

This section details some of the experiences of Black Muslims within the sport sector in the UK. It is a starting point to understand some of the successes and barriers the Black Muslim community faces whilst trying to engage in sport. It includes Jawahir Roble’s journey to becoming the UK’s first female Muslim referee, the inspiration behind Black Muslim Women Bike initiative and its aim to shifting perspectives, and the ambitions of Sports Performance Academy to empower people through knowledge and exposure to careers in sports coaching.

FOOTBALL - MY DREAM, MY JOURNEY

BY JAWAHIR ROBLE

PURSuing MY PASSION

My journey begins in Somalia where I was born. When I was about the age of 4 or 5, I started to have a serious passion for football. I remember playing football within the neighbourhood, with mainly boys and a couple of girls. The civil war in Somalia escalated and my family had to flee to the UK. Here in the UK football is well organised. Both girls and boys are encouraged to play it, which was nice to see.

When I was in year 9, I tried to attend football trials and engage with professional football clubs. My family raised objections to pursuing a career in professional football. The main reason being it was culturally unacceptable for a girl to play football. My parents feared being shunned by the local Somali community. There was social pressure to conform as a female to a traditional image, which revolves around girls being encouraged to remain at home and help with domestic chores. Traditionally, football is seen as a boys' game.

At the time, a Black ex-England and Arsenal female player provided local coaching at my school. She advised me to attend an open trial with local teams. Back then, the pay for female players was low, which is why she was undertaking a second job as a coach in my school. This was a further reason for my parents to object to this career pathway.

One of the other main reasons my parents never wanted me to play football was that they were well aware of FIFA's ban on accessories, which was recently lifted in 2015. This rule prohibited Muslim girls from playing while wearing their *hijab*.

After finishing year 11, and during the first year of college I started to consider other avenues that would enable me to continue to engage with football. I discovered courses on coaching and started pursuing coaching qualifications. The prospect of coaching was not seen as problematic by my family. It seemed that it conformed to their ideas of how a female conducts herself outside the house, i.e. no running around.

The coaching role was seen as a support role and not heavily involved with on-field playing. From a clothing perspective, it was seen as a more compliant option to the religious coverings required from a female when compared to when playing in a football kit.

Following the completion of my coaching qualification in 2012, I was curious about how real life coaches do their jobs. I wanted to find out how things work in the training grounds and to ask questions to professional coaches. At a football academy, I secured an administrative role. It was not exactly what I wanted to do but it was a good starting point to gain insight into coaching. On a particular Saturday, the academy had a shortage in the number of referees present for a juniors' match. I was asked to fill in due to my knowledge and enthusiasm for the game; it was my first time experiencing the refereeing role. The parents of the juniors expressed gratitude. Although I felt confused at times and was unfamiliar with the role, it was a valuable experience for me and the gratitude of the juniors' parents made me feel a sense of accomplishment and happiness. It was an exciting experience that introduced me to refereeing. From then on, I was promoted into a refereeing role at the academy and was encouraged to undertake a refereeing course.

The course tutor spoke about refereeing in the Premier League, encouraging me to work hard and climb the corporate ladder. The Premier League is considered the highest level of professional football in the UK and it is my dream to referee a game in this league in the future. During my refereeing course, I began to realise that there is more to a football match when refereeing compared to participating as a player. Understanding of the atmosphere is needed to make the correct judgments and keep the peace on the pitch. Time keeping is important as well as reading the game. At my first time refereeing for a men's game I had taken my female cousin and sisters with me as backup. This was because I felt scared to go to a men's game alone. I doubted my ability to succeed and wanted to have a support network around me, who I can lean on during difficult moments in the match.

EDUCATIONAL PATHWAY

Finding the right course was an important factor. I wanted to study sports science in university. But my parents encouraged me to keep football as a hobby and to attain professional qualifications in the university. A back-up plan for her future, they said. While studying in 2014, I had a part-time coaching role for a women's team. I was unhappy about the IT course that I was on so I ended up dropping out at the end of the second year. I had a dilemma on how to tell the parents about dropping out. I told my dad first as I felt that it was harder to tell my mum who I was afraid of disappointing. After having a heart-to-heart conversation with my dad about my career options, I negotiated focusing on a football related career.

I researched with my dad online and found a course in football coaching and management at UCFB Wembley. I applied and got accepted. It was the quickest three years of my life and I really enjoyed it. I was one of only two females on the course. Although a part of a small minority of BAME students, I felt like I belonged due to having a common goal of pursuing a career in football with my classmates. Being the only BAME student, it makes me happy at times because I was breaking the stereotypes and pursuing my dream. But more often it made me feel sad being the only one because I've met a lot of BAME girls, who are into sports but never took it to the next level and made it into a career.

Another potential barrier was that the course was expensive. This reduces accessibility to the course for people from low-socio economic backgrounds such as myself. I ended up working as a carer and continued coaching and multiple part time jobs to pay for the course.

GENDER, RACE, AND COMMUNITY

Currently, I coach my own team of females, made up of mostly BAME girls 4-16 years old. The team is part of a Football Association (FA) initiative to help increase the number of female players. The program itself is called 'WILDCATS.' My plan is to create a local league in the area, which caters to different ages and gives opportunity to the local girls to play football. This is important to me because when I was younger I had always wished that my parents had taken me to a similar environment where girls can play football freely. I set up this programme because I know how much benefit the girls will be gaining from it. Skills like discipline, teamwork, work ethic, and communication.

With my career, I tried to make football mine in the best way that I can, whilst bringing my family along and changing their perception of it. Through my experience I have developed my own style of playing football and refereeing that reflects my own personal values and I share that with those around me when I'm in my element.

My claim to fame came about when I was approached by a player who suggested that his father worked for a news article. The father ended up writing about my career as a referee. Through this article, I shared my values and my story with people so that they know who I am and where I'm heading. I hoped that it would encourage other girls from similar backgrounds to pursue a career in football.

There needs to be accessible role models of similar backgrounds that are celebrated to increase engagement of Black Muslim females in certain sectors. People need to know that there are others who are doing the work that they want to do. There are many unsung heroes within the Black Muslim community that need to be highlighted and celebrated to inspire the next generation.

Not enough is being carried out by the big organisations to highlight the contribution of the BAME population in sport. Much work is still needed in this space to increase representation and inclusion. This is reflected by the small number of both female and male ethnic referees that are currently active within the game.

My family was instrumental in shaping my career through both their objections and their eventual support. I have had many successes within the field and hope that my shared experience can shed some light on the many barriers that I have faced. I think that the first and most difficult barrier to overcome is the objections raised by the Black Muslim community to females pursuing a career in sports. It is important that our communities begin to engage in a wider capacity with the sport sector and start to understand the challenges as well as the vast opportunities available to those who have a passion for the game. I hope that my story can positively change the community views and result in an increase in the number of Black Muslim females, who feel confident to pursue football just like me. The pathway that my school coach created for my generation is the same pathway I am trying to create for the next.

In my career, race and religion were never an apparent issue. It might be behind doors, which I was never exposed to. The spaces I've been a part of have always been accommodating. I was given special arrangements like my own changing room and the home team always asked me if I had a specific dietary requirement. I've been around the same clubs for so long, now they are accustomed to my requirements.

I had the privilege to travel to China, Spain, The Netherlands, Denmark and few other countries to referee and gain more experience. China was one of my favourite countries that I had visited because the people treated me so well and even at some point made me feel like a celebrity. They were not used to seeing Black people so they ended up taking pictures of me every time they saw me outside.

I think there is a lot of fear within the Muslim community and especially Muslim females being targeted by Far-right groups. However, I feel that everyone needs to have confidence and to aim to not show their fear in front of others and try to live their lives to the fullest by pursuing what they want. Personality and conduct matter more than just the image that people might have of you and will open doors for you.

In Somalia, I would automatically fit in. But in the UK, I have to work on myself to understand the UK culture and language and work to create a comfortable space for myself. Coming to the UK doesn't change my culture and heritage. I found ways to fit in by learning about the country and what is accepted without forsaking my values. Making a home for myself wherever I go.

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JAWAHIR ROBLE

Jawahir Roble is the UK's first female Muslim referee. She is a Somali-born British football player, coach and mentor. She has won several awards and has been featured on many national media platforms in the UK in her work to encourage and inspire girls into pursuing a career in football.

THRIVE

BY MUNEERA WILLIAMS