



LAURA MORTON / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Preserving modesty, in the pool

By [Lornet Turnbull](#) / Seattle Times staff reporter

Sohad Sarhan, left, and Manal Elsay cover the windows at North Seattle's Meadowbrook Pool before a special swim session for Muslim women. One Saturday each month, the windows are covered and only female lifeguards are on duty, so Muslim women can swim without violating the tenets of their faith.

It's Saturday evening, the end of a hot day, and a group of women and children have gathered at North Seattle's Meadowbrook Pool for their monthly swim.

Most of the pool staff has left, except for two female lifeguards, who on this day will be on duty for the next two hours.

The women and children — all Muslims — have been swimming in private once a month at Meadowbrook as part of a program organized by the North Seattle Family Center.

Because Islam requires Muslim women to fully cover themselves in public, swimming in pools or the ocean is largely off-limits for many.

But across the Puget Sound area, that's starting to change as public and private pools at times are sending home their male staff members, covering up their windows and allowing women of faith to swim alone and in private.

It's occurring here as it has elsewhere across the country, as the Muslim population increases and families seek more ways to stay active.

Access to these pools is not free; the groups, like all others that use these facilities, pay a rental fee.

Private swims at local pools

Several area pools have begun to accommodate women of faith who want to swim in private. Here are some of them:

- **Meadowbrook Pool**, 10515 35th Ave. N.E., Seattle. Arranged through the North Seattle Family Center; one Saturday monthly. Contact: 206-364-7930.
- **Juanita Pool**, 10601 N.E. 132nd St., Kirkland. Organized through a group of Muslim women; every Sunday. Contact: 425-823-7627.
- **Everett Family YMCA pool**, 2720 Rockefeller Ave., Everett. Organized by the Interfaith Association of Snohomish County; every other Sunday. Contact: 425-252-6672.
- **Rainier Beach Pool**, 8825 Rainier Ave S., Seattle. Arranged through the Congregation Bikur Cholim-Mach Hadath; every Sunday. Contact: 206-721-0970.

"Seattle is still a new community for Muslims," said Aziz Junejo, a frequent speaker on Islam and host of "Focus on Islam," a weekly cable-television show.

"It's just been probably 10 years, and we've grown exponentially. I'm sure this sort of thing has been going on in other places on a regular basis. But our community is still looking for opportunities for women to get together."

On this warm Saturday evening at Meadowbrook, the women prepare the pool for privacy: They use brown paper to cover the bottom two-thirds of the floor-to-ceiling glass windows separating the front lobby from the 12-foot-deep pool.

That done, they shower and enter the water — their hijab (scarf) and outer clothing removed. When they swim, the women wear three-quarter-length pants — spandex or free-flowing garments — covering their bodies from navel to knees, as they believe their religion requires.

Their tops are an assortment of T-shirts and modest swimwear.

Ann El-Moslimany, a leader of the Islamic School in Seattle, said, "Most women wear something longer than a swimsuit that comes down to their knees. It depends on the individual; some are more covered than others."

But Junejo, one of four religion columnists for The Seattle Times, said his understanding is that women must always be fully covered to their ankles and their wrists, even when they swim.

"No flesh is to be shown, except for the hand, feet and face," he said, although he acknowledges, "Islam is open to interpretation."

"We feel welcomed here"

The Muslim women say swimming is great exercise, a chance for them to socialize and an opportunity to learn to swim.

Manal Fares, who's swimming on this day with her three children, two girls and a boy, said, "I've been in Seattle 15 years and now I'm able to swim with my Muslim sisters."

"We feel welcomed here and it's easy to go in and out."

But the restrictions make it tough for even some of them to participate.

Ghada Elsaiid went swimming shortly after the program started but hasn't been back because her sons are too old. Boys up to age 6 can swim with the women and girls.

"I love swimming," Elsaiid said. "I swam before when I was in Egypt. That was my first time in a pool here."

Inside the pool at Meadowbrook on Saturday, there was a flurry of activity. One woman did laps in the roped-off deep end as the others socialized, keeping a close watch on the children, who used balls and water noodles to heighten the fun.

"We need the exercise," one of the women said. "And we need to be able to do it in a place where we feel comfortable. I wish it was more widely available."

A handful of area pools now accommodate Muslim women and other women of faith. And one city of Seattle pool — Rainier Beach — sets aside time for Orthodox Jewish women, who observe their own dress customs.

Moslimany said some public pools years ago made swim times available just for women. And she recalls about 25 years ago when a group of Muslim women used to rent the Medgar Evers Pool in Seattle's Central Area for swimming.

But that ended after new managers took over and were unwilling to continue to accommodate the women, Moslimany said.

"We've been looking for another place to swim," she said, learning for the first time about some of the area swim programs.

"There are a lot of Muslim women who want to swim; they're not comfortable swimming with men. There are some Muslim women who think they shouldn't show themselves to anyone but Muslim women."

Idea came after Sept. 11

Ann Fuller, executive director of the North Seattle Family Center, which provides a host of services for immigrant families, said the idea for the swim came about in the months after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks when her staff realized many Muslim families had stopped coming to the center.

So they organized a potluck and brainstormed ideas, including activities for families that involved things like swimming.

Fuller said the challenge then became finding a pool that could accommodate the women's religious restrictions.

Not every pool could. Some simply weren't interested. Others didn't have the staff, since the lifeguards must be female and regulations require two of them. Pools also had to be willing to cover their windows, something some rejected as a safety issue.

Glenna Thon, pool supervisor at the Juanita Pool in Kirkland, said a group of Muslim women began using the pool about twice a month last fall and now swim weekly.

"I'm glad we're able to do this," Thon said. "It's good this is comfortable for them."

At the Everett Family YMCA, women of different faith — Muslim, Jewish and Christian — come together for twice-monthly swims through a program organized three years ago by Interfaith Association of Snohomish County.

Karen Fagerberg, associate executive director of the Everett Family YMCA, said that on a slow day they see four people, and on a busy day 30-plus. "The program is not just for Muslim women, but Christians and Jewish women, too.

"That's nice. It's not segregated but brings Christians, Muslims and Jews to socialize together and play together."

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