Hopkins, 2016), as well as the fact that Muslim women continue to be the subject of neo-Orientalist fear, and fascination (Taylor & Zine, 2014). Muslim women's veiled bodies have also been constructed as a threat to undermine Western nations and the values of democracy, freedom, and women's autonomy and rendering them as "anti-citizens" (Zine, 2006, 2009, 2022). This article argues that even though Islamophobia and racism are often discussed as distinct concepts, they overlap and are particularly important in exploring Muslim football players' narratives of Islamophobia in grassroots football.

Systemic Racism and Intersectionality

Racism is multidimensional and systemic. It occurs in all aspects of society including health, employment, housing, and education as well as sports. Feagin (2013) has developed a theory of systemic racism which involves five major dimensions: (1) the dominant racial hierarchy; (2) comprehensive white racial framing; (3) individual and collective discrimination; (4) social reproduction of racial-material inequalities; (5) racist institutions integral to white domination of Americans of color. Feagin (2013) focuses his analysis on white-on-black oppression drawing on racial oppression developed over three historical eras; the slavery era, the legal segregation era, and then those of white Americans. Feagin (2013) demonstrates that racism is indeed systemic and involves far more than individual racial bias. Rather, major institutions have been pervaded by racial stereotypes, ideas, images, emotions, and practices. This system of racial oppression continues to pervade, permeate, and interconnect all major social groups, networks, and institutions across society Feagin (2013). Bonilla-Silva (2006) developed the notion of "racialized social systems." According to Bonilla-Silva (2006), systemic racism refers to societies where social, political, economic, cultural rewards are "partially" allocated along racial lines. Bonilla-Silva (2006) highlights that the distribution of rewards in any society is partial as it involves not only race but also other social divisions for example, gender, class, and sexual orientation.

Intersectionality is a sociological theory that asserts that social identities are not merely independent or additive; rather multiple social identities converge to create unique experiences of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). Critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) coined the term "intersectionality" as a way of conceptualizing identity, particularly in terms of underscoring the multidimensionality of marginalized individuals' lived experiences. Crenshaw (1989) used the metaphor of intersecting roads to describe and explain the ways in which racial and gender discrimination intersect. Specifically, Crenshaw (1989, p. 149) used the following analogy to concretize the concept:

> Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black

> woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination … But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm.

In her work on discrimination against Black women, Crenshaw (1989) argues that they are discriminated against in ways that often do not fit neatly within the legal categories of either "racism" or "sexism"—but as a combination of both racism and sexism. As such, intersectionality rejects the single-axis framework (which maintains a focus on either race or gender) on the basis that this approach fails to consider how Black women are vulnerable to both grounds of discrimination. Rather, intersectionality analyses "the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's experiences" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). The road metaphor quoted above describes the way in which a minority group "navigates a main crossing, whereby the racism road crosses with the streets of colonialism and patriarchy, and 'crashes' occur at the intersections. Where the roads intersect, there is a double, triple, multiple, and many-layered blanket of oppression" (Dhamoon, 2010, p. 231).

McCall (2005, p. 1771) stresses that intersectionality has become the "gold standard" multidisciplinary approach for analyzing participants' experiences of identity and oppression, calling it "the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far." Indeed, Crenshaw's formulation of intersectionality has been enormously significant, as it further opened up a conceptual space through which to identify how various oppressions work together to produce something unique and distinct from any one form of discrimination standing alone (Dhamoon, 2010). In the context of the present study, intersectionality can be understood as a nexus of identities that work together to render Muslim women and men as "other" due to their religion, race and gender.

Bonilla-Silva (2006, p. 520) notes that "we all take part in it [systemic racism]." In this regard, the racial structure of everyday life creates the conditions for the reproduction of systemic racism. Bonilla-Silva (2006, p. 521) states that systemic racism "is not a matter of a few rotten apples," rather, the average White "apple" may not be a member of a far-right group, yet they participate in systemic racism in a passive, even neutral way. According to Bonilla-Silva (2006), racialized social systems are organized in ways that fundamentally reproduce racial order. Mechanisms, practices, and habituated behaviors lead to actions and inactions from actors that reproduce privilege for some and disadvantage for others (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 520).

Systemic racism is also manifested through racial microaggressions. Racial microaggressions are "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). The term was originally coined by Pierce (1970) as a way to describe the more subtle types of racial maltreatment commonly experienced by African Americans. Key to the transmission of microaggressions is the fact that they can often be subtle and manifest themselves in gestures, looks, or tones; however, their accumulation over a period of time can have detrimental consequences (Burdsey, 2011). Essed (2002, p. 202) used

the term "everyday racism" to describe the concept of racial microaggressions stating that "Everyday racism is racism, but not all racism is everyday racism. From everyday racism there is no relief." Indeed, a key criticism of the concept of microaggressions is that they are sometimes dismissed as insignificant and harmless (particularly by dominant individuals) which is an important component of the minimization of systemic racism (Burdsey, 2011). Also linked to the concept of systemic racism is implicit bias, which refers to prejudiced notions based on unconscious attitudes and stereotypes which can influence one's behavior and judgment (Payne & Hannay, 2021). It is often assumed that implicit bias is an individual issue; however, as Payne and Hannay (2021) argue, the individual-focused approach can lead researchers to neglect systemic racism as a cause of persistent disparities. To this end, implicit bias can be considered a cognitive reflection of systemic racism.

Critical Race Theory

CRT has been successfully applied as an analytical framework to explore racism and racialization in sports and specifically in football (Burdsey, 2011; Hylton, 2009, 2010; Kane et al., 2013). CRT highlights the commonplace and complex nature of racism. It begins with the notion that racism in society is endemic. There are five tenets of CRT that denote its distinct approach to this topic. CRT's tenets which include: the notion that "race" and racism must be central to our scholarship and activism; intersectional forms of oppression must also constitute this challenge to racism and racialization; social justice and transformation must also be a significant element of a CRT project; centering the black voice; challenging color blindness, meritocracies and liberalism; challenging convention; and as a pragmatic framework it is necessarily transdisciplinary (Hylton, 2010).

For Omi and Winant (2002, p. 124), racism is historically situated, operating at all levels of society including sports and specifically football. CRT shows how society disadvantages, oppresses and subjugates social groups because of their "race" coupled with multiple social intersections such as gender, disability and sexual orientation. Although "race" has traditionally been marginalized or ignored, CRT does not consider "race" as the only signifier through which power operates. Gilroy (2002) argues for an intersectional approach to racism rather than an abstract focus on racism. Burdsey (2007) states that one of CRT's objectives is to highlight the relationship between "race" and other forms of oppression. From this perspective, CRT does not argue for a hierarchy of oppressions, but for intersecting forms of oppression in relation to race. In the present study, exploring participants' intersectional experiences privileges marginalized voices and allows them to inform anti-racism. Ignoring Muslims' intersectional experiences would "simplify" Islamophobia.

A primary principle of CRT is "interest convergence," or the notion that progress toward racial equality will only be made when it converges with the interests of white people. The tenet "interest convergence" originated with the work of Derrick Bell (2004) in 1980, who argued that the interests of Black civil rights coincided for a brief time with the interests of white elites, thus enabling a decision that benefited

the interests of Black people. Milner (2008, p. 333) adds that: "…interest convergence stresses that racial equality and equity for people of color will be pursued and advanced when they converge with the interests, needs, expectations, and ideologies of Whites." In other words, positive change for marginalized communities only happens when it benefits privileged communities.

Another key notion in CRT is racialization, which is manifested through racial projects and racial stacking. Stacking refers to the process of consciously or unconsciously applying racially motivated stereotypes to individuals/groups, and making decisions based on their perceived abilities; these stereotypes "stack" athletes of color within certain positions (Kilvington, 2019). Along similar lines, "racial projects" occur in sports such as coach ideologies about physicality and intellectual abilities (Omi & Winant, 2002). Such stereotypes promote biological differences and racialized binaries, and influence resource allocations. For Hylton (2010), sport itself can be viewed as the sum of racial projects, which are explicit and covert, individual, institutional and societal, routinized and ad hoc. Indeed, there are many examples of "racial projects" whereby resources are organized and allocated according to racial lines, yet in seemingly "natural" ways. "Racial projects" were highlighted by Black players across a number of sports and their exclusion from administration and management roles in Long and Hylton's (2002) study (Burdsey, 2007; King, 2004). Along similar lines, Burdsey's (2007) study on the exclusion of British Asians from the English Premier League, could be described as a "racial project." Burdsey (2011) notes that the marked absence of British Asians from the majority of sports at elite level is striking. Burdsey (2010, 2011) demonstrates how the cultural positioning, representation, and treatment of young British Asian, especially Muslim, men in English first-class cricket—as the most significant racialized Others—is both product and producer of their representation in wider British society. In the context of football, Kilvington (2019) points out that British Asians are not only excluded from the playing field but also from coaching and management. Studies demonstrate the exclusion of Black and Asian individuals from coaching and management positions within European football too (Bradbury, 2013; Bradbury et al., 2011, 2014). The research literature (Ahmad, 2011; Burdsey, 2007; Ratna, 2011) highlights the disparity between the high levels of British Asian participation in a recreational capacity and their alienation and exclusion from the higher echelons of the game as players, coaches, and administrators, both for men and women.

