

# [IN]VISIBLE

HERSTORIES OF MINORITY AND  
MIGRANT WOMEN IN SPORT



## ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

***“As a young girl I yearned to see a girl who looked like me on my television,”*** recounts Irish U19 team player Blessing Kingsley. Her parents are from Nigeria, she is black. A lack of role models, little recognition for girls in sports, racism. Feeling like ***“a fish without water”*** (Nadia Ejjaferi) – feeling alone, standing on the sidelines feeling like you don’t belong, feeling unwelcome or simply “different” are all too familiar to the women portrayed in this exhibition.

The sports they each play may differ, as well as their stories and backgrounds: some were forced to flee, some are members of an ethnic minority, others are BPoC (Black and People of Colour) or have parents who migrated from another country. Some are top athletes while others participate in popular sports. Some are just starting out while others have careers already behind them.

They are European champions, national team players or amateur athletes. But they all share something in common: they are women, they are non-white or do not belong to the so-called majority society; and they live for their sport – as athletes, referees or trainers – and make sport to what it is: the most magnificent pastime in the world.

The exhibition “[in]visible” tells the stories of minority and migrant women in sport and gives them the voice to make visible how they made their way, while facing and overcoming barriers and becoming what they are: powerful women in and through sport.

This exhibition strives to create role models for girls and women. Because they do exist – the female athletes who look like Blessing Kingsley. But too often they remain invisible and do not receive the recognition they deserve. A male-dominated field such as sport leaves little room for women and girls: in terms of media coverage, but also in terms of infrastructure and financial support. ***“We have to claim our rights”***, says Portuguese national team player and Olympique Lyon striker Jéssica Silva.

It is an issue of equality – ***“I perform well and should receive the same support”*** says Liu Jia, the Austrian European Table Tennis Champion.

And it is about the power of sport: ***“Sport has made me strong. Given me selfconfidence”***, Helia Mirzaei describes the decisive role sport played in her life.

“[In]visible – Herstories of minority and migrant women in sport” wants to contribute to ensuring that Blessing Kingsley’s wish soon becomes reality: ***“I really hope that future girls could learn from my story and hopefully be fortunate enough to see a girl that looks like them playing the sport they love.”***



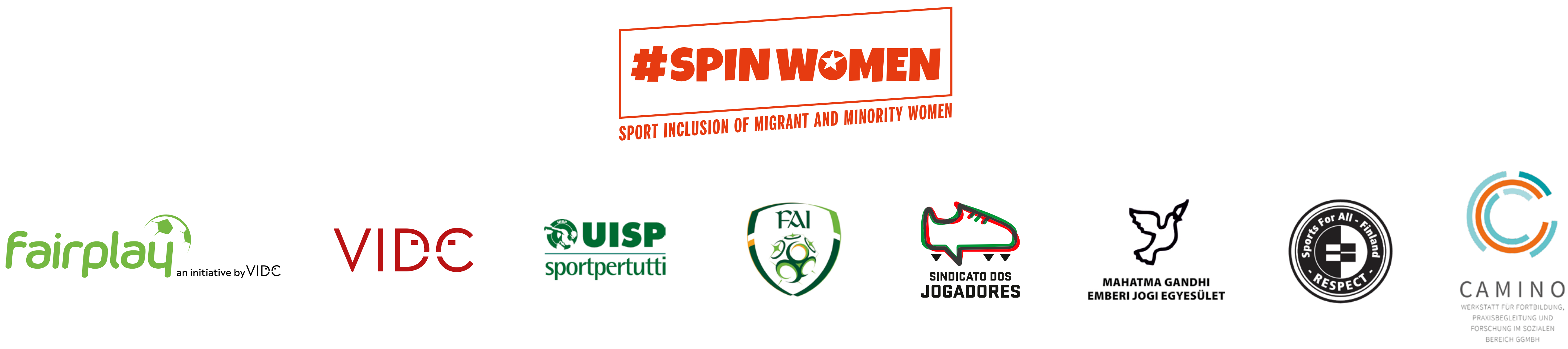


# ABOUT THE PROJECT

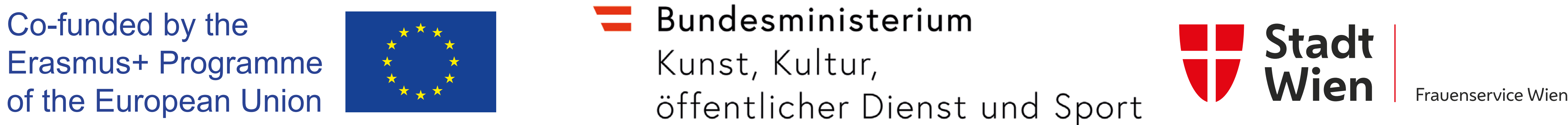
Migrant and minority women experience discrimination on the basis of both gender and migrant or ethnic background. As a response to this reality, the European Sport Inclusion Network (SPIN Network) developed the project “Sport Inclusion of Migrant and Minority Women” (SPIN Women). SPIN Women aims to encourage social inclusion and equal opportunities for women and girls with an immigrant or ethnic minority background through increased participation in sports.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

The exhibition is a **touring exhibition** – you want to show it **in your town**? Please contact [fairplay@vidc.org](mailto:fairplay@vidc.org)  
**Further information** and **long versions** of the **portraits** you find on our website: [www.fairplay.or.at/exhibition](http://www.fairplay.or.at/exhibition)



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# LIU JIA

**TABLE TENNIS PLAYER,  
AUSTRIA,  
BORN 1982 IN CHINA**

European Champion 2005,  
Olympic athlete at five Olympic Games



## NO RESPECT FOR SPORTY GIRLS

### **Have you encountered barriers as a female athlete?**

As a girl I didn't. In China, girls are encouraged to do sports. I started playing at the age of 5, it was very performance driven from very early on, but for girls and boys equally. It was hard to always be judged on your performance, but I didn't know any other way. At some point conforming and obeying orders didn't work for me anymore. Then I went to Austria.

### **What was it like to come to a completely new country at the age of 15?**

It was a culture shock! When I left the airport I thought: where are all the people? It was deserted. Where are the bikes? And the food: pork chops, schnitzel, roast pork. Why so much meat? I want rice and where are my chopsticks? And of course the language was a huge obstacle. I struggled, was excluded, I couldn't laugh along because I didn't understand.

### **Racism too?**

Definitely racism. In the tram on the way to training I would always encounter a group that called me "Schlitzauge" (slit eye). I got scared and would get off the tram earlier to avoid them. These days I fight back! But back then I was young, foreign, new, couldn't speak German... no chance! For months I suffered with this situation. I didn't tell anyone about it, I was ashamed. Many people say, no way, there is no more racism these days. But of course there is!

### **How do you see the current situation for girls in sports?**

Generally, there is little respect for sporty girls. Even if they are good, they still get less recognition. It is sad that families and society do not motivate girls to exercise more. Politics must ensure that everyone is allowed to do sports, not just those with athletic parents. That is why school gym class is so important. Particularly for the girls.

### **What needs to change for girls, for migrants?**

These verbal insults are not the crux of the problem. The most important issue is equal rights. Then one also has the self-esteem to resist. To not just say, you are a woman, so you get less. But unfortunately that is the case. We earn so much less than men.

Sport plays an incredibly important role in integration. Sport, along with culture and music, is the easiest way to gain a foothold.



# MELINDA PÉCSINÉ LÁZÁR

**BOXER, HUNGARY,  
BORN 1974, OF ROMA ORIGIN**

Three-time Budapest Champion, multiple silver and bronze medal winner at the National Championships



## POWERFUL WOMAN

### What role does sport play in your life?

Sport is a big part of my life. The first time I played football was in primary school. I usually played it during the break with the boys. In 2004 I got into boxing which I love to this day. Sport can help a lot if you come from a disadvantaged group like I do.

### Did you encounter barriers as a sportswoman with Roma background?

I was born into a big family, my mom raised my 3 siblings and me all by herself. My mom dealt wild flowers. We cultivated land and sold the goods at the market. I realised at a very young age that hard work pays off.

But there were always others helping me. I owe a lot to my family, but not everybody is so lucky. Roma people are discriminated against a lot in Hungary and do not have the same opportunities. I find it so important to help young people of Gypsy origin.

Sport plays an important role for male Gypsies. It is a way to integrate and find acceptance. Girls often have responsibilities within their families and get married at an early age, so they have no access to the power of sport.

### What can one do to overcome these barriers for girls?

Education through sport! I worked as a pedagogical assistant at Erzsébet Utcai Primary School where I helped students with behavioral and integration issues by playing sport with them after school. Furthermore in the afternoons I worked with the Gypsy Nationality Self-Government of Újpest. I taught boxing to young people of Gypsy origin.

My degree in social work, my sports history, my personality, my Gypsy identity and my social sensitivity have all helped me to educate students and help them with their development.

### Why is sport so important in the fight against inequality?

Sport can teach young people how to play by the rules and allow them to fall in love with movement and games. It can strengthen their personalities and help them learn how to both work as a part of a group, as well as how to think as an individual. Their self-image, self-esteem, body and soul get stronger, and they get to know their limitations and learn tolerance.



# BLESSING KINGSLEY

**FOOTBALL PLAYER,  
IRELAND,  
BORN 2002**

Irish Women's U19 and Wexford Youths  
WFC Player



## BEING THE ONLY BLACK GIRL, YOU FEEL OUT OF PLACE

**How did you make your way towards the Irish U19 National Team?**

My mom has really had to step up and be a role model for me and she's always told me anything you want to achieve, you can achieve. She was quite apprehensive about me playing sports, especially with boys. But once she found out that I wanted to go far in football, she was the most important person ever. My mom emigrated from her home country, Nigeria, at the age of just 17 and was still trying to find her feet juggling jobs to make sure we had a somewhat comfortable life.

I used to struggle with being different on occasion. When you're playing soccer and you realize that you're the only black girl on your team, you can't help but feel out of place.

**How did football change your life?**

I will always be thankful for soccer. Because of it, I was able to cope with the hardships of not having my father around, the very man who introduced me to the sport. Overcoming various obstacles is something I no longer run away from, instead, I now face them head-on. Through sport I found my purpose and aspirations for the future.

Since signing Wexford Youths two years ago, I've travelled to many countries all over the world. I've received International caps at U16, U17 and U19 level, and played in a Senior Cup Final. And most recently, I got a scholarship and I will spend my next 4 years studying and playing soccer in the USA. Things that my mother never got a chance to experience but made sacrifices at the mere chance that I would.

**Do you have a wish for future generations of girls?**

I come from a background that's not very well represented in my sport. As a young girl I yearned to see a girl who looked like me on my television. But regardless I believed I could achieve something great if I wanted it bad enough and worked harder than everyone else. Because of that I've achieved so many things I never would've thought possible in my wildest dreams. I really hope that future generations of girls could learn from my story and hopefully be fortunate enough to see a girl that looks like them playing the sport they love.



# JÉSSICA SILVA

**FOOTBALL PLAYER,  
PORTUGAL,  
BORN 1994**

Portuguese national team striker,  
plays for Olympique Lyon since 2020



## WE HAVE TO BE RADICAL AND PUNISH DISCRIMINATION

### **How did football enter your life?**

I always played football – at school, in the playground, on the street, on my doorstep. I was born with football inside me. But only when I went to live in Aveiro in 2009 did football really start for me. My family never prevented me from playing and I had supporters.

### **Have you experienced discrimination throughout your career?**

Not so much now, but particularly in the North I felt racism without a doubt. At that time, it still made me cry. Racism is something that is always very present.

All kinds of discrimination, be it sexist, homophobic or racist exist. Racist chants are sung frequently and there is no severe punishment. I think that some kind of legislation has to be created to change this situation. We have to be radical and punish offenders because we have already realised that although campaigns like “No to racism” may be beautiful, in practice they are not enough.

### **Do you think there is still a long way to go when it comes to gender equality in sport?**

Women must be valued in relation to what they give to the sport. I think it is not just in football, but in sport in general: