

# Physicality and health inequalities in British Pakistani Muslim women

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Physicality and health inequalities In British Pakistani Muslim women: Analysis of a participatory theatre-based play

Dr Qulsom Fazil and Polly Wright

*“When it was J’s (brother) wedding (in Pakistan), I sat and imagined the music, I sang all the songs to myself and I danced around the table”*

## Introduction

We are familiar with narratives of British Pakistani Muslim women’s health and well-being either as figures for high rates of disease prevalence or through sensationalised media stories of submission, oppression and abuse. British Pakistani Muslim women living in the UK are viewed as unhealthy when exploring the statistics around illness. They have been reported to have very high rates of mental illness compared to white British women (Fazil, Q Cochrane, R 2003; Gater et al 2009), as well as high rates of morbidity and mortality in a number of areas of disease (Official Statistics 2006; Evandrou et al 2016). Major limitations in understanding health inequalities in ethnic populations is partially due to the lack of urgency to drive ethnic data collection as a matter of priority and then delays in analysing these data within a reasonable time, the case of cancer data is a good example (Fazil 2018).

The British Pakistani Muslim community in the United Kingdom has an estimated population of 899,000 with over 92% of Pakistani’s in the UK classifying themselves as Muslim. Sian et al (2012) highlight in their analysis of 68 news items on domestic issues relating to Muslims conclude that despite the expectation that there might be a decline in negativity surrounding Muslims in the media since 9/11, the onslaught of negativity continues and the “association of Muslims with terrorism has concretised”. It could be argued that this rise in Islamophobia has impacted on the way the health of these populations is inconsistently scrutinised or marginalised, subsequently resulting in a sketchy understanding of health issues.

There has been a recent rise in British Pakistani Muslim women’s visibility on the British arts and culture scene. A number of comedians for example Nadia Mansoor and Shazia Mirza have performed to packed audiences who come to hear of experiences of life for British Pakistani Muslim women living in the U.K. A recent boxing play entitled “No Guts No Heart No Glory” based on interviews with Muslim female boxers tracks the story of a Muslim female boxer and her struggles. In this way, there is a slow increase in both the visibility of British Pakistani Muslim women on the arts and culture scene as well as a recognition that the creative arts is a powerful vehicle for challenging representations.

This chapter provides a detailed account and analysis of a participatory arts based research project with the British Pakistani Muslim community living in Birmingham. We explain our process of engaging British Pakistani Muslim women to become involved in developing a script and acting in a play, entitled “Alum Rocks”. We outline the play, which documents the British Pakistani Muslim women’s journey from migration in the 1960s to their current lives,

as a community with more than 60 years of roots in the UK and their outlook for the future. We see through the telling of the story and its enactment, the challenges faced by the women when they arrived, the link between the process of settlement to a new country and the beginning of their health concerns. Lack of physicality, isolation and loneliness are drawn out as confounding factors resulting in subsequent health inequalities for the British Pakistani Muslim women settling in the UK. We challenge the common narrative of inaccessible and closed off communities deemed as “hard to reach”. Our stance is that the generalist methodologies employed by researchers lead to poor participation of minority communities in research. Subsequently resulting in being labelled as “hard to find and reach”, leading to a lack of understanding of health issues relevant to these communities. We conclude that this generalist approach is in its nature stigmatising and racist. Ground-up co-produced culturally appropriate designs and solutions are required to engage with communities and individuals from diverse backgrounds.

## THE PROJECT

The research we discuss in this chapter is from a project titled: Representing Communities: Developing the creative power of individuals to improve health and well-being. it involved five communities in three case studies of populations living in the UK. The project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (Grant Ref: AH/K003372/1). The Pakistani community in the district of Hodge Hill, Birmingham took part in the research project as one of the case studies based in Birmingham led by Dr Qulsom Fazil who identifies as being British Pakistan Muslim and who was born and brought up in Birmingham and still lives there. Within this case study, we carried out a number of community-based arts projects in which we engaged the Pakistani community to understand their needs and experiences of health and well-being as well as how they see their future in the UK. The overall aim of the project was to enable communities to create re-presentations of their own communities. We report here the journey of creating a play with inner city British Pakistani Muslim women who had not taken part in any drama or theatre activity previously and we discuss our learning from the play through an interpretive analysis of the play. Learning from the creation of the play, the women titled “Alum Rocks” is of importance to those with an interest in engaging with diverse seldom heard voices as it provides for generating knowledge in a way not possible through interviews and postal questionnaires. We learn in our analysis of the play, the interconnectivity between physicality, health inequalities and the impact of the post migratory historic experience and the barriers that arise preventing participation in promoting healthy living through physical activity. The play as it progresses gives us an understanding of how through the gradual process of integration, British Pakistani Muslim women are testing and going beyond the historical and migratory boundaries that limited them in participation in sport and physical activity.