Long et al.'s (2000) study examined racism in grassroots football in West Yorkshire. All the African-Caribbean and Asian players had experienced racism in physical and verbal forms as well as what they interpreted as institutional forms (e.g., differential treatment by officialdom). Players, referees, supporters, league officials, managers and coaches were all identified as people who have continually caused an element of racism to creep into their experience of football. As many as half of the African-Caribbean players, though fewer Asian players, had suffered physical abuse that they put down to premeditated racist intent. Players repeatedly suggested that racist incidents occur more frequently in the lower leagues where match day officials are fewer and as a result able to be less vigilant, players are less

"professional" in their approach to the game, supporters are not policed or stewarded. Abuse was more likely when playing away from home, especially when teams with African-Caribbean or Asian players are in matches located in specific rural or white working class, urban areas. Although African-Caribbean or Asian players argued that racism is abhorrent and not to be tolerated, they did indeed tolerate it to a point by conceding that racism is "part and parcel" of the game. Long et al. (2000, p. 31) also argued that the more experienced players stated that they had "learnt to stay on their game where racism is in evidence because it is one of the ways that white players will try to put black players off." According to this line of argument, racial abuse targeted at Black players on the pitch intended to "weaken" their performance and spirit. The more experienced players had learnt to ignore it in order to "get on with the game." In the long term, this resulted in resigned acceptance that the game has the "three Rs": rules, regulations and racism.

Referees were seen by most players as being the cause of many incidents on the pitch, due either to their inability to recognize racism or to being racist themselves. Three quarters of the African-Caribbean players and half the Asian players stated that referees play a crucial role in the way racism is manifest in a game, most commonly in the way players go unchallenged for racist behavior. Many of the Asian players knew of other Asians who were playing solely among themselves in leagues or informal structures not affiliated to the FA because they had not been happy with the way they were treated on the pitch or from the sidelines. Wanting to stay away from intimidating environments, many players were playing at levels below their proper standard, which was seen as a "waste of potential." Participants in the present study echoed this finding which demonstrates the lack of progress in tackling racism in football over the last 20 years.

Methodology

This was a qualitative study, which employed individual, semi-structured interviews with Muslim men and women who played football at grassroots level. In total, 40 individuals participated in the study. Specifically, the sample included 28 males and 12 females. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 45. All the participants who took part in the study identified as British Muslims. The sample included Black (7), Asian (28) and Mixed Race (5) participants.

Participation in the study was voluntary. The data collection took place during 2020. The authors recruited participants through grassroots football organizations in England and Wales coupled with snowball sampling. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the interviews took place online and lasted about one hour on average. Informed consent was obtained for all participants before they took part in the study.

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 software to analyze the data. 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 & 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) to provide sufficient evidence of the themes within the data, as presented in the following analysis. In order to ensure participants' anonymity, their names and any other identifying information was anonymized.

Data Analysis

The overarching themes that emerged from the research data included: (i) scope of Islamophobia; (ii) intersectionality; (iii) prejudice, discrimination, and stigma; (iv) implications.

Scope of Islamophobia

Participants argued that they suffered Islamophobic incidents both in the football stadium as well as online. They described Islamophobia as a form of racism which permeated all levels of society. As such, they felt that racism is endemic in football as it is in wider society. To this end, football is a mirror of society whereby racism and Islamophobia are normalized.

> Islamophobia plays out in stadiums and online, we get abuse and threats on social media. (Aisha)

Participants highlighted how key aspects of their identity namely race intersected with religion in terms of making them "ideal targets" for abuse on the football pitch and online. They reported experiencing both Islamophobia and racism, as well as misogyny for Muslim female footballers.

