

Sports Insight

Young Somali Females (16-25)



This guide specifically focuses on understanding lifestyle factors which influence behaviour and sports participation for young Somali females aged 16-25.

Introduction

Our latest consumer research looks specifically at the young Somali female market (16-25) drawing on Sporting Equals past research supplemented by additional focus groups and interviews with young Somali females. It provides a valuable insight which sport providers can draw upon to make sport more inclusive for this segment and help increase participation.

Somali community in UK¹

Since the late 1990s, the Somali population of the UK has grown rapidly. There are now estimated to be around 250,000 Somalis living in the UK, with around 70,000 in London (International Organisation for Migration 2006). The earliest Somali settlers, mostly men working for the British Merchant Navy, arrived in the ports of London, Cardiff and Liverpool in the late 19th century; the majority from the British controlled north, Somaliland.

Other Somalis living in the UK have arrived as a result of ongoing Civil War in Somalia since the late 1980s and early 1990s (Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees 2007), arriving either directly from Somalia and surrounding countries, or, more recently, from other European countries such as Norway, Denmark and The Netherlands where they had initially settled.² Somalis represent one of the most economically deprived ethnic groups in the country. In addition, young Somalis are among the lowest achieving groups educationally (Rutter 2004), and Somali adults experience the lowest rate of employment in the country (IPPR 2007).

The majority of the Somali population are muslims and Somalis worship at mosques. They are often categorised as 'Black African' which has frequently resulted in the Somalis community needs being overlooked as they are a distinct group with different cultures, language and practices.³

1. The Somali Community in the UK
- <http://www.icar.org.uk/somalicomunityreport.pdf> - 24-09-2015

2. Understanding East London Somali Community, Options UK, A study conducted for the East London Alliance, August 2010

3. Somalis in Camden, Challenges faced by emerging communities, A report by Saber Khan (Ethnic Focus Research) and Adrian Jones

4. Understanding East London Somali Community, Options UK, A study conducted for the East London Alliance, August 2010

Background

This research was conducted with Somali females who had either been born in Britain or had been in this country for a long time and does not reflect other new arrivals who may be less educated and face greater barriers. The country in which they were brought up, and the stage at which they came to the UK, has an important impact on young Somalis' female identity.⁴

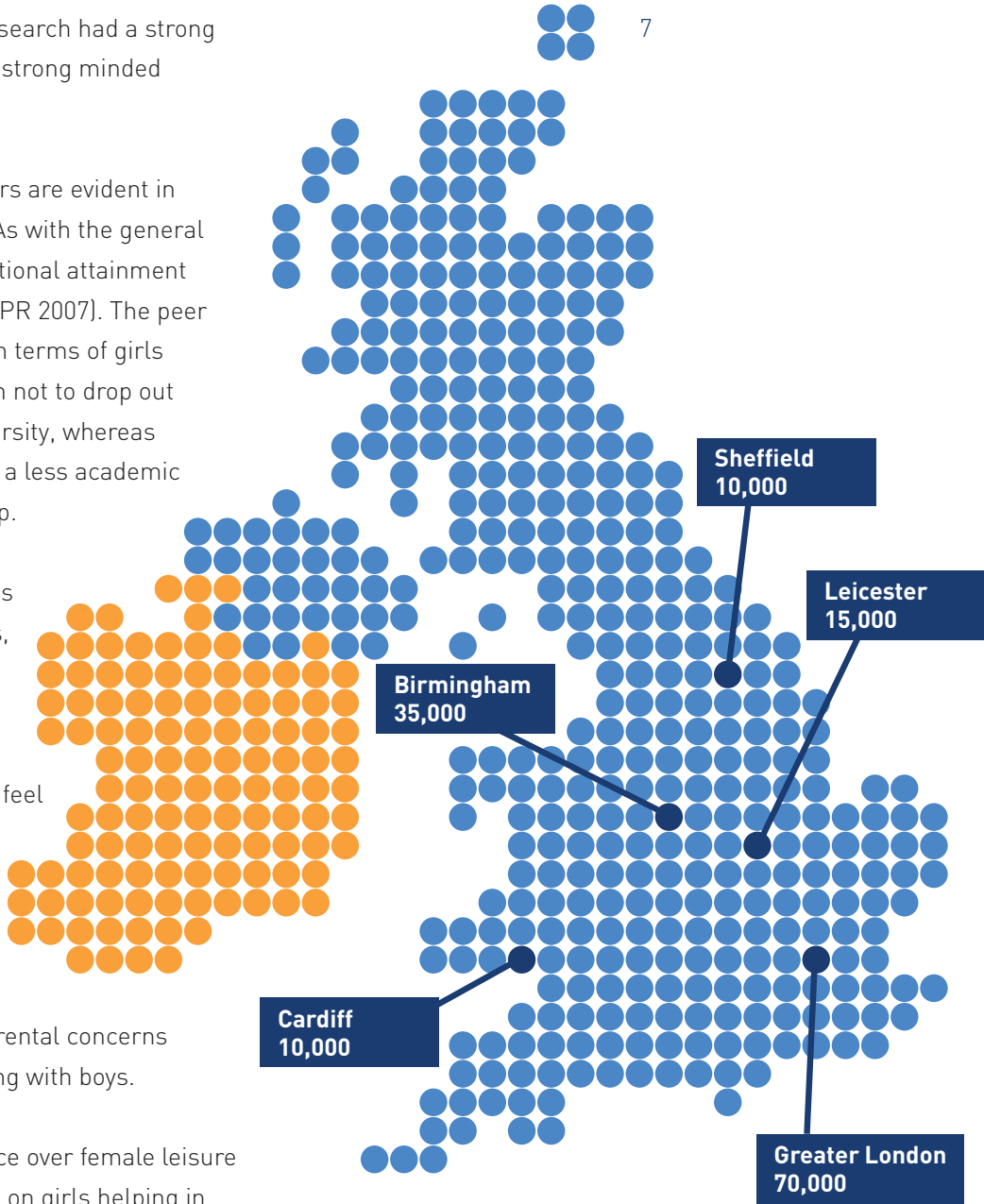


Many girls taking part in the research had a strong Somali culture but also a fairly strong minded western mentality.⁵

Differences between the genders are evident in their experience of education. As with the general population, Somali girls' educational attainment has recently overtaken boys (IPPR 2007). The peer researchers talked about this in terms of girls 'respecting themselves' enough not to drop out of school, and to go on to University, whereas boys might drop out, or choose a less academic route such as an apprenticeship.

- Girls' perception that there is a focus on activities for boys, to the detriment of girls. They felt there to be a lack of sporting/leisure activities for girls, who do not tend to feel comfortable playing sport in public.
- Many Somali girls tend to stay within their own area in light of parental concerns around safety and free mixing with boys.
- Parents have alot of influence over female leisure time with a traditional focus on girls helping in the home and taking care of siblings. However many families see the benefit of education and many young girls have strong views which can influence and challenge cultural norms.
- Many girls taking part in this research identified that even though they have restrictions if parents are reassured that environments are safe spaces where women only activities are taking place this can influence whether or not they take part.

Somali muslim women's attitudes to sport are often shaped by a number of factors including social class, religious orientation, culture, gender norms and family support. For many barriers to engagement include; dress codes, attitudes toward the body related



to privacy and modesty, mixed gender classes and cultural norms. Although many young Somali women have other pressures shaping their lives many would like to get more active given the right opportunities.

The Black African population increased from 0.9% in 2001 to 1.8% in 2011. Somali groups are a sub-set of the Black African sample and data is often not broken down to this level. In percentage terms 1.4% of Black African groups come from the South and Eastern parts of Africa and Somalis, in amongst them, constitute 0.2% of the overall population of England and Wales.⁶

5. Sporting Equals Focus Groups, Somali Females 16-25, Ilyes Community Association, June 2016

6. Somali Communities and State of Health, Briefing for the Council of Somali Organisations, Neeta Samota, 2014, Council of Somali Organisations

7. ONS 2011 Census



Somali Culture⁸

Somali families, as minority ethnic families are more likely to live in areas of deprivation and come from lower socio-economic groups. Therefore, much of the lower attainment of some of these groups can be attributed to socio-economic factors.⁹ A recent report produced by the Council of Somali organizations raised concerns from community leaders about lack of role models, inspiration, family support, poor housing and low income contributing to a picture of disadvantage likely to affect both educational and social norms.

It was identified in the Somali Communities state of the health report¹⁰ that Women and youth-led organisations are crucial in addressing health related needs of the community. Building their capacity to better engage with disparities in health and other areas such as employment and education should be a priority.

8. Somalis in UK - http://research.omicsgroup.org/index.php/Somalis_in_the_United_Kingdom - 12-11-2015
 9. Somali Communities and State of Education 2015, Council of Somali Organisations Briefing Paper, Idil Osman, Mariam Mohammed, Ahmed Nur, Council of Somali Organisations
 10. Somali Communities and State of Health, Briefing for the Council of Somali Organisations, Neea Samota, 2014, Council of Somali Organisations

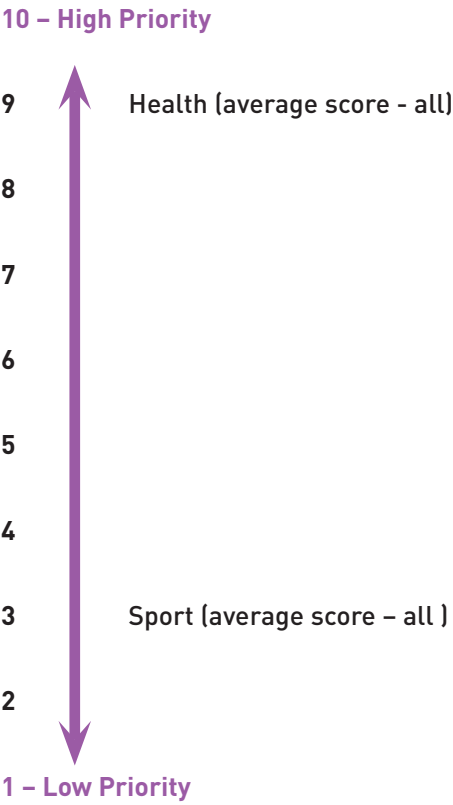
According to the 2011 census, 94,197 or roughly 93% of Somalia-born residents in England and Wales are Muslim, with 7% made up of Christians. The culture harbours a very traditional inheritance with men seemingly in control of households. This influences how people engage in sport, particularly females, with males having greater flexibility within cultural/religious constraints.

Location	Somali-born population (2011 Census)	Somalis regardless of birthplace (2006 estimates)
London	65,333	70,000
Birmingham	7,765	35,000
Bristol	4,947	N/A
Manchester	3,645	N/A
Leicester	3,209	15,000
Sheffield	2,372	10,000
Cardiff	1,672	10,000
Liverpool	1,249	N/A
Slough	1,247	N/A
Coventry	1,181	N/A
Milton Keynes	1,141	N/A
TOTAL	93,763	140,000

Lifestyle Choices

All of the girls in the focus group had all declared a prior interest in sport or physical activity mainly through PE at school and were aware of the benefits of sport in relation to fitness and wellbeing.

However for most of them sport was low priority and the majority were inactive. When asked how important, on a scale of 1-10, being fit and healthy was to each of them, the participants rated this issue highly – generally between 7-10 on the scale provided, and recognised the link with being active, sport and health.





Barriers

For the Somali females there seems to be lack of opportunities to get involved in sport particularly when girls leave school. Many feel that they face discriminatory prejudices based on their Somali identity and service providers are not receptive to their needs.

“They don’t really reach out to us, we don’t know when things are happening and there is a lot of issues with being Somalian as our needs are often get overlooked”,
focus group participant

“We are muslim community but we sit outside the larger Muslim groups and sports projects need to be tailored to our tastes and needs,”
focus group participant

A study carried out by Options UK in 2010 identified gendered differences in norms and expectations. Young men and women are seen to have different needs and vulnerabilities, requiring different parenting and rules. Young men have more freedom, and are more likely to spend time on the streets and come home late. Young women are meant to follow their parents’ rules. They are described as being more purposeful, more eager to try new activities, more trusted by their parents, but at the same time, more vulnerable to certain kinds of harm (particularly to their reputation).

The Sporting Equals research identified that many of the women and girls would like to do activities in groups of friends and this would be more acceptable to parents if they were attending sports activities or a youth club and they would be motivate if they were encouraged to go by a friend. The girls identified a need for more women-only activities and indicated an interest in team sports however place and facilitation were important factors influencing behaviour to engage in activities. Although young women have some restrictions on travel many would engage in activities if other friends were attending.

Engaging with Young Somali Females:

- No single approach to engagement is appropriate for all young Somalis females, who views differ widely according to age, gender, religiosity, and where they grew up.
- Family and cultural norms often dictate whether girls feel comfortable and are able to access activities outside local areas so more thought needs to be given around finding safe spaces in locations which are accessible.
- There is a clear need to educate families about the health benefits of sport and physical activity to help break down some of the barriers females face around cultural constrains.
- Young Somali females are comfortable socialising with people of other ethnicities however are they more inclined to stay with females from their own communities.

“I would definitely get more involved in sport if more women only activities were available in the local area. We need to see more role models from the community encouraging us girls to get involved and creating opportunities which are culturally sensitive to our needs”,
focus group participant

Many of the Somali girls engaged with sport at school and most were keen on team sport, however this enthusiasm didn’t carry through as the girls got older. Some had converted to the gym with the rest becoming inactive due to cultural barriers;

“I really enjoyed sport at school but now the lack of female only activities in the area means I have nowhere to do sport even if I wanted to,”
focus group participant

“I would do more sport if my friends were involved and we saw more women from the community engaged in sport,”
focus group participant

It was apparent that greater barriers existed for the females who wore the full muslim dress (jilbab), they were restricted in relation to outdoor activities as they didn’t feel sufficient privacy was available and would only be happy to do activities in indoor spaces with windows covered up.

Other generic barriers included influence of family, lack of local women only sessions and local opportunities. Many females are happy to engage in sport at school but need to be pushed and ‘offers’ structured to meet there needs once they leave school with an emphasis on female on sessions and activities with female coaches/instructors.

“I go to work and use a gym sometimes but I don’t think I have the time to do sport. I was ‘sporty’ at school however my priorities have changed and I have to help with my siblings as my mum isn’t well. Maybe the benefits of sport were much widely spread I might get involved but it would have to fit around my lifestyle.”
focus group participant



11. Understanding East London Somali Community, Options UK, A study conducted for the East London Alliance, August 2010
 12. Sporting Equals Focus Groups, Somali Females 16-25, Ilyes Community Association, June 2016



Motivators

SOCIAL ASPECTS

Many of the women suggested that knowing other women in the session helped motivate them to attend and made the sessions more enjoyable. They also enjoyed having fun, social and most see sport as a recreational activity with friends.

SAFE SPACES

Spaces to do sport or fitness were required where women did not feel embarrassed about their appearance or their ability and also spaces which met cultural concerns. They wanted to feel comfortable that coaches and other participants were non-judgemental about appearance, ability and clothing.

PARENTAL INFLNCE

Although it was felt parents had alot of influence it was felt that this culture was changing as girls were growing up they were able to challenge the norms around sport being a 'male activity' and are often given some freedom provided that parents were reassured that the girls were doing group activities in safe spaces.

CLOTHING

Flexibility with clothing was raised as a key issue, some women wanted to be fully covered or wear clothing they felt comfortable with. Some Somali women would only do sport in 'women only' environments due to religious beliefs and these sessions need to be facilitated by a female coach or instructor. The ability to participate in sports with other women who had similar values and norms was also important.