## APPROACH

White (2009) advocates the importance of considering arts and health in terms of empowerment, communication, legacy, participation, curiosity, impact, investment, and sustainability. The development of participatory theatre practice as a tool for change is a recent one. Paolo Friere (1992) stressed the importance of ongoing dialogue and reflection as a crucial process in education, development and emancipation. We adopted Freire’s

view to shape our participatory research, which sees collaborative, co-creation and participation as the means to developing a more confident and empowered representation of one-self achieved through reflection and understanding ones potential place in the world (Campbell 2014). The playwright (PW) employed a feminist methodology in which women researchers working alongside women are able to elicit “private accounts” as opposed to “public ones” (Oakley 1981). An example of the difference between a public and private account could be the one cited by Wright, ( reference) in which women felt empowered to discuss more complex experiences of motherhood, when they were working with women drama based researchers, in contrast to the answers they gave when being interviewed, as part of a qualitative research study (Wright 2018).

Participatory theatre can take different forms. It can be completely owned by the community and written and performed by the community. The community are involved in creating their own messages and their own theatre that they want to engage people with. Here we took the above approach of engaging the participants in creating their own theatre production.

Through the use of drama as a method of knowledge production we had the following aims:

1. To provide Pakistani women the opportunity to represent themselves and through the creation and enactment of a play
2. To understand the processes involved in co-creation and co-production through the development of the play.
3. To understand the lived experience of British Pakistani women’s daily lives through the method of drama making and production
4. To understand how Pakistan women saw the future and some of the challenges that exist relating to achieving their future ambitions

### The Development of the Play

The researchers developed a specification for the play and a university contract was made between the playwright (Polly Wright from The Hearth Centre [www.thehearthcentre.org.uk](http://www.thehearthcentre.org.uk)) and the university to develop the play. The specification for the play was the requirement that it should seek to explore and represent the multi-layered lives of the Pakistani community living in Birmingham and the UK in the future context with a particular focus on health and well-being. The play’s focus was to be a positive one with an aim to provide positive, community own representations and aspirations. Through our previous activities with Pakistani communities, we had come to realise that we would only be able to engage with one gender. We found that it was only possible to do participatory activities with the British Pakistani Muslim community if we segregated the genders and held specific activities for each group. With this knowledge we decided to engage with the British Pakistani women in the play instead of British Pakistani men as we were interested in the seldom heard perspectives of the British Pakistani Muslim women around the past, present and future.

## Recruiting women

One of the first challenges faced was how we would be able to access the women to invite them to participate in the research project. An arts-based women's or any other kind of women's group that met regularly in the local area did not exist so we had to go out and recruit women to the project. How to go about this, was also a challenge. The research team spent a lot of time in the area of the Hodge Hill district observing and visiting community centres. We discovered that early in the morning from between 9-10.30am, many people walked around the local park. This included both men and women of all ages. This was a regular daily event. The playwright spent time walking in the park with the women and explained the research project to women that she met. She also joined a local Pakistani women's running group who had started running in the Park. With the help of the Dolphin Centre where the play was based and Polly's own participation in activities that the women were doing she was able to recruit women to take part.

The playwright worked with the women to develop the themes of the play. They met weekly, through sharing their own stories they helped to shape the script. The play was developed over a period of three months. Once the play was written, the women were trained in performing in the play and a dance choreographer was brought in to bring movement to the play.