> I've been called a "black monkey," I've had fans doing monkey signs. I've received pictures of bananas on my twitter account. (Ibrahim)

> I receive racist and misogynistic posts on my Facebook account. They call me "ISIS bitch" and "Bin Laden's daughter." (Amira)

Indeed, of the many nuanced and pernicious forms of Islamophobia is verbal abuse. Participants gave examples of the abuse they received, which clearly indicated offenders' racist and Islamophobic motivation.

> I was told "take that towel off your head." I've experienced a lot of Islamophobia because I'm a Muslim girl and wear the hijab in football. (Sophina)

Participants also described the verbal threats and abuse made toward them by rival fans at football matches, as indicated in the comment below.

> 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" and "Muslim c****." (Abdul)

In some incidents, referees would act as bystanders where this abuse took place, yet they ignored it. Participants felt that referees were behind the discrimination they faced because they did not understand racism, let alone intersectional Islamophobia. This was coupled with the fact that some participants felt implicit bias was taking place where even if incidents were reported to referees, they were unlikely to be treated equally.

Intersectionality

Participants argued that it was primarily because of their religion and specifically, the visibility of their Muslim identity, that they were targeted by fans and other players. Being perceived as visibly "different" and "other" due to practicing Islam (for example, by wearing the headscarf for female players, having a beard for male players, having a Muslim name or practicing Islam through prayer/fasting) meant that they were seen as legitimate targets to attack both on the football pitch and online.

> Muslims are an easy target, clear example is when Paul Pogba tweeted a verse of the Quran on January 21st New Year's Day, it led to a petition against him and a former high-profile player like Ryan Giggs had a problem with it and said "public figures should not politicise football." (Naveed)

Gender plays an important role in the process of racialization. In the case of Muslim men they are criminalized and seen as dangerous and extremists. Muslim men particularly those with a visible Muslim identity are racialized because they are seen as a threat to national security and therefore become a suspect community. Muslim women on the other hand have different experiences. They are seen as being oppressed and marginalized because they are seen as a cultural threat because of their physical appearance. For veiled Muslim women they become associated with issues of inequality and mistreatment in the home. If they are veiled Muslim women they are also seen as a threat to Western values of democracy and feminism.

Female participants noted how they experienced Islamophobia, racism and misogyny from opposition fans/players because of the visibility of their Muslim identity coupled with their gender.

> Fans and other women players give me dirty looks. I've been told that I am dirty, and I smell l like curry. (Anisa)

> Once I was playing and someone shouted "get that bomb off your head." Other players say "why are you wearing a headscarf? It's suffocating you!" (Aleesa)

It is important to understand the role of Islamophobia in sport particularly after the rise of white populist groups across Europe. Visibly identifiable Muslim women pursuing sports such as football are seen as a public threat to western values (Ciocca).

Female participants described how they faced certain barriers regarding wearing the hijab. In some cases, the league made it difficult for them to wear it. For both Muslim men and women, these experiences forced them to change their appearance by downplaying the visibility of their Muslim identity.

> If you wear a hijab you're told by the league that you're only allowed to wear it in a certain way and make sure it doesn't get in the way while you're playing. (Hajra)

Prejudice, Discrimination, and Stigma

Historically, Muslims were viewed as socially and economically deprived communities. They were seen as biologically inferior to white Europeans. In fact, they were labeled as "lacking purity of blood," which meant they did not possess pure Christian blood. Much of this ideology can be traced back to notions of biological superiority and Muslims being seen as being culturally different and inferior to Christians because of these perceived racial and religious differences (Grosfoguel & Mielants, 2006). According to Selod (2015) racialization became an imperialist European process whereby racial categories were assigned to individuals. This process was linked back to race-making classifications of humans based on biological characteristics. Omi and Winant (2002) believe the definition of racialization is therefore tied to racial classifications as a process of racial formation whereby racial categories are formed and transformed.

Participants shared certain stereotypes about Muslims playing in football, specifically that Muslim men should "stick to playing cricket" and that Muslim women should not play football as "they are oppressed."

> It's more about cultural perceptions and negative stereotypes of being Muslim, a woman and also playing football. They think Muslim women are oppressed and they stay at home all day. (Aminah)

Academic scholars such as Rana (2011) argue that Muslims are racialized by a global racist system whereby post 9/11 the image of Muslims has been conflated with terrorism. In Rana's research Muslims are ascribed racial comportment based on visual attributes of skin color and customs. Therefore, Muslims are racialized because of cultural and biological determinism ideas.

