

To Muslim Girls, Scouts Offer a Chance to Fit In

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Allen Brisson-Smith for The New York Times

Farheen Hakeem, right, with a predominantly Muslim Girl Scout troop she leads in Minneapolis.

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR
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MINNEAPOLIS — Sometimes when Asma Haidara, a 12-year-old Somali immigrant, wants to shop at Target or ride the Minneapolis light-rail system, she puts her Girl Scout sash over her everyday clothes, which usually include a long skirt worn over pants as well as a swirling head scarf.

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Allen Brisson-Smith for The New York Times
Girls from predominantly Muslim Troop 3119 in Minneapolis at an indoor cookout on a rainy day.

She has discovered that the trademark green sash — with its American flag, troop number (3009) and colorful merit badges — reduces the number of glowering looks she draws from people otherwise bothered by her traditional Muslim dress.

“When you say you are a girl scout, they say, ‘Oh, my daughter is a girl scout, too,’ and then they don’t think of you as a person from another planet,” said Asma, a slight, serious girl with a bright smile. “They are more comfortable about sitting next to me on the train.”

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Allen Brisson-Smith for The New York Times
Farheen Hakeem, troop leader, led girls in the reciting of the Girl Scout Promise.

Scattered Muslim communities across the United States are forming Girl Scout troops as a sort of assimilation tool to help girls who often feel alienated from the mainstream culture, and to give Muslims a neighborly aura. Boy Scout troops are organized with the same inspiration, but often the leap for girls is greater because many come from conservative cultures that frown upon their participating in public physical activity.

By teaching girls to roast hot dogs or fix a flat bicycle tire, Farheen Hakeem, one troop leader here, strives to help them escape the perception of many non-Muslims that they are different.

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Scouting is a way of celebrating being American without being any less Muslim, Ms. Hakeem said.

"I don't want them to see themselves as Muslim girls doing this 'Look at us, we are trying to be American,'" she said. "No, no, no, they are American. It is not an issue of trying."

The exact number of Muslim girl scouts is unknown, especially since, organizers say, most Muslim scouts belong to predominantly non-Muslim troops. Minneapolis is something of an exception, because a few years ago the Girl Scout Council here surveyed its shrinking enrollment and established special outreach coordinators for various minorities. Some 280 Muslim girls have joined about 10 predominantly Muslim troops here, said Hodan Farah, who until September was the Scout coordinator for the Islamic community.

Nationally, the [Boy Scouts](#) of America count about 1,500 youths in 100 clubs of either Boy Scouts or Cub Scouts sponsored by Islamic organizations, said Gregg Shields, a spokesman for the organization.

The [Girl Scouts'](#) national organization, Girl Scouts of the U.S.A., has become flexible in recent years about the old trappings associated with suburban, white, middle-class Christian scouting. Many troops have done away with traditions like saying grace before dinner at camp, and even the Girl Scout Promise can be retooled as needed.

"On my honor I will try to serve Allah and my country, to help people and live by the Girl Scout law," eight girls from predominantly Muslim Troop 3119 in Minneapolis recited on one recent rainy Sunday before setting off for a cookout in a local park.

Some differences were readily apparent, of course. At the cookout, Ms. Hakeem, a former [Green Party](#) candidate for mayor, negotiated briefly with one sixth grader, Asha Gardaad, who was fasting for the holy month of Ramadan.

"If you break your fast, will your mother get mad at me?" Ms. Hakeem asked. Asha shook her head emphatically no.

The troop leader distributed supplies: hot dogs followed by s'mores for dessert. All was halal — that is, in adherence with the dietary requirements of Islamic law — with the hot dogs made of beef rather than pork.

It was Asha's first s'more. "It's delicious!" she exclaimed, licking sticky goop off her fingers as thunder crashed outside the park shelter with its roaring fire. "It's a good way to break my fast!"

Women trying to organize Girl Scout troops in Muslim communities often face resistance from parents, particularly immigrants from an Islamic culture like that of Somalia, where tradition dictates that girls do housework after school.

In Nashville, where Elisha King of [Catholic Charities](#) helps run a Girl Scout troop on a shoestring to assist Somali children with acculturation, most parents vetoed a camping trip, for example. They figured years spent as refugees in tents was enough camping, Ms. King recalled.

But a more common concern among parents is that the Girl Scouts will somehow dilute Islamic traditions.

"They are afraid you are going to become a blue-eyed, blond-haired Barbie doll," said Asma, the girl who at times makes her sash everyday attire. Asma noted that her mother had asked whether she was joining some Christian cabal. "She was afraid that if we hang out with Americans too much," the young immigrant said, "it will change our culture or who we are."

Troop leaders win over parents by explaining that various activities incorporate Muslim traditions. In Minneapolis, for instance, Ms. Hakeem helped develop the Khadija Club, named for the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, which exposes older girls to the

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Suboohi Khan, 10, won her Bismallah (in the name of God) ribbon by writing 4 of God's 99 names in Arabic calligraphy and decorating them, as well as memorizing the Koran's last verse, used for protection against gossips and goblins. Otherwise, she said, her favorite badge involved learning "how to make body glitter and to see which colors look good on us" and "how to clean up our nails."

Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. does not issue religious badges, but endorses those established by independent groups. Gulafshan K. Alavi started one such group, the Islamic Committee on Girl Scouting, in Stamford, Conn., in 1990. The demand for information about Muslim badges, Mrs. Alavi said, has grown to the point where this year she had the pamphlet listing her club's requirements printed rather than sending out a photocopied flier. She also shipped up to 400 patches awarded to girls who study Ramadan traditions, she said, the most ever.

Predominantly Muslim troops do accept non-Muslim members. In Minneapolis, Alexis Eastlund, 10, said other friends sometimes pestered her about belonging to a mostly Muslim troop, although she has known many of its members half her life.

"I never really thought of them as different," Alexis said. "But other girls think that it is weird that I am Christian and hang out with a bunch of Muslim girls. I explain to them that they are the same except they have to wear a hijab on their heads."

Ms. Farah, who served as an outreach coordinator in Minneapolis and remains active in the Scouts, said she used the organization as a platform to try to ease tensions in the community. Scraps between African-American and Somali girls prompted her to start a research project demonstrating to them that their ancestors all came from roughly the same place.

Ms. Hakeem, the troop leader, said she tried to find projects to improve the girls' self-esteem, like going through the Eddie Bauer catalog to cut out long skirts and other items that adhere to Islamic dress codes.

All in all, scouting gives the girls a rare sense of belonging, troop leaders and members say.

"It is kind of cool to say that you are a girl scout," Asma said. "It is good to have something to associate yourself with other Americans. I don't want people to think that I am a hermit, that I live in a cave, isolated and afraid of change. I like to be part of society. I like being able to say that I am a girl scout just like any other normal girl."

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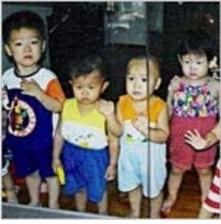
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