## Summary of the Script of the play entitled “ Alum Rocks”

### Act one

The play starts in 1966 and Salma wearing traditional Pakistani clothes had just arrived to the UK to join her husband. Salma is shown recording a cassette tape to her mother describing her lovely new home and their life. She also describes the extreme loneliness she faces when the children are at school. We see the contrast between her portrayal of life in the UK via the cassette and the life she would have in Pakistani which is shown on a screen in the background. We see a film of a wedding with people dancing with lots of colour. She tells her mother “your daughter has gone fat here and that she has to let out her dresses and asks her to send some material as it is difficult to buy material that can be sewn in the UK. Salma tells us how lonely it is in her new home, the difficulty of understanding the transistor radio and how much she misses her family and her brothers wedding that has just occurred. We see clearly in the play, Salma’s difficulties of adjusting to living in the UK.

### Act two

We then see Salma as the grandmother in the family and the story moves to 2016 when Isla is a teenager and her mother (the wife of Salma’s son) one morning whilst cleaning her daughter’s room she discovers a cigarette packet. She tells Isla who begs her not to tell her father and she listens. We see the dilemma of Isla as “Isla is doing so well and she is taking part in her sports and is the best in sports in her school”.

Her father leaving mosque enters into the conversation with a fellow attender where they ask after their families and Isla’s father proudly says that one evening he was informed by a fellow attender that his daughter was seen smoking. He is furious and he comes home to face his wife and daughter. A row develops and he bans Isla from running. Her father tells her in anger,  
“Today smoking, tomorrow boys and then next drugs, I am taking you to Pakistan!”

We then see Isla struggling with her peers and her parents. Symbolising her inner struggle and her subsequent liberation through her running and becoming exhausted. In the background as Isla is running we see a picture of lots of beautiful sandals with not a trainer in sight.

We then see the grandmother (Salma) giving her son advice, she says, “Son your father was a difficult man and I had to hide some things from him”. She advises her son to move on from this situation and to be supportive of Isla as a family.

### The end

The women perform a choreographed motion of reconciliation and a build up to running.

The play ends with a video in the foreground of the women running in the park.

## **Learning from storytelling**

Developing a play provided the women with an opportunity to tell their own stories, create their own representations of British Pakistani Muslim life and to share their vision of the future. Using the given theme of the “Future of British Pakistani’s” the women’s play took us on a journey to the past, brought us to the present and gave us an insight into their envisaged future. We discuss below the knowledge generated from the creation and enactment of the play as well as what we have learnt from the use of a participatory drama method as a form of research methodology.

We focus below on the findings in relation to what we have learned through the women’s own storytelling. In analysing the play three central themes emerge around the women’s lived experience in Britain and their future outlook. Firstly; isolation and loneliness in the generation of women that migrated, secondly; inter-generational conflicts as part of the integration process and finally; through choosing sports participation and running as the empowering catalyst which propels Isla into the future, free and empowered portraying an established community adjusting to life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We also address what we have learned from the process in relation to underrepresented communities and their engagement in the performing arts and research.

### ***From negative to positive just by adding a “s”***

The women titled the play “Alum Rocks”. Using the name of the well-known area of Alum Rock in the Hodge Hill district and by adding the letter “s” onto the end of the word Rock, the meaning changes. This change gives a whole new meaning to an area often depicted in negative terms and deemed to have a negative reputational geography (Parker, D and Karner, C., 2011). The word “Rocks” gives a positive representation, giving rise to images of being a modern place where things are “moving and shaking”.

### ***Well-being, physical activity and its roots in the migratory experience.***

In the story Isla’s grandmother (Salma) portrays for us a picture of extreme loneliness living in the UK. Putting on weight, waiting for the children to come home and a longing for the extended family left behind in the native land. The quote at the beginning of this chapter is taken directly from the narration of Salma as she records a tape-recording for her family to listen to in Pakistan. This illustrates the complete isolation faced by the women when they came to the UK, whilst their husbands were at work and their children were at school. The women had only the four walls of their house to engage with. This is an important aspect of the British Pakistani Muslim women’s migration story in the UK and provides the backdrop for a number of studies that have shown high rates of anxiety and depression in British Pakistani Muslim women as well as social isolation. A lack of physical activity in South Asian women is also clearly documented in a mixed method systematic review of physical activity among South Asian women (Babakus, and Thompson, 2012). They report that South Asian women did not meet the recommended amounts of physical activity for health benefits and barriers included structural and cultural barriers as well as faith, education and a lack of understanding of the benefits and required amount of physical activity. From the play we

see an important historic health inequality that is fundamental in understanding the lives of British Pakistani Muslim women. Coming from an active lifestyle with an active community and family life to a life in isolation and inactivity apart from housework. Often when people talk about cultural and structural barriers they attribute the blame towards the participants culture and their inability to navigate their way through the physical activity environment, here we see the impact of the actual process of migration and the resulting environment as an inhibitor and restrictor of activity. The play provides a deeper understanding of the limitations faced by women who migrate to a new culture and environment.

