

MUSLIM GIRLS FENCE: THROUGH THE EYES OF A COACH

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Fencing - often perceived as a 'posh white man's sport' that is unreachable for many. A sport that is about the Olympics, medals and winning. Fencing, as I am sure many of you will agree, offers so much more. For the women and girls involved in Muslim Girls Fence, it has been about finding a sport that allows them to fully participate, whilst being respectful of their cultural and religious values. One woman in Doncaster, involved in the project, felt that being part of the project had helped her "get out of the house and meet other women from diverse backgrounds" with another participant adding that "fencing has brought lots of women together, women of all ages and from different communities. I never thought fencing would be for me, but it so is!"

But, it's not just the women taking part in the fencing who have felt the positive impact of the project. It is also the coaches who have been working to support the delivery of the project.

We spoke with Helen Solly and Lucy Johnson, who have been integral players in its success to date, to find out what it means to them to be part of Muslim Girls Fence. Currently delivering in two London schools, Lucy brings a creative element to her delivery. As a classically trained actress and stunt-woman, (as well as fencing on the Irish Women's Epee team), Lucy's sessions are very fun and engaging with the added secret ingredients of creativity and imagination. Helen has a wealth of experience and enthusiasm working in education, with a specialism and passion for working with young people with special educational needs. Another feather to Helen's cap is her role as a BF Coach Developer and she has been a key influencer and advisor in the success of the project in Doncaster.

We asked both coaches what they most enjoyed about being involved with this project and their responses shared two strong themes - enjoyment and a sense of satisfaction and achievement. For Lucy, knowing that "you can work with someone who has never touched a sword before and take them on a journey to seeing them become a fencer" was a real achievement for both the women and Lucy. Helen, felt that although this has been rewarding to witness, "seeing the women grow in confidence and new friendships form and build over the weeks" has been a huge outcome for the project.

In Doncaster Helen hopes that with her support and guidance, overtime the women will be able take more and more responsibility for the delivery of the programme. During the initial training that Helen delivered, feedback from the women included how they found the weekend had increased their confidence to do something for themselves, which for many women, regardless of religion or culture, can be a huge barrier for taking part in sport.

For Lucy, working in the schools, she wants to see the project grow and believes that the project provides a "unique and amazing opportunity" for the girls.

Lucy feels strongly that “having a female community of fighters who are fighting every single possible stereotype to get on a piste” is hugely important for not only those involved in the project but those who may be tempted to get involved. “Whether it be fencing or another sport, we are empowering these women and allowing them to celebrate who are they!”.

Like any *sport for social change project*, there are challenges and barriers to overcome. For Muslim Girls Fence it’s about changing perceptions of how the sport is viewed from outside of the fencing community as well as challenging misperceptions of and raise aspirations among, young Muslim women, in the light of the complex discrimination experienced by this group, on the basis of both faith and gender. As a coach Lucy believes “you have to be creative and adaptive to what’s in front of you and you learn a lot about yourself and how you need to adapt your delivery. You have to trust your gut, that we are giving people a strength and allowing individuality.” In Doncaster, Helen has been working closely with the women who completed their two-day Core Coach course, with the aim of making sure they are not only confident in their delivery but are able to take part in the sessions at the same time. The social element of the women coming together is hugely important to these women, but what has equally developed overtime, is their technical and tactical ability to fence and to fence well.

As BF continue to develop the partnership with Maslaha and reach out to more women and girls, BF are looking at ways to ensure that female coaches from within the sport are well briefed, equipped and confident to work with the women, to shape and develop the project in the communities and schools we are working in.

To learn more about Muslim Girls Fence, [please click here](#).