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# Action research for inclusion: migrant women and girls in sports



CAMINO

**#SPINWOMEN**

SPORT INCLUSION OF MIGRANT AND MINORITY WOMEN

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# Introduction

Victoria Schwenzer

## What is action research?

Action research explicitly aims to achieve social change: It relies on the perspective of those affected by a particular set of social circumstances in order to come up with solutions for a specific set of problems (Somegkh 1995, 339), i.e. the target group of the research assumes responsibility for finding solutions. Research findings are directly fed back into the real setting, where they help improve social practice. Therefore, action research is often described as a cyclical process involving research, practical action, reflection on the implementation of the latter and further research (MacDonald 2012, 37). It constitutes a participatory, practice-oriented approach that allows affected individuals to assume an active role in research and to make their own, often collective contribution.

Action research differs from „traditional“ research in that it suspends or at least significantly reduces the hierarchical separation between the researchers and their subjects of investigation. The approach is not necessarily associated with any method in particular, but rather describes a methodology and an attitude (Feldman/Minstrell 2000, 1). However, different forms of qualitative research, based on experiential knowledge, can be regarded as particularly promising within this context, since they can offer crucial insights into the subjects' spheres of life and their everyday perceptions, which quantitative methods fail to record.

The approach is based on the ideas of German social psychologist Kurt Lewin: In the late 30s, after his flight to the US, he began to use quasi-experimental research designs to study democratic participation in the workplace and the interrelation of democratic management styles and productivity. In the following decades, the approach was revisited, further developed and used to investigate a wide range of topics: One study on education, for instance, had teachers examine the impact of their own teaching methods (cf. Adelman 1993).

## Action research within the SPIN Network

Within the Sport Inclusion Network (SPIN), action research has been conducted within the context of the SPIN Women Project. SPIN Women (Sport Inclusion of Migrant

and Minority Women: Promoting sports participation and leadership capacities) is co-funded by the Erasmus + Programme. SPIN partners include the Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC - fairplay) from Austria, Liikkukaa – Sports for all from Finland, UISP from Italy, the football players' union SJPF from Portugal, the Mahatma Gandhi Human Rights Organisation from Hungary, the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) and the research institute Camino from Germany.

For SPIN Women, we have delved into the approach of action research to explore new ways of practice-oriented research and obtain new perspectives on our topic, the inclusion of migrant /refugee women and girls in sports, and non-white perspectives in particular. In this context, focusing on non-white perspectives means allowing migrant and ethnic minority women and girls to express their views, choose their own focus and conduct their own research, instead of making them the subject of discussion, examining them from the perspective of the social majority.

With a view to the collective production of knowledge, further migrant/refugee women and girls from sports clubs should participate in the implementation of research: They could, for instance, interview each other, organize group debates and participate in social events, e.g. have meals together. Our action research aimed to win women and girls from sports clubs as experts to make migrant perspectives visible. They were asked to report on their situation in the clubs, on difficulties and barriers they had encountered regarding their participation in sporting activities, but also (possibly) with regard to their participation in club life, and to develop suggestions and ideas with a view to improving participation and openness within the clubs and the sports sphere.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we have not been able to implement our action research quite as planned. However, we have managed to win three young female researchers with a migrant background as well as a sports background, who have compiled their own small studies in Finland, Austria and Germany. These deal with the challenges, barriers and chances migrant women and girls encounter in organised sports, focusing on the views of the affected females. Initially, interviewees were supposed to plan and conduct the research themselves to a far larger extent, but the temporary closure of the clubs in spring 2020, during the first phase of the pandemic, and the fol-

lowing summer break impeded this. For logistical reasons, our initial idea of forming research tandems became impossible to implement as well.

Nevertheless, the authorship of the migrant researchers, who have close connections to the sports sphere and/or play sports in a club themselves, ensures that in principle, the action research approach is implemented. To some extent, the researchers from Finland, Austria and Germany have used their own networks within the clubs to find interlocutors and they have established new contacts by means of a snowball system. Together with their local SPIN partners (Liikkukaa – Sports for All in Helsinki, VIDC-fair-play in Vienna and Camino in Berlin, respectively), they reflected upon their findings and were consequently able to refine them.

While the action research was being conducted in the three countries, Camino coordinated the overall process and provided support in the form of methodological proposals. The choice of methods and the content-related design of the studies were left in the hands of the researchers. They produced three small empirical studies that offer new insights about the inclusion of migrant women and girls in sports, but also confirm previous findings obtained by means of other methodical approaches within the context of SPIN Women (cf. Schwenzer 2020). This publication aims to make the results of the action research available for organized sports and to encourage sports clubs, associations, initiatives, NGOs etc. to use them to reflect upon and further develop their own practices.

## The researchers and their studies

**Lulu Sabbiti** is a 35-year-old Ugandan who moved to Finland in 2012, where she acquired a bachelor's degree in social services at the Diaconia University of Applied Sciences in Helsinki and became a sociologist. She comes from a family of four: Her one sister, one brother and mother all live in Uganda. Her favourite type of sport is swimming, which she does to keep fit and also as a form of „moving meditation“.

Lulu Sabbiti interviewed 25 women and girls from migrant communities or ethnic minorities, who were aged between 20 and 45. She held conversations, interviews and group debates at various sporting events. She has identified structural barriers that impede the access of women and girls to organized sports, including language difficulties, a lack of information regarding sporting activities on offer, lacking financial resources that could be spent on a sports club membership (which is very expensive in Finland) as well as the lack of a welcoming ambience in sports clubs. Regarding socio-cultural constraints, she found that stigmatizing experiences made within the Finnish society can become barriers for women and girls as well as cultural differences between the country of or-



igin and the new country. In this respect, she emphasizes the (patriarchal) social control that girls are subjected to and the corresponding restrictions that limit their scope of action. Personal constraints can include a lack of sporting experience, which tends to dampen a girl's motivation to participate, a lack of knowledge regarding the health and well-being benefits that come with playing sports as well as a lack of encouragement on the part of parents or spouses. In her analysis, Sabbiti underscores the fact that it is a wide range of barriers that can impede the equal participation of migrant women and girls.

**Kayra Hohmann** is pursuing a multidisciplinary graduate degree in social sciences at Humboldt University Berlin and has obtained her B.A. in politics at Freie University Berlin. Kayra currently works as a research assistant and is specialized in migration and social inclusion. Kayra was born in Germany in 1997 and grew up in a German-Turkish family. She used to play sports in various sports clubs during her teenage years.