BODY IMAGE

A lot of women in this age group are very body conscious. The influence of western culture and slim models means many women aspire to be slim and a key motivation for sport and fitness is to lose weight.

"I struggle to find places to play sport which are private enough to address my cultural concerns",
focus group participant

Sport by Sport Trends

Team Sports - The most popular team sports identified were football, basketball, rounders and cricket and most girls would be interested in getting involved if opportunities were available locally. The key issues around team sport were finding enough people for a team, finding a female coach and finding a place which would be private enough for the girls to get involved.

Paired Sports - The most popular paired sports were badmindon, tennis and table tennis. The key issues around paired sport was equipment and also finding a suitable place to play.

Individual Sports - The most popular individual sports were swimming, running and horseriding. The key issues were around timing, clothing and finding suitable place and venues which offered women only activities. Swimming was popular however it was felt not enough women only sessions were available in local areas and many of the girls had to travel to access this.

For all sports it was highlighted that having an instructor or coach to teach you the skills and rules (particularly for team sports would help encourage them to get involved).

It was identified that a need existed to get more Somali females into the workforce to help facilitate activity in local areas. It was felt more messaging and outreach work was needed to engage females into sports, alongside a need to create more Somali Volunteers/ Activators to raise awareness of sessions and get more women involved through word of mouth.



Marketing & Communication

The social aspect of sport appealed to these women with many saying that information had to be packaged to highlight the 'social and fun' elements of sport. Many of these women see sport as a recreational past time which they could do with friends and family and would be more inclined if opportunities were made available locally.

Many of these women are IT savvy and most confirmed that they engaged in social media as a communication medium as a key way of engaging with friends and family.

- Word of mouth is of primary importance among friendship and family networks. However, in the 16-25 age group the girls mainly rely on existing social networks such as whatsapp, facebook, instagram to spread information on activities and events.
- The girls wanted information directly to come to them rather than taking the time to search for information and most get information through word of mouth, posters in mosque, social media, schools colleges were all platforms through messaging could be accessed.

- There are growing number of Somali radio stations, Somali press (eg. Somali Eye), TV channels (Somali TV Universal) largely watched by the older generation, however the young girls are more likely to engage with mainstream media alongside other media such as Islam Channel which they feel relevant to mainstream life and cultural heritage.

Messaging

- Imagery is important – the girls wanted to see girls which reflect themselves e.g wearing hijabs whilst playing sports.
- The women felt that images of girls wearing short skirts for netball and tennis were off-putting and created a negative stereotype around sports being for white 'elite'.
- It was important to create role models from within the community which they could relate to, 'images speak louder than words'.

"I regularly use facebook, Whatsapp, instagram... to engage with my friends and would use this as a medium to organise activity",