The women tackle the clash of cultures head-on in the play, making it the central theme. As the story moves to the future, through using the event of smoking, it illustrates the intergenerational conflicts and notions of honour reported in other studies in relation to British Pakistani Muslim women's lives. We see in the story a different slant on the role of the mother-in-law as a conflict resolver rather than the usual narrative of a conflict maker. The mother-in-law/grandmother role is often demonised in narratives related to women. The mother-in-law/grandmother plays a very empowering role in the play. As well as developing a script where women are empowered through the intervention of other women in the family. The women whilst writing the play were very conscious not to portray the male character as being the typical male protagonist but to portray him as a real human being living within a family context. In the play, after Isla is banned from participating in her sport, the mother in law, Isla's grandmother acts as the mediator and talks to her son and persuades him to try to understand from Isla's perspective. Often elders are seen as being able to resolve conflict in Pakistani culture but this role is almost universally publically attributed to men. Through using the culturally acceptable notion that it is acceptable for the son to listen to his mother, the women, used this form of resolution as a normal part of the lived experience, through this enactment they challenge what may be existing narratives of the role of the mother-in-law within the family.

### **Identity, clothing and exclusion in physical activity**

Women's participation in physical activity sits within a "differentially exploited, racialized, ethnicised, sexualised, and religioned narrative in mainstream society (Brah and Phoenix 2004, 84). Taking up sport sits within a set of gendered expectations around what is fitting for young Muslim women and what is not and what is shameful. Within this context they are seen to face "surmountable obstacles" that are in the way of them "putting on a pair of trainers" (Bee 2005). The play challenges these obstacles, having a women only cast relays the message that British Pakistani Muslim women can partake in running and being part of a female only group is not an oppressive marker for them. It is liberating as they can participate in sport but also be loyal to their beliefs and family, community rules and duties. Walseth (2004) in research conducted in Norway more than 14 years ago exploring migrant Muslim women's ethnic and religious identities and their relationship to sport participation, reported that the wearing of sportswear and trainers challenged notion of femininity. The women in the play wore the clothes that they would have normally worn, a shalwar chemise or trousers and a top. Women in the play did not conform to the usual image of wearing shorts as a symbol of running. In the imagery in the background whilst the women are running in the play, there are beautiful sandals. We can interpret this to assume that



through the display of beautiful sandals and colour the women are sending a message that running itself can sit side by side the notion of femininity and the wearing of sandals.

### **Role of arts in research around health inequalities**

One of the achievements of the research project is that British Pakistani Muslim women wrote and enacted in a participatory theatre based play. The project was able to engage British Pakistani Muslim women in the creative arts (dealing with health) in a form that traditionally people will say that women would not participate in. Recruiting women involved being out in the community and taking part in the activities that the women were doing. Prior to recruitment to the play we had spent over one year in the district spending time with a number of community organisations who worked closely with the community. In this year, our aim was to understand the community in more detail and to then be able to develop what we call culturally appropriate arts based activities. The playwright Polly Wright as stated earlier spent time learning about the community and doing activities with the British Pakistani Muslim women in order to build up familiarity and trust. We worked very closely with a number of local community based organisations who also helped to promote our activities and research. The general feel at the beginning of the project was that it would be difficult to involve British Pakistani Muslim women to enact in a play. As time progressed we began to understand that in order for us to do this we needed to work closely with individuals to develop skills and build confidence. In the design of the research project we built in time so that women were trained to learn new skills and develop existing ones, for instance women were provided with drama acting and dance movement training. We also began to understand that women would be reluctant act in public due to family and cultural restrictions. This may have been the case for some women but not all and we were able to recruit women who even though reluctantly at first, were after a time able to act in front of an audience.