Such comments were often made in the form of "banter." Participants identified the potentially racist components and repercussions of acts that are not necessarily involving commonly-acknowledged "hate words." To this end, they recalled experiencing microinsults and microaggressions sometimes in the form of jokes in relation to their appearance and religious practices such as praying and fasting.

Furthermore, participants highlighted the lack of diversity, and specifically the lack of Muslim representation in football in terms of players, coaches and referees, especially in the Premier League. There was a broad consensus among the participants that the lack of South Asian representation within football was a key contributing factor towards the discrimination and hostility that they faced because of a lack of Muslim role models within professional football.

> 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. (Ahmed)

Selod and Embrick (2013) believe racialization should not be exclusively viewed in the lens of racial categories rather they should be seen in the way in which certain groups are rejected from whiteness. They argue that race and racism mutate based on social and historical contexts. For instance, post 9/11 Muslims are a suspect community because they are inherently viewed as dangerous to society. They argue that we need to acknowledge this and create a race language that enables Muslims to be seen as racialized.

The consensus view among participants was that Muslims face discrimination in all aspects of football.

> To be honest I'm so used to it. All the bad things I've been called like a "Paedo," "Terrorist," "P***" are just normal and I'm used to it. It's normal practice. (Amine)

Related to the point of hostility towards Muslim players being normalized, participants noted that when they did report their experiences of Islamophobia to the Football Association or the police, they did not feel that their accounts were taken seriously. In some cases, participants and their teams felt like being "punished" when they spoke up even though they were the victims.

> It's just a kick in the teeth, even if you report it, nothing happens, nothing gets done about it. Clubs, the FA and the UK Football Policing Unit don't really care. (Bilal)

Participants argued that despite reporting incidents to the FA, they did not feel supported.

> Last season, we ended getting jumped by the team we were playing against. They had a reputation for being racist. It went to the FA, but they banned and fined both our team and theirs. We were the victims but we were punished. FA brushed it under the carpet, there was no police involvement…The FA does not take it seriously. (Umar)

Participants also noted the lack of support from their managers and referees in cases of Islamophobic incidents.

> Last season I was racially abused by fans. I reacted, I had a go at the fans. I got a red card and got sent off. So really, as much as I don't like it, I have no option but to suck it up. Again, the management team never really did anything about it, they never got involved. (Khalil)

Implications

Muslim women have to also navigate and confront bias and prejudice when it comes to the wearing of the hijab. The hijab has become a barrier for them. If they decide to wear it, they are questioned about their allegiance to the country, sport, and national identity. That said, it is important to highlight that it is not hijab that has become a barrier, it is racist discourse, policy, legislation and practice that have created barriers for Muslim women.

This process of othering has also led to a heated public debate about the stigma of the hijab in sport and the demand that Muslim women must adhere to it. There is also a demand for Muslim women not to wear the hijab in relation to certain sporting events. This also raises wider questions about the role of the hijab in sport, assimilation and integration.

Participants discuss below the emotional and psychological impacts of these experiences, particularly in relation to their mental health and physical well-being.

> I face racism, sexism and Islamophobia. There are times I go home after a match and I cry. (Farah)

> I've had to disable comments on my Instagram account after receiving rape threats. It has affected my mental health. I'm now on anti-depressants. (Anisa)

Since the banning of the veil for French athletes at the 2024 Olympic Games, it has become synonymous with historical colonial attitudes in the West about Muslims not willing to assimilate in society. Muslim women are represented in a negative light because they are deemed to be oppressed by Muslim men. This is can also be seen as a form of racialization. Current anti-sexist and misogynistic labels have stereotyped Muslims and mispresenting there lived experiences of abuse and hate in sport more generally.

In some cases, participants became physically unwell, as the following quote shows.

> It [incident of abuse from opponent team coupled with lack of support by league] really made me sick, for 2 months I was sick. It happened and I couldn't stop it. Every time I think of it, it's panic, panic, panic. I stopped working for 2 months, I was out of work for 2 months. (Ibrahim)

Participants also noted how demoralizing and demotivating these experiences were for them.

> My passion is playing football but I feel deflated and upset most days not because we have lost or won but because of the attitude towards me, it's always negative because of my beard. (Shakil)

In the run-up to the Fifa Qatar World Cup in 2022, Muslims and predominately Arab Muslims were accused of sportswashing after the Argentinian football star

Messi was given a black robe called the Bisht to wear when picking up the world cup. Both offline and online Qatar and Muslims were criticized, stereotyped and labeled as being misogynistic hosts who would never be able to address issues related to inequality and fairness (Carr & Power, 2020).