focus group participant

Top Tips

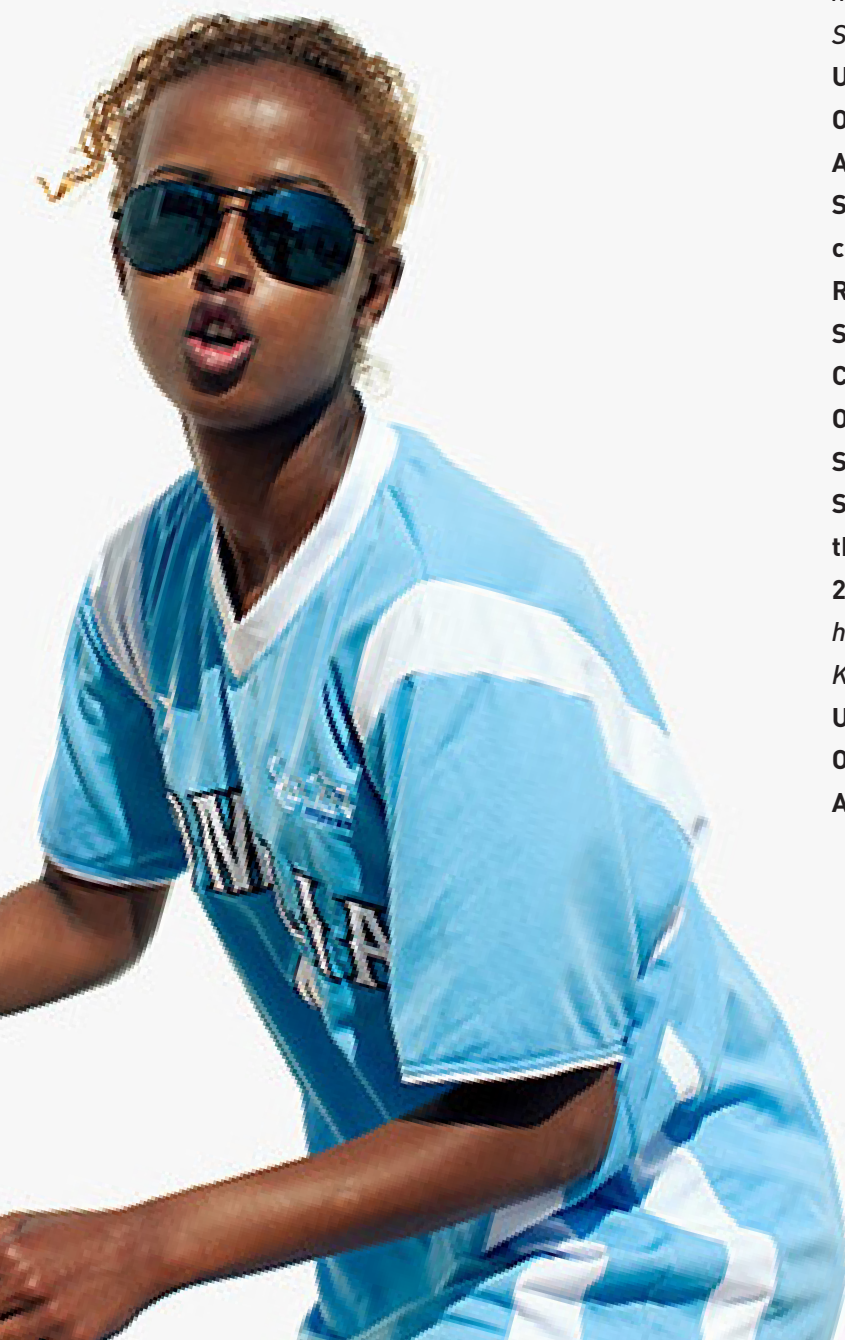
1. There is a clear need to build confidence amongst this group to enable wider engagement in sport.
2. Offer taster and drop-in sessions with 'invite a friend or family member' feature to help engage Somali females. This will help boost confidence and encourage sustained participation as the women will be in the comfort of people they know.
3. Service providers need to be flexible around clothing, some women who wear the jilbab may only be comfortable doing sport in indoor setting where they have privacy and offers should be tailored around local need.
4. Help develop greater accessibility through supporting transitions in colleges/higher education to avoid drop off after girls leave schools.
5. There is a need to offer more single sex provision with female coaches and instructors in local settings.
6. Promote sport through Female Somali role models and link to health messaging to help break down barriers.
7. Participants expectations of coaches may be different than in other settings and emphasis should be on engagement and being culturally receptive e.g. clothing and privacy – try and encourage participants to become coaches to help develop long term sustainability of groups.
8. Keep marketing and information simple with an emphasis on fitness, fun and social aspects.
9. Advertise opportunities in a range of places and make use of social networking opportunities, use group emails, add to the 'sociability' and 'inclusiveness' of the offer, and enable participants to 'keep in touch' even if they miss a week.



References and Acknowledgements

2 focus group discussions took place in Birmingham (Small Heath and Smethwick with 26 females aged 16-25), this was supported by a number of one to one interviews with Somali females along with a detailed interview with Shukri Mohammed from the Dery Foundation. The findings have also been supported by the research carried out with Somali males in December 2015.

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Promoting ethnic diversity in sport & physical activity

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