The use of arts-based activities provided a platform for unpicking and uncovering deeply embedded and enshrined behaviours in the communities and understanding the complexity of factors that can contribute to the development and enshrinement of these behaviours and the resulting health inequalities. This form of storytelling acts as a basis for capturing a range of invaluable testimonies which help us to provide new and alternative answers for health inequalities as well as providing a platform for engagement and challenging the existing notions within policy narratives of passive groups and disengagement.

The methodology for developing the drama provided a way of capturing hidden and unheard life stories and the enactment of the drama provided a medium to hear those unheard and hidden perspectives that provide challenge to existing representations of British Pakistani Muslim women. Documenting the ways in which British Pakistani Muslim women are living in constructive and helpful familial environments that allow for physical and sport participation. Yet in many cases the race logic doctrine in sport and PE environments can hinder this participation based on specific prejudiced perceptions. We see from the play that being part of a female network enabled participation in a play and also that new rules can be created on how physicality can be achieved such as rules around clothes that are suitable for the activity. Benn, Dagkas and Jawad (2011) highlight the

discriminatory nature of sporting policy and how many of these policies excluded Muslim women on the grounds of dress code for particular sports such as tennis etc. Recently we have seen a challenge by Muslim women around the notion of acceptable swimwear that is suitable for them and their needs rather than what the wider society prescribes or deem as suitable. The recent issue of the tennis player, Serena Williams choosing to wear an all in one black “catsuit” at the 2018 French Open at Roland Garros also highlights the tight control around women’s sportswear and the exclusivity of participation. It would be fair to say that British Pakistani Muslim women reading the fate of the tennis star may well feel that tennis is not a sport that they are able to participate in. Even though there is no reason why a woman needs to wear a short skirt or shorts to participate in playing tennis.

### **Concluding thoughts**

We have highlighted the powerful role participatory theatre style research can play in tackling topics that are often not touched as they are too sensitive as well as the way marginalised groups can be engaged by providing something back to the community through participation in terms of learning new skills, developing confidence and self-esteem. We see how the women challenged existing notions of the British Pakistani Muslim women as sedentary and insular by providing their own story which helps to understand the inequalities that the women faced. From the 1960s, we see the mother at home whilst the children are at school, scared to leave the house and eagerly awaiting the arrival of her children. This transformation occurs as British Pakistani women have evolved through the process of time and by raising their offspring within British society. We see daughters transform into acculturated young women who have a different identity to that of their mothers. Living in the outside world and dealing with parental expectations. Isla is empowered through her running, portraying through this representation what it means to be a young British Pakistani Muslim woman in the West. We see how the women through creating this story are socially constructing the young British Pakistani Muslim female, free to follow her dreams with the support of her parents.

The often cited reasons for health inequalities which focus much on individuals, behaviours, and cultural barriers usually overlook the beginnings of these health inequalities. From the play we learn how the act of migration and moving to a new country sets off a process of health inequalities which has resulted in the much produced data and statistics we see in relation to migrants’ health. Arts-based story telling research can be useful ways of producing knowledge with communities which can add to existing “evidence” as well as challenge what may be contradictory or incorrect “evidence”.

### **Researching communities you think are too difficult to research**

We provide some thoughts and advice based on our experience to enable researchers to rethink their research development practice so that the communities that are deemed as “hard to reach” are no longer labelled in this way.

Engaging with Black and Minority Ethnic communities cannot be an add-on to your existing research without an in-depth examination on the process of engaging with the specific community or communities. Design your research proposal so that it fits into the way the community will be able to engage with your research and to do this you need to engage with the community from the outset of the research idea.

It is essential to understand the community that you are doing a piece of research with. Spend time working with the community and building trust. In our experience, communities will willingly accept individuals whatever their background, it's all about building that connection and relationship. It is also essential to put something back into the community, an arts based project is a very good way of doing this, as you are providing the community with skills and activities that will benefit individuals whilst at the same time they are providing something that will benefit you and hopefully them in time too. Once your research is complete, stay in touch, disseminating your findings via an easy to attend party is one example. Try to put something back if you can help a community organisation with your free time. It all helps in keeping connected and having those links.

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