Participants argued that Muslims are leaving football because of Islamophobia in football coupled with the lack of support from their managers, Football Association and the police. This also affects Muslim communities more widely as the new generation of Muslims is less likely to join football.

> It affects Muslim communities. It prevents Muslim lads from participating in football. (Rashid)

Discussion

The narrated experiences of intersectional Islamophobia in grassroots football can push forward contemporary understanding of race. In this regard, it is important to apply a CRT approach to examine grassroots football as "productive" of anti-Muslim racism. A CRT approach to understanding Muslim players' experiences in grassroots football facilitates a richer, more informed analysis of intersectional Islamophobia. The definition of racism offered in the APPG on British Muslims report (2018) report was adopted in the present study: "Islamophobia is rooted in racism, and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness." Using CRT as a guiding theoretical framework, we foreground the qualitative experiences and stories of male and female Muslim football players in order to understand the intersectionality between Islamophobia, racism and gender. CRT's emphasis on using intersectionality enables a timely and critical appraisal of Islamophobia in football.

As the findings indicate, participants reported experiencing abuse from fans as well as other players (including from their own teams). Incidents of abuse that started offline sometimes moved into the online world. Participants' racial identity coupled with religion was a key trigger for the hate that they received, both offline and online. Muslim women who wore the hijab (headscarf) experienced "triple penalty" of Islamophobia, racism and misogyny. Participants also reported experiencing discrimination from the management in terms of career development, progression and retention. When they spoke up, they were accused of playing the "race card." This reflects Bell's (1992) "rules of racial standing." Bell (1992) explained how claims of racism suffered by minority ethnic people are seen to be special pleading and not given serious consideration. Participants felt that there was often little point in reporting Islamophobia because it will not be taken seriously by clubs and the authorities, and perpetrators were likely to go unpunished. The issue of underreporting is also evident in Najib (2022) and Zempi and Chakraborti's (2014) research on Islamophobia.

The consensus view among participants was that Islamophobia is "part and parcel" of the game. This reflects Burdsey's (2011) findings on interviews with British Asian

players in first-class cricket. Specifically, Burdsey (2011) examined racism as discourse with regards to the presence and effects of racial microaggressions within player interactions such as locker-room conversations and exchanges during matches. The study highlights players' experiences of racism, but also identified their tendency to normalize their experiences of racism. According to Burdsey (2011), British Asian players are often pressured into denying or downplaying racial microaggressions which are articulated between teammates and in a seemingly playful manner, dismissing incidents as merely "banter" or "jokes." Yet contrary to their perceived innocent, playful nature, jokes represent a significant means of subjugating racialized groups in sport. Not only do they contribute to the marginalization of minority ethnic participants, the normalization of discriminatory practices and the maintenance of white privilege, but crucially they can also be articulated without being seen to contravene the widespread opposition to racism that exists in this sphere (Burdsey, 2011).

Participants in this study also spoke of the impacts of Islamophobia in football, which included emotional, psychological, physical and economic damage. Participants felt reluctant to continue playing football and encourage other Muslims to engage with this sport. This contributes to the wider marginalization of Muslims not only in football but also wider society. As Carrington (2010, p. 66) points out, "sports become productive, and not merely receptive, of racial discourse and this discourse has material effects both within sport and beyond." As our participants highlighted from the outset, they are seen through a negative lens of securitization and have become victims of wider racial inequalities in football and wider society. Yet, when they spoke up, they were accused of playing the "race card."

Sian (2015) argues that Muslim experiences of racism are often dismissed, and this appears to chime with our findings that Islamophobia in football is considered as just "part of the game" in attempt to silence any form of discontent. Such inferences have led to the negation of crude racist reductionist ideas around race (Hussain & Bagguley, 2012). As Stuart Hall (1992) explains that race and the West are seen as binary opposites, that is, the West is seen as homogenous and all that which is not western is seen as part of the "other." The sense of "otherness" that western discourse imposes on non-western peoples and cultures can be seen as the key source of modern ideas around race in football and the "other," which Hall argues is constructed as the absolute opposite, and the negation of everything the West stands for. This sense of "otherness" also equates to power structures of racial superiorities and dominance, and the feeling that Muslims playing football are seen as being "backward" and "other," and therefore given less opportunities than their white counterparts (Fekete, 2004). Also, within this context, racism in football is not necessarily the result of overt, intentional discrimination, but rather it is embedded in the way that organizations and systems operate, making it more difficult to identify and address (Chu et al., 2014). Because whiteness is embodied through imperialism, Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues that racism is structural and, in this context, institutional racism within the grassroots game will have a profound impact on the lives of those who experience it, including increased mistrust of the authorities within football, increased feelings of marginalization and exclusion, and

