

Muslim girls just want to be treated like other athletes



Your Turn

Samina Sohail
Guest columnist

Growing up in the scorching Florida heat during the 1980s was not always easy for a dark-skinned daughter of immigrants. Recreation involved riding bikes with friends through neighborhood streets, running through sprinklers to cool down, and pure celebration when someone on the street got a swimming pool. The camaraderie of finding ways to have fun despite the heat set the stage for a memorable childhood.

As the years progressed, school sports – swimming, tennis, track, basketball and others – required certain attire to participate. Whether they were tennis skirts, bathing suits, or shorts and tees, by the time I reached middle school, I was unable to participate primarily because of what I was expected to wear.

As a Muslim, the codes of modesty set in around this time (puberty), and they were in contrast to the norms. Even though I did not wear the hijab (headscarf) at the time, the dress code was dif-

ferent enough that ultimately my days of athletic extracurriculars were over. It never occurred to me to test the norms, as fitting in was already hard enough.

Aside from the physical benefits of exercise, multiple studies have shown how participating in youth team sports builds leadership skills, teamwork, confidence and self-esteem. Allowing all American youth this access is one of the many opportunities this country affords. Recently, this access was challenged in Ohio.

Noor Alexandria Abukaram, a high school athlete from Sylvania, Ohio, was disqualified from her high school's cross country meet in 2019 despite having beat her own personal 5K record. The reason she was disqualified was because she wore a hijab, which was not approved. The disappointment led Noor to begin a movement "in an effort to prohibit organizations from implementing discriminatory policies."

After garnering national attention, Senator Theresa Gavarone (R- Bowling Green), sponsored Senate Bill 181, which was passed unanimously by both chambers and signed into law by Governor Mike DeWine on Feb. 28. The new law ensures that Ohio school athletic programs will not prohibit wearing of reli-



Noor Alexandria Abukaram, right, poses with Ohio Sen. Theresa Gavarone before a House bill at the Ohio Statehouse on Feb. 9. ALIE SKOWRONSKI/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

gious apparel during participation.

The passage of such legislation with unanimous bipartisan congressional support is truly remarkable. I am not sure how many other pieces of legislation have had this unchallenged course during these otherwise polarizing times. The fact that the interfaith community of Christian, Jewish, Muslim and other groups came together to garner this support is a testimony to the endless possibilities of collaboration.

My high school niece recently relayed,

"Muslim girls who wear the hijab just want to be treated like other athletes and get the opportunity to play the sports that we love."

Decades after my childhood experience, I am truly inspired by the progress we have made when I see confident young Muslim American girls dressing modestly, some wearing the headscarf, and participating in so many sports.

The freedom to practice one's religion is the foundation of our nation's existence. As a Muslim American woman who now chooses to wear the headscarf, I am so proud of my country, which unequivocally affords me this right. This is especially poignant when the hijab is being banned in parts of Europe, Asia, and even Canada. It relays how important it is for us to persistently counter discriminatory practices and advocate to ensure our freedoms are protected.

During this month of celebrating women, kudos to Noor Abukaram, Senator Gavarone, and the countless women who choose to stand up and make a difference.

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