Kayra Hohmann interviewed five young women with a migratory background on their experiences in football. She focused on young women who are currently playing sports in alternative clubs and projects and in some cases, see their former membership in „regular“ sports clubs critically. The study finds that beyond playing sports, the sense of belonging to a team and the time spent together are crucial for the young women. Alternative clubs attach great importance to social activities and to support on the part of the coach and the peers when it comes to solving problems in other areas, such as family, school, work or housing. The young women also appreciate the clubs' political awareness, which ensures protection from discrimination. Hohmann describes the different experiences



**Kayra Hohmann**



**Nuria Karimi**

made by the young women and, always from their point of view, the great significance that belonging to the club community has for them. Moreover, she explores the stereotypes and stigmata society ascribes to the image of a young migrant woman who plays football. In Berlin, a lack of resources means that many of the young women who are interested cannot find a suitable option to play sports, one that matches their needs and abilities. Nevertheless, an increased participation and an increased visibility of women in football have led to a situation in which women who play football are no longer perceived as bizarre.

**Nuria Karimi** studied law at the University of Graz, Austria, and is a student assistant at the Institute for Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology. She worked as a project assistant at the European Street Football Festival – Homeless World Cup & Goal in 2018 and is an active member of the girls' football team FC JAM United of SIQ! (Sport, Integration and Qualification), a socially inclusive project of Caritas Styria. Nuria was born in Graz, Austria, in 1999, to a family of migrants.

Nuria Karimi's report deals with female migrants from Bulgaria and with girls and young women who fled from Syria or Afghanistan and came to Austria with their families in 2016 and 2017. They are all active football players and state that they notice positive effects of playing sports, which has bolstered their self-confidence, self-perception and positive body image. They were interviewed on barriers in football and possible strategies to overcome these barriers. Struggles with religious requirements played an important role for these girls, as well as restrictions imposed by parents who tended to limit their freedom of movement. It becomes evident that the girls develop their own positions and attitudes, but that in some instances,

they also feel insecure when it comes to dealing with certain cultural or religious rules. In her report, Karimi highlights the significance of role models from professional sports whom girls can identify with.

In some instances, the three action research studies explicitly express a feminist view on the topic, pinpointing the patriarchal restrictions women and girls are subjected to, restrictions that are justified with religion or culture. Yet, they also expose the discriminating cultural attributions and exoticizations that the white majority tends to ascribe to the stereotypical category of „migrant women“.

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# Challenges of migrant and ethnic minority women and girls in Finland

Lulu Sabbiti

## Methodology of the research

The aim of this research-oriented study is to examine the challenges that migrant women face with regards to playing sports in Finland. The research work started at the kick-off meeting of the SPIN Women project in 2019. Many project leaders unanimously agreed in selecting me as a researcher for the project. I am a graduate student of the University of Applied Sciences of Diaconia (Finland) and was at the time pursuing my bachelor's degree in social services.

Four main associations were involved: Monaliiku, Fit4Life, Helsinki Sports International and Aligned Thinking. Several meetings were coordinated to boost the work and we decided to use qualitative research on real life experiences and to explore in-depth understanding of social phenomena. During the interviews, the researcher gained new ideas from the views and perceptions of the participants that were vital to the research.

The research questions were as follows:

- What factors affect migrant women's active participation in sports?
- What can improve their inclusion in sports?

The research was conducted using a qualitative research approach, and the data and information were obtained through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions that allow discussion with the interviewees. A total of 25 interviews were conducted with migrant and ethnic minority women between the ages of 20 to 45 who live in Finland. These interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. 45 minutes were allocated for each interview. We also conducted open mic (random) interviews and questions during some events. These questions were so easy that the answers gave us instant feelings about the event. Most of the data collected has been analysed in excel boards and graphics in the respective sections.

## Development of Research

Research was also conducted during meetings and events. During the research timeframe, several meetings and workshops were organised in conjunction with the lead project association "Liikkukaa!" and its partners associations.

The focus group meeting was organised with a group of associations who shared their support, knowledge and expertise in women's sport. The aim was to encourage migrant women to participate in sport activities and also give them tools to overcome barriers for their own benefit.

In another event, the Nordic Diversity Trainers workshops, team leaders and female coaches had an opportunity to present their embarrassment and struggle when dealing with new migrants joining their teams. The workshop helped to share information and methods on how to tackle attitudes and issues relating to cultural differences.

During the Respect Pride tournament, which is a major football tournament to support the LGBT community and fight against discrimination and racism, interviews were conducted with some of the athletes to talk about their feelings regarding LGBT issues and discrimination in Finland.

In another event, the Tervakoski sport event which took place in a small town not very far from Helsinki, families came together to practice and meet at a sports and leisure day. There, migrant women came together and shared stories about their situation and life in the Finnish countryside.

The research also involved speaking with refugee women from asylum centres during the European Week of Sports and FARE action week. But due to their actual situation, some of them could not say much about their sport situation, so we collected data from coaches.

Our last event was the Global Family Awards, a joint event with the Rasmus (Anti-Racism) organisation. During this event, information was gathered through discussions

*"Finland has a good education policy, so people are able to learn the language, but when applying for a job, women are rejected for reasons such as not having enough language skills, even for manual work."*

with female role models who are active in the field of sport and social affairs.

## Discussion of the results

### Structural constraints

When coming from a different part of the world, it takes time to learn a language. Migrants seeking information about sport activities in their new city need to contact their local social, sport and health departments. They are aware that information is out there, but with the language barrier and lacking self-confidence to talk to administrative workers, they do not access this information. Not every town has services in languages other than Swedish or Estonian. They cannot read those languages. More translated materials are needed in several different languages (e.g. Arabic, English, Somali, French...)

In Finland, participating in structured individual or team sports is self-financed. Competitive sport is costly, and many migrants cannot afford it because they don't have the same opportunities for professional education and access to the employment market.

*"Finland has a good education policy, so people are able to learn the language, but when applying for a job, women are rejected for reasons such as not having enough language skills, even for manual work."*

Becoming a competitive athlete is a personal commitment. The costs are high, but some cities and countries subsidise sport activities to encourage youth participation. In Finland costs are not subsidised by the municipality or any social services for poor families. It is difficult, for example, to pay for swimming on a limited household budget which is directed to more essential goods such as children's food. During the winter season, walking or practicing volleyball outside is impossible. Renting an indoor hall for 1 hour costs over 120 € a month. This is expensive for a lot of women.

So women and girls are trapped in the loop of not being able to pay for sport due to a lack of money due to a lack of work leading to a lack of money, and so on. The situation is worse for girls than for boys in the same family. Parents tend to finance their sons' sport before their daughters'. Cultural and religious beliefs often restrict parents from sending their girls to participate in group activities. Weekly

sports activities organised on a certain date and hour also create obligations that parents must adapt to.

The issue of finances reappeared when going swimming, *"you always need money for after practice for tea or coffee"*. It is not possible for parents who are struggling to find work to offer extra cash.

*"As a migrant ethnic minority woman you always have to prove yourself a little more, and people pay more attention to skin colour than to your work ethic and talent."*

Finnish people are quiet and don't socialise easily. Some girls hope for a more positive, welcoming attitude when joining a new group.

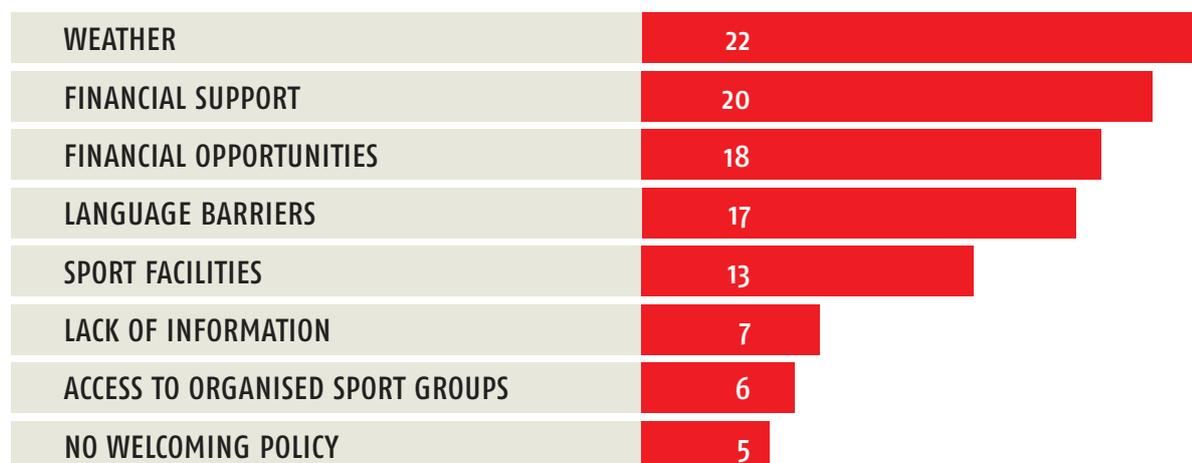
Clubs do not have a welcome policy and coaches are not trained to encourage newcomers to feel relaxed when joining the group. For a migrant girl with no friends in the club, it can be challenging and frightening to step into a group of people without anyone there to guide, advise or just be there as a supportive friend. It can be difficult for migrant and ethnic minority women to feel included in the sports club because they are treated as 'the other', in combination with discriminatory or exoticizing practices.

*"As a migrant ethnic minority woman you always have to prove yourself a little more, and people pay more attention to skin colour than to your work ethic and talent. You are never one of the team, you are always seen as the 'ethnic girl'. There are a lot of micro-aggressions in the air, like jokes about 'illegal immigrants' and exoticizing, questioning my 'Finnishness' and entitlement to 'belong'."*

### STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

| WOMEN                   | GIRLS                            |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| lack of information     | financial support                |
| language barriers       | access to organised sport groups |
| financial opportunities | no welcoming policy              |
| financial support       |                                  |
| sport facilities        |                                  |
| weather                 |                                  |

Constraints mentioned by women and by girls

Graph 1 **STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS**

Number of times constraints were mentioned by interviewees (absolute numbers, 25 interviewees)

### Socio-cultural constraints

*“Someone has to tell our husbands to let us practice sport because in their mind, we don’t have time but they do. They need to support and push us to go out and train. It would be better for the atmosphere in the house.”*

*“It’s not appropriate to talk with men about going to do sport activities after a certain age. It’s a little shameful. Also the dress code for sport isn’t accepted in my family and by my religion.”*

Women and girls migrating to a new country bring their own cultural baggage. Cultural differences can be completely contrary to Finnish culture. For some sports activities, their culture goes against the dress code or style. For example, sport activities are mixed gender spaces. Interaction between strangers can be seen as inappropriate.

Women are stuck with tasks that are ‘supposed’ to be women’s tasks in their country of origin. They now need to get support from their husbands. The problem is about finding the time to practice. Women also need to free themselves from their moral constraints. One solution is to organise groups with friends or other women from the same community or culture. This way they can find a secure environment for themselves where they can practice sport at their own pace and share problems and solutions with friends.

For many of them, there are no role models in their communities to step up and guide them. Most of the women who are able to practice sports have Finnish husbands,

not migrants like their own. They do not serve as a useful example.

*“There are also attitudes and behaviours you don’t like, for example going out drinking in a bar. I can’t be in a room where all the girls are swearing ugly words.”*

Girls are also pressured by their fathers and parents to keep up the habits of their culture of origin while living in a country of equality. The challenge for girls comes a lot more from within their homes than from the new society they are growing up in.

Evening sports practice and training are a big issue for migrant girls when they still live with their parents. Fathers want their daughters to come home at certain hours which are usually when sports teams practice. Girls’ participation in sport increases when they get more support from their fathers.

Problems usually begin when the girl is a teenager because they do not need anyone to take them to their training place anymore. The control on girls’ lives is excessive. Staying with sports friends after training is a problem, going to a sauna (an important cultural practice in Finland) is also a cultural and moral problem. There are cultural misunderstandings about, for example, talking about boys or girls in a mixed-gender group.

Taking responsibility in the family by taking care of younger brothers and sisters without complaining openly to parents is common in African families: it is expected, otherwise it could lead to criticism and isolation from the family on the grounds of being selfish and unsupportive.

*“There are also attitudes and behaviours you don’t like, for example going out drinking in a bar. I can’t be in a room where all the girls are swearing ugly words.”*

When the culture of origin clashes with Finnish habits, like swimming in the lake or the sea wearing a hijab, people view migrant women and girls as strange.

Some migrant women are treated differently because the focus is on their skin colour rather than their talents or desire to participate in sports. It all comes back to stereotyping and the expectations of coaches, which migrants sense and observe.

*“Stereotypes are embarrassing, but you get over it and sometimes it’s even funny like: ‘just because I’m black I should know how to play basketball.’”*

*“Stigmatisation is worse because the real intention is to exclude you: ‘even if i’m different in colour, I don’t want to be treated differently by the coach. I want to blend in.’”*

Many parents’ instinct is to protect their children in a country where not everyone is happy about migrants. It is normal to want to know where your child is all the time and with whom they are hanging out just in case they happen to hang out with the wrong crowd and something happens to them.

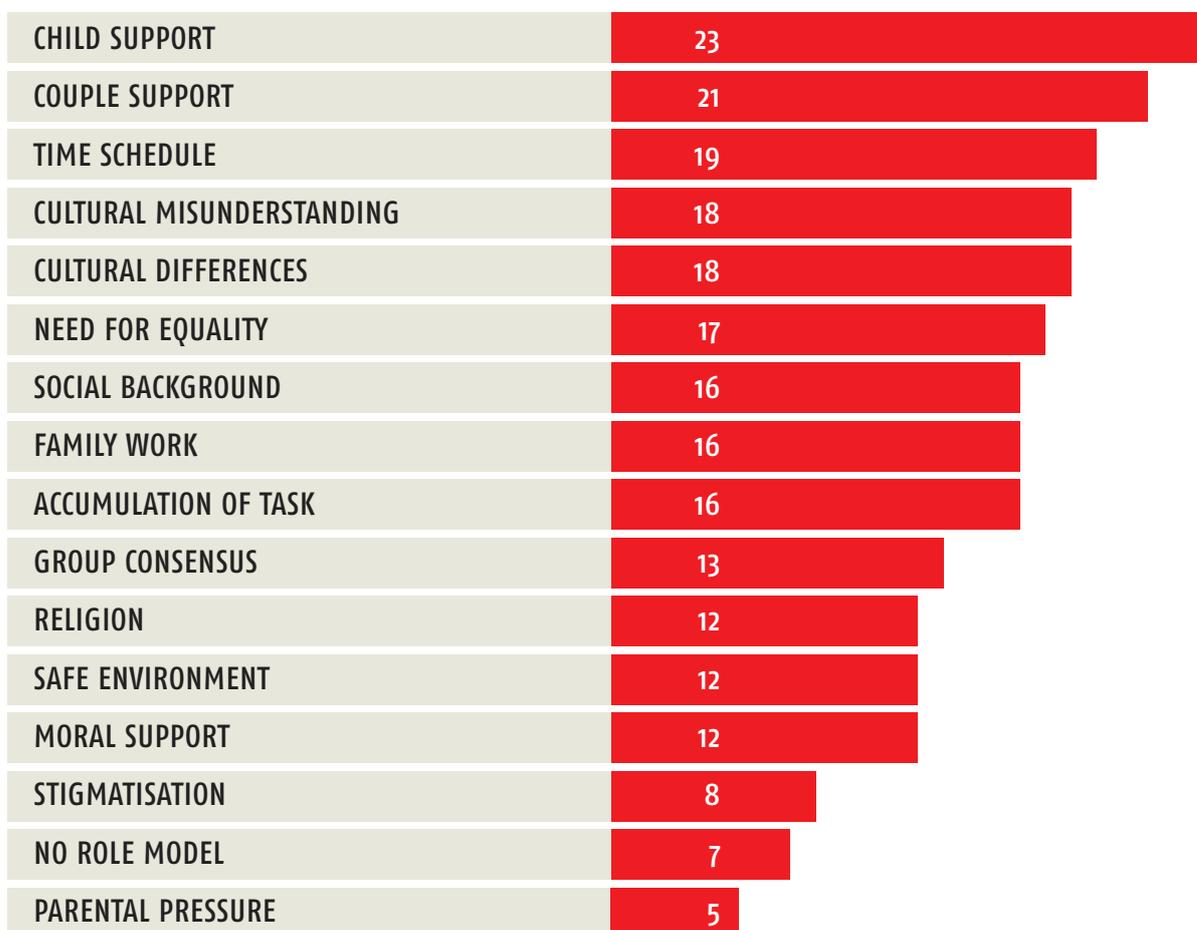
*“My parents want to know where I am and who I’m with. I’m afraid to go to certain places because I heard that people don’t like migrants there.”*

### SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS

| WOMEN                                 | GIRLS  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| religion                              | parental pressure  |
| social background relation with sport | religion   |
| family work                           | cultural misunderstanding                                      |
| couple support                        | cultural differences (attitudes and behaviours of local girls) |
| child support                         | stigmatisation   |
| accumulation of home task             | safe environment   |
| time schedule                         | moral support  |
| no role model                         |  |
| need for equality                     |  |

Constraints mentioned by women and by girls

Graph 2 **SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS**



Number of times constraints were mentioned by interviewees (absolute numbers, 25 interviewees)

## Personal constraints

It is very possible that the challenges faced by migrant women and girls in their new environment will come from themselves. They will have to take the opportunities offered by Finland’s social and equal rights to change their situation. But it is also up to the family (husbands and friends) to support them to take the step towards participating in sports.

For many migrant women coming from difficult and poor backgrounds, sport is not viewed as an essential activity. From where they come from, many were doing physical activity on a daily basis such as carrying water buckets, chopping firewood, grinding wheat or other crops to eat, and walking long distances daily. So without the pressure of having to do so, why would they still do it? They also do not believe that shaping the body is an important issue like Finnish women do. When it comes to a particular sport, many migrant women believe they cannot play because their body will not be able to handle it. They also feel that practicing sport can be dangerous. They were never told that it was good for their health.

*“I have discovered that I am good at sports and that I can achieve a lot of results. I can be better than my father in sport and he can see that.”*

For many girls, they suddenly have new possibilities to practice all kinds of sports. They face many more challenges than boys, starting with parental control over their time. Parents set the pickup time for their daughters right when their practices finishes so they cannot socialise after their sports activity. Young girls growing up need to take more precautions about who they hang out with because of the

*“My parents want to know where I am and who I’m with. I’m afraid to go to certain places because I heard that people don’t like migrants there.”*

possible risk of sexual harassment and abuse, usually from people they know or call friends. Migrant mothers understand better than fathers the need for their girls to have some freedom. Their girls don’t need to get exactly the same education as in the country they came from.

### PERSONAL CONSTRAINTS

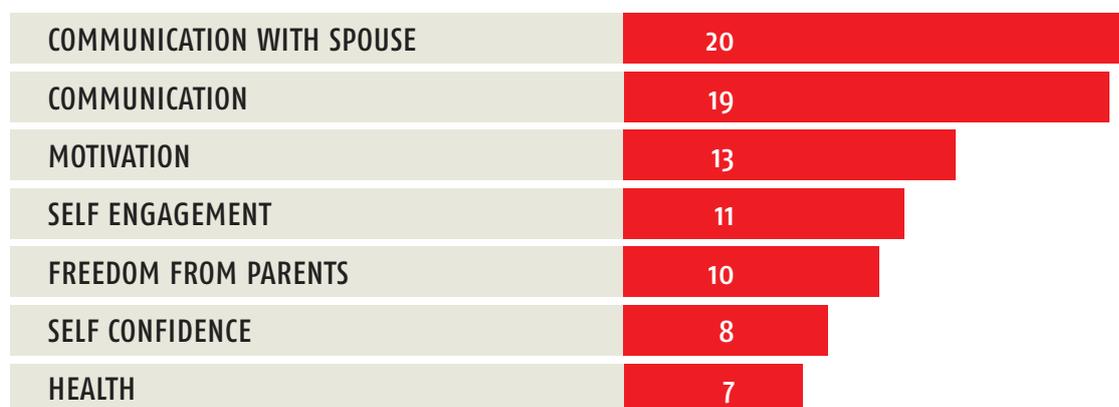
| WOMEN                             | GIRLS                       |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| self engagement                   | self confidence             |
| self confidence                   | freedom from parents        |
| health                            | health and childhood issues |
| motivation                        |                             |
| communication with spouse         |                             |
| communication with family members |                             |

Constraints mentioned by women and by girls

## Personal reflections: advantages and disadvantages of practising sports

The importance of sport in general is that it helps build self-esteem, decrease anxiety and emotional instability, improve mood, and most importantly, increase resistance to stress in both youths and adults. These benefits

Graph 3 **PERSONAL CONSTRAINTS**



Number of times constraints were mentioned by interviewees (absolute numbers, 25 interviewees)

are present regardless of risk factors associated with being overweight. There are particular health benefits to doing physical activity both with family or individually. Practicing sport greatly promotes harmonious development of adolescents. It promotes bone building and helps with muscle pain and healthy development of the heart and lungs. It also seems to me that the support of coaches, parents and peers when practicing sport is essential for developing personal skills and social skills and evolving in the community.

The major downside to sport is certainly the risk of injury even for non-professional players, and although physical activity is highly recommended, if not essential, this risk is inevitable. To help avoid injury, it is important to do a proper warm-up and several stretches with a coach.

Practicing sports in Finland requires special spaces which are accessible but very expensive such as sports halls, swimming pools, yoga or dance halls. But the biggest obstacle facing mothers of families is the time required to practice a sport even if they are generally motivated.

Would a different distribution of household chores free up time for a personal activity that would not necessarily have to be sports? This would require the cooperation of the life companion and the children. It is therefore always necessary to negotiate with them to have a regular time available to practice a chosen activity. Would this be sufficient? Maybe not, and perhaps many other internal obstacles must be taken into account, as described before.

*"It's not appropriate to talk with men about going to do sport activities after a certain age. It's a little shameful. Also the dress code for sport isn't accepted in my family and by my religion."*

## Conclusion

This research started off on a good note and the information gathered over time has been very revealing of the challenges migrant women face, not only as housewives, but

also those who deal with the daily chal-

lenges of a family. The second

challenge particularly concerns the relationships

between religion,

culture and sports

traditions which

are still rather dif-

ficult and really

complicate women

and girls' possibility

to practice sport.

There were also some

setbacks due to the global

Covid-19 pandemic, which greatly

complicates our way of life. Despite the difficulties, we still

managed to overcome the situation to organise meetings

online or in small groups of six people to discuss and

coordinate in order to gather more information and complete

the research.

We hope that the results of this research can be used

to improve the situation of women not only here in Finland

but also in other countries with our various partners

and gradually encourage more migrant women to actively

participate in sports activities, for the benefit of their

health but also to create solid links between the different

communities.

Finally, we know today that the world of sport has

bright things to offer whether one is Christian, Jewish,

Muslim, practising a traditional religion, of African

cultural origin, or elsewhere. Sport has penetrated

cultures and practices around the world in a dazzling

way. But it would be beneficial to facilitate more

access to sport at affordable prices, especially

since sport helps a lot to improve our health.

# Female athletes with migrant backgrounds. An overview of participation opportunities in non-mainstream football in Berlin, Germany

Kayra Hohmann

## Introduction

This report reflects the outcome of the Action Research I conducted for the Sports Inclusion Network (SPIN). The purpose of the research was to explore how female athletes with migratory backgrounds perceive barriers to participation in sporting clubs and highlight their individual needs. The study engages with female footballers who themselves or at least one of their parents migrated to Germany from Muslim-majority countries. The empiric focus lies on athletes active in non-mainstream football, such as migrant cultural associations and non-profit sporting organisations.

I employed community Action Research that draws on participatory observation and narrative interviewing. My inquiry was motivated by an ethnographic approach utilising a constructivist philosophical framework. I first came into contact with some of the interviewees when I conducted a survey on behalf of SPIN during a match event between four non-mainstream football organisations. After the event, the teams invited me to join them for dinner to get to know the athletes better. Three of them were particularly motivated to participate in my study. My age proximity and similar background facilitated finding conversation topics, which set the grounds for an emphatic relationship. Besides the athletes I met directly during the participatory fieldwork, I contacted various players from other clubs via social media. While some did not answer at all, other women interested in talking to me ultimately cancelled because of the current pandemic. I ended up conducting one interview with the athletes I reached out to online. The fifth interview was held with a young woman I found through my personal networks.

While the participative observation took place when the Corona regulations were less strict, all interviews, unfortu-

nately, had to be conducted by phone due to the national lockdown. Before our conversation, I had occasionally chatted with the interviewees via social media, which enabled us to have a friendly atmosphere. We were comfortable with each other; joking and laughing many times during the interview. Since I had not met two of the participants before, our conversations were informative yet less familiar. The interviews lasted about 45 minutes on average. I prepared a loose set of questions concerning the motivation to join a particular club, differences between the organisations, highlights, and struggles. Most of the time, I took

the role of a guided listener. It was essential to me that the women could set their own thematic priorities. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

I then worked out clusters in their narratives by thematic coding. In the following, I will first introduce the players by short portraits and then present the main themes that shined through their remarks.

*"I like that everyone comes from a different background. I am proud of the woman I became, and it is great to play in an environment where others feel the same."*

## Introducing the athletes

The participants' unique characteristic is that they play in various non-mainstream football organisations. Two of them previously played in regular sports clubs, two changed from one organisation to another, and one athlete has always played in the same migrant organisation. Their experiences in the different institutions and attitudes towards them are particularly interesting as they allow for a differentiated picture regarding participation opportunities of migrant women in football.

For the purpose of anonymity, the interviewees' names were changed, and the clubs are anonymised. I refer to the athletes with their preferred pronouns. Further, I will not mention the specific country from which the players, or their parents, migrated.

*Amira* is 17 years old and currently pursuing her A-levels at senior high school. She is a player in the semi-professional women's team of a migrant football association. The club has a diversified portfolio of male and female groups at various skill levels. *Amira* grew up in the district the club is located and joined it many years ago as a schoolkid. The young woman recently moved up to the advanced women's division.

*Pelin* is 18 years old and applying for medical school after finishing her A-levels last year. She tried out different types of sports in the past and played football at a mixed-level team. *Pelin* previously struggled to get along with her teammates and is considering joining a cultural sports association. She has not yet found the right football team for her.

*Saran* just turned 19 and fled to Germany two years ago. She is currently learning the language and doing an internship. Although she has been active in sports before, she is new to football. Due to her stressful schedule, she occasionally goes to football practice in a diverse team that brings together newcomers, migrants, and other Berlin residents.

*Noora*, age 21, sought refuge in Germany five years ago. After finishing language school, she is now catching up on her secondary education diploma. The athlete has played football since her early childhood and tried several clubs in Berlin. *Noora* is very active in sports outside football as well. She currently plays in the female team of a football club that engages refugees. She would like to train at a more advanced level but struggles to find a suitable team that fits her intermediate level and age group.

*Jasmin*, 27 years, is working a full-time job and grew up in a village in southern Germany. She played football as a teenager and then took a long break because she felt pressured at her former club. After moving to Berlin, *Jasmin* decided to take up sports again and now plays in an alternative sporting organisation that promotes diversity of all genders and origins. *Jasmin* plays football for leisure and self-development in a beginner's team.

## Presenting the themes

The following part displays key themes the women brought up during our interviews. The athletes frequently portrayed boundaries in football by highlighting the positive aspects of their current club. Therefore, I combined

both their criticisms and personal hurdles with the qualities they particularly value in their team.

### Belonging

A prominent theme in our conversations revolved around belonging. The athletes all stated that being part of a collective is a crucial aspect of playing football. Despite *Amira*, who never changed her club, the women said finding a suitable team can be challenging. *Noora* described that she had been unhappy in her last club because she did not feel like she belonged to the group. She explained that *"the players did not do anything wrong; they were alright. But I never felt like I fitted in. There were other girls like me, and I guess they were fine with the team. But I could not relate to the other girls."* *Jasmin* told me that, in her early teenage years, she was self-conscious about

how her teammates would perceive her: *"I could not focus on the field because*

*I was so concerned about what others thought of me. I was*

*worried about my performance, my looks,*

*everything."* She indicated that her insecurities partly stem from

the fact that she was perceived as different by her environment: *"Only*

*when I moved to Berlin, I realised that it was not normal to be*

*seen as the 'other'."* Whereas *Jasmin* described 'being different' as a vague feeling, *Pelin* explicitly

named why she felt disconnected from her previous team. The young athlete expressed *"that in this club, I had to explain myself somewhat. For example, one time, a girl asked me what I thought about Muslim women wearing a headscarf. Another time, I was asked what my position was on 'the Kurdish question'. Although their interest was not necessarily in bad taste, I simply do not want to answer these kinds of questions."*

The pressure of justifying oneself was felt quite strongly by some of the girls. Hence, being able to identify oneself with the team was of particular importance to them. *Saran* pointed out that an advantage of playing in a group with other migrants is that her teammates understand *"where I come from and what I bring with me to the field."* Similarly, *Pelin* seeks to *"play in a team with women who share similar life experiences."* One of the athletes who had always been active in a non-mainstream club reaffirmed that *"here you find an environment where you are accepted for who you are. I just get along with the others; I like that everyone comes from a different background. I am proud of the woman I became, and it is great to play in an environment where others feel the same"*.

## Promoting team-relationships

It was a common conception among the athletes that mainstream sporting clubs do not sufficiently encourage their players to bond *beyond* the football field. According to Amira, “*in many regular clubs, disciplinary pressure gets in the way of valuing the shared experience.*” Although the depth of friendships with other players varied in each interviewee’s case, the women ascribed great importance to their coaches’ role in establishing meaningful connections within the team. Pelin explained that “*during a match, team spirit occurs somewhat naturally because you have a common goal, but during practice sessions and outside the pitch, you don’t click with everyone instantly.*” Most interviewees emphasised that their coaches regularly plan joint activities with the team; some clubs even hold educational workshops and vacation together. Although Amira plays in a semi-professional division, the athlete stated that “*good teams need trustful and deep relationships.*”

Noora summed up that “*before, I used to go to practice and come back home. A few times, I met with other girls, and there was an annual outing, but it does not compare to my current team at all. When I was new to the club, my coach really made an effort to integrate me into the team. Because we always do something together, I got close to them. Some of the girls are my best friends.*”

**“During a match, team spirit occurs somewhat naturally because you have a common goal, but during practice sessions and outside the pitch, you don’t click with everyone instantly.”**

## Peers/family

Beyond their function in bringing the team closer together, the interviewees highlighted that a significant feature of non-mainstream clubs is that coaches take on a supportive role for them. The women valued their coaches’ guidance. Two of the athletes used the expression “*My coach always has an open ear for me.*” The athletes consult their coaches about school and work issues, family related problems, or romantic relationships. Amira also told me that her club integrated a ‘parenting’ system where older members take care of the younger girls. By actively engaging in their life beyond the field, coaches and elders foster a “*sisterhood*”, as Amira described it. Noora also talked about the other players as “*sisters and cousins*”, and Saran said she would look up to her coaches the same way as she did to her older siblings. Some of the girls described having deeply rooted relationships and ties with the club too. Amira said: “*The club is my family, football is more than a joint activity but a bonding experience, our friendships go beyond the football pitch.*” The establishment of social ties comes with various advantages for each of the women. Saran told me that the club supported her to find housing options, whereas Noora’s teammates helped her navigate the German bureaucracy. While having a social network to rely on can be of immediate importance

to newcomers, it is equally crucial to those athletes who grew up in Germany. Jasmin described the club as her support system. While mainstream clubs can have similar functions, Amira underlined that “*In my club, we work hand in hand. We all make an effort to be there for each other. We support our teammates – during practice as much as in our private life.*”

## Awareness

It was significant that four of the athletes mentioned the idea of ‘awareness’. They referred to this concept along two lines. First, some interviewees specifically pointed out that mainstream clubs lack political consciousness and, as Jasmin claimed, “*tend to ignore or do not know how to deal with sensitive or critical issues.*” Pelin felt similarly and was bothered that her previous coach did not adequately deal with the issue of derogatory language:

“*One time a player made an inappropriate comment about the opposing team. I don’t exactly remember what it was, but it was quite sexist. Our coach gave her a warning, but we did not talk about it afterward.*”

The women emphasised that many non-mainstream organisations preach equality and engage in political education. Jasmin values that her club shows sensitivity to issues

of gender and appearance and, as such, “*does not force me to fit into a certain category.*” Amira, whose team is remarkably politically active, stated that: “*We are pursuing change in our societies by attending protests together.*” She described that her club has a ‘moral code’ that each player aligns with, and said, “*we don’t experience any major conflicts around racism or homophobia, but if they happen, we openly discuss these subjects within our team, and we deal with them.*” Jasmin was aware that “*not every club is suitable for each player.*” Especially in non-mainstream organisations that focus on a specific social issue, the club’s agenda might be attractive to some women but scare away others. Jasmin concluded that she would not expect all clubs to do political work but that it was a personal preference.

Second, it was essential to the athletes that the coaches were aware of their respective life situations. For the two full-time working women in particular, it was a relief to be able to miss training sessions without being penalised. The interviewees highlighted that non-mainstream clubs show a greater understanding of the various hurdles their players face. This perception was especially apparent in the case of the athletes who migrated to Germany only recently. For Noora, language has been a struggle in finding

***"In my club, we work hand in hand. We all make an effort to be there for each other. We support our teammates – during practice as much as in our private life."***

the right club. The young athlete felt self-conscious that her command of German would not be sufficient: *"language is so important on the field, when you are not fluent, you don't understand*

*comments in the heat of the moment and can't chat with the others. Although I really wanted to play with Germans when I first came here, I ended up in my current club. Here, some speak good German, others are very bad, and that's okay."* Saran was initially hesitant to join a football club but said that *"the team, the girls, the coaches – everyone is welcoming. It does not matter whether you speak the language, whether you were born here or recently arrived."*

### Stigma in women's football

The athletes described several characteristic problems in women's football. One of them is the outside stigma they deal with as female athletes and individuals with migratory backgrounds. Amira stated that she frequently experiences stigmatisation in everyday interactions.

The biggest hurdle for her was that *"society has a preconceived image of us. They want me to be a specific kind of person, preferably someone from a poor neighbourhood with parents who forbid me from playing football."* It also bothered Noora that others assume her family would not be supportive of her. She stated that *"my mother and my brothers, they take pride in us. All girls in my family play soccer."* Jasmin underlined that football *"looks different on the 'inside' than society assumes"*. Pelin further dealt with a kind of stigmatisation that is specific to migrant clubs. She is worried about joining an ethnic sporting club because they have *"a reputation for promoting a nationalist image."* Amira confirmed that migrant clubs are often stereotyped: *"We are very aware of the image others might have of us and try to prove them wrong by showing openness and tolerance."*

The interviewees all found it essential to stress that women's realities in football have changed. Jasmin stated that *"although it is a male-dominated discipline, women's football has undergone positive change. A few years back, we had hardly enough female players to set up two teams. We are underrepresented, but it is getting better."* Amira agreed with this perception and told me that *"when I was a kid, I was the only girl in my school who played football. It was very bizarre, and my classmates mocked me. Today times have changed, and the more women join us, the more visible we become."* She compared her previous

struggles to her younger sister's experience, who followed in her footsteps and for whom playing football is now a 'normality'.

### Practical shortcomings

While some clubs' female divisions are striving and even entered local leagues, many small organisations lack funding and outreach to target a diverse female audience. Due to a shortage of female players, some sporting clubs play with mixed-gender teams. Noora changed her previous team precisely because she feels more comfortable in an all-female group. She explained that *"it is unusual for women of my culture to play with men. I feel more relaxed with the girls."* However, Noora's current club is still a compromise for her. She is still searching for a team that is open to refugees and has an advanced female division for her age group: *"I am too old for the U 18 but also not experienced enough to play in the adult professional group."* As women's football does not always have enough resources, some coaches put together larger teams with different skill levels. Jasmin particularly valued that her team has low entrance requirements because it

*"takes the pressure out of playing."* On the other hand, Pelin felt frustrated that although *"it is good that anyone can join our team, there are too many new people and not enough room for the girls who want to move up."*

***"The club is my family. Football is more than a joint activity but a bonding experience, our friendships go beyond the football pitch."***

### Conclusion

This report covers several hurdles for female migrant footballers, some of which are specific to mainstream clubs and others that apply to women's football in general. In conclusion, teammates and coaches play an important role in making football a valuable experience. Migrant associations are particularly appealing because the players share and understand each other's social realities. Furthermore, alternative football organisations often show a more pronounced political awareness, which many players with migratory backgrounds appreciate. Although these clubs put a lot of work into reducing prejudices within the team and towards migrant women footballers in general, the athletes still encounter biases in their everyday lives. Overall, women's football will benefit from more resources to be further tailored to their specific needs.

# A field study report on young migrant women in women's football in Graz, Austria

Nuria Karimi

## Field access: introduction

The knowledge gained in this study is based on qualitative methods from empirical social sciences. Eight qualitative interviews were conducted with young migrant women (aged 14-19). More than half of the young women came from Afghanistan, the others from Syria and Bulgaria. Most of the young women fled to Austria with their parents in 2016 and 2017.

The report pays particular attention to new asylum seekers who are still waiting for a positive asylum decision. The term 'migrant' here refers to immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers and women who are under subsidiary protection. The encounter of different cultures, religions, languages and different social origins and classes is of great importance here.

The aim of this field study is to speak openly with the young women about the situational barriers in football and to develop effective strategies for them. The last part of the chapter is devoted to special requests for more well-being in football.

## Barriers & strategies

### Body image and shame

Sport counts as an expression of the body and is a particularly sensitive issue for some Muslim communities, whose image of women is very different from the norms of non-Muslim communities. Above all, however, the topic plays a major role, especially with pubescent girls, and is subject to some extreme taboos.

This includes wearing and public discussion of the headscarf for Muslim migrants. The manufacturers of sportswear have long since adapted to the needs of women wearing headscarves. There are, for example, special headscarves for outdoor sports or suits for water sports. Policies regarding the

*"I am very happy that I can live in Austria. I love being able to play soccer every day. No bombed-out streets, no Sharia police, there is just my ball and me."*

wearing of these headscarves is still very unclear in competition regulations of the respective sport associations and in some cases the use of a headscarf is openly rejected.