also increased risk of alienation and stigma (Laruccia & Martyniuk, 2016). In addition to the Runnymede Trust report (1997, 2017), the work Zempi and Chakraborti (2014), and the work of Najib (2022) highlight the impacts of Islamophobia. Together, this work shows the emotional, psychological, behavioral, physical and financial "harms" of Islamophobia for victims and their families. However, these harms also extend to the wider Muslim community, particularly those individuals who have a "visible" Muslim identity.

Experience of racism of this nature is often perceived as an attack on the victim's identity (Fawbert, 2011). In this situation, Muslim football players are depicted as dangerous "others" rather than normal people living an alternative lifestyle. As Bowling (1993, p. 67) states: "Racial victimisation is, like other social processes, dynamic and in a state of constant movement and change, rather than static and fixed." Cashmore and Cleland (2011) examined the under-representation of Black football managers by examining over 1000 football fans views at the lack of Black managers in English football. Fifty-six percent of football fans, according to their research, think racism occurs in the boardroom at the executive level. Furthermore, the lack of bystander support for victims of racism in football also brings in the notion that referees and other match officials at the ground are not intervening to support Muslim football players. Rather, Muslim football players are accused of playing the "race card." Cleland and Cashmore (2016) refer to this as the "colour-blind" approach, whereby racism is not acknowledged by the authorities and therefore there is a reluctance to report it or challenge it.

The present study also highlighted the "normalization" of Islamophobia on social media. In this way, social media acts as an amplifying echo chamber for such anti-Muslim hateful rhetoric and racist views. It reinforces the idea for some people to see football and the internet as a place where it is acceptable to post comments with sexist and racially motivated language, often with the caveat that they are not racist, but simply hate an ideology. That said, it is important to recognize that these comments on social media can also reflect wider attitudes that are endemic in the real offline world. Social media in this way can act as a megaphone for racists. Cleland and Cashmore (in Kilvington et al., 2022) emphasize that football is merely the window through which we view society at play. Thus, it could be argued that Islamophobia in football is a societal mirror.

Conclusion

Islamophobia in grassroots football discriminates, subjugates and oppresses Muslim players. The article employed CRT as an important theoretical tool for understanding Islamophobia as a form of anti-Muslim racism. The findings showed that participants suffered Islamophobia from fans as well as other players (in some cases, from their own teams). Incidents of abuse that started offline sometimes moved into the online world. Participants' race coupled with religion was a key trigger for the hostility that they received, both offline and online. Indeed, intersectionality is a key tenet of CRT. Crenshaw (1995, p. 358) has argued that focusing "on the intersections of

race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed." Relatedly, participants described the multiple levels of racism and the complexities of intersectionalities that they experienced, resulting to "multiple racisms" rather a singular racism. Furthermore, participants reported experiencing discrimination from the management in terms of career development, progression and retention. When they spoke up, participants were accused of playing the "race card." Impacts included emotional, psychological, physical and economic damage. Hylton (2010) states that discrimination and prejudice occurs at the level of the personal (individual), organizational (institutional) and societal (structural). The lack of action perpetuates these multiple racisms and maintains the status quo. For example, when it comes to sport such as cricket the Independent Commission for Equity in cricket found that sport of cricket has a deep entrenched problem with racism. The reality is that football like cricket must deal with the deeper issues related to discrimination, sexism and elitism. Specifically, the report found that 87% of people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage who responded to its survey, along with 82% of Indian and 75% of Black respondents, said they had experienced discrimination in cricket. Despite this, organizations such as the South Asian Cricket Academy (SACA) have helped to bridge the gap between young British Asians who might have a lack of trust in the system. To this end, grassroots football could be understood as a "racial project" whereby Muslims are stigmatized, oppressed, and excluded. As such, grassroots football becomes a mirror of Islamophobia in wider society.

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