*"I always wear long trousers and a long-sleeved T-shirt and a headscarf. When I play football and we're playing a tournament, I always have to wear everything twice because the clothes are very tight and the pants are very short. I don't have a special headscarf for sports and I am afraid that it will fall off while I'm running."* (Masooma, 19 years)

Based on this experience, another girl reports that over time she decided to take off the headscarf. Often she was confronted with shame and a guilty conscience when she took off the headscarf during a game, as her mother strictly forbids this.

*"My mother says that Muslim women shouldn't show their hair to strangers, so they should always wear a headscarf. She herself has never played football and doesn't know how it feels."* (Rasiqa, 16 years)

Since the mothers of the migrant women have never been involved in any sporting activity before, they lack an understanding of sport in general. To counteract this, a project such as 'women swimming', in which young migrant women can take part with their mothers, would be advisable.

Another heated discussion was the subject of the hymen in connection with sport. Muslim families sometimes express concern that their girls' virginity could be

*"I wish that we all wore T-shirts with our names in the club."*

lost if their hymen is injured during sporting activities such as playing football.

*"It's a little awkward to talk about, I don't even know exactly what it is. I was just told that I had to be careful not to tear it. When do you start to feel this when you are doing sport?" (Sanan, 15 years)*

A situation where Muslim parents send their girls to sport without hesitation can only be achieved with a great deal of information and education, sometimes also from a medical point of view. The education should, however, begin with the migrant women first, to give them a feeling of security and confidence when deciding to join a sporting team.

The young migrants agreed on one thing. Football supports the development of your self-perception, promotes the acceptance of your own body, builds more self-confidence and belief in yourself.

*"I feel strong when I play soccer. As well as my brother, who also plays soccer." (Safal, 14 years)*

*"If people sometimes look at me strangely because I wear a headscarf when I play football, then I want to score even more goals!" (Masooma, 19 years)*

## Head of the family and male decision makers

Due to a different understanding of roles in some cultures, the man traditionally bears the main responsibility in many families. Since most of the migrant women are Muslim, they confirm that the man is the undisputed head of the family in Islamic countries. This is because most Islamic countries use the principles of the Koran, Sharia and Hadith.

Young migrant women gaining more independence through sport sometimes leads to a significant loss of authority for the fathers. The idea that girls are autonomous and lead lives unsupervised by their fathers still seems far away and is not a goal for many families. The reputation of the family is also defined by the behaviour of the girls and women. This includes: being untouched until marriage, no contact with men outside the family, and subordination to paternal or male authority.

*"My father never compromises, as long as I'm not married, he always has the final say in decisions. (...) He just can't imagine women and football. He grew up religiously in Afghanistan. (...) I still go to soccer tournaments, but I pretend I was at school." (Khaliya, 16 years)*

Sensitive interaction with fathers and brothers and possibly seeking the advice of an insider who comes from the Muslim community and can be trusted are recommended. Community insiders should be convinced of the advantages sport brings to the lives of women and girls. Cooperation be-

***"Like Modesta Uka, my dream is to be included in the SK Sturm women's team... I can still remember exactly, we won so many tournaments with her."***

tween mosque associations and social institutions would be helpful to gain acceptance and to make the idea of women's football a subject of public discourse. By working with mosque associations, you can make a concrete contribution to the integration of Muslim migrant women. In this way, new approaches to women's sport can be implemented in the hope of reforming conventional traditional norms.

## Role models

*"Like Modesta Uka, my dream is to be included in the SK Sturm women's team... I can still remember exactly, we won so many tournaments with her." (Zülfa, 14 years)*

Modesta Uka, an Austrian football player who plays for SK Sturm Graz and Kosovo's National Team, played in the same club as Zülfa, one of the interviewees. This football club, FC JAM United, has been motivating girls and young women with and without a migratory background to move and participate in sports through play-

ing football together. The girls football module of Caritas Styria (Austrian non-profit organisation) is a cooperation with the girls' centre JAM Graz and supports the idea of 'integration through sport'. Right from the start, the goal was deliberately not to find a 'pure' immigrant football club. To maintain contact with the local population, flyers calling for applicants were distributed in schools. Several young girls took part in the FC JAM United football club which was a great success. It led to players like Modesta Uka, initially at FC JAM United and later at SK Sturm Graz.

In general, it should be noted in the discussions that the importance of role models and the participation of local (autochthonous) youth in the association have a generally positive effect on the language and social participation of migrant women.

*"At the beginning I could speak German badly. Our trainer spoke German with us, but she is not very good at*

***"In Austria women are very important. Women have many opportunities to develop freely. Sometimes I imagine paradise to be as just as here, in Afghanistan it is unfortunately exactly the opposite."***

it herself. When Austrian girls joined the team, I heard the Styrian accent for the first time.” (Masooma, 19 years)

Such successes are of course a suitable means for positive integration development. Characteristics such as teamwork, commitment, perseverance and fair play are reinforced and professionalised by role models. This is shown by the fact that all interviewees are extremely self-confident and know what they want. They also have a great degree of maturity for their age, which they gained because they were able to positively overcome many barriers for themselves.

Football should play a central role in today’s society and give young migrant women the opportunity to find their self-affirmation in this way. Organised tournaments and matches strengthen the cohesion of the teams and encourage them to grow together.

“There are also plenty of Afghan women who speak German perfectly like Austrians. This makes me a little proud, but they have been in Austria for a very long time.” (Mursal, 15 years)

**„I hope that one day we can train really professionally, like the soccer stars.”**

## Wishes and comments of the interviewees

“I am very happy that I can live in Austria. I love being able to play soccer every day. No bombed-out streets, no Sharia police, there is just my ball and me.” (Masooma, 19 years)

„I hope that one day we can train really professionally, like the soccer stars.” (Sanan, 15 years old)

“In Austria women are very important. Women have many opportunities to develop freely. Sometimes I imagine paradise to be as just as here, in Afghanistan it is unfortunately exactly the opposite.” (Khaliya, 16 years)

„I wish that we all wore T-shirts with our names in the club.” (Zülfa, 14 years)

„More training, more tournaments!” (Safal, 14 years)

„I wish that we had our own hall with balls and gymnastics equipment.” (Mursal, 15 years)

„I am now an active player, in a few years I hope to be able to do referee training through the club and become a football referee.” (Rasiqa, 16 years)

„Every woman in every country should have the opportunity to play football.” (Nushin 18 years)

**„Every woman in every country should have the opportunity to play football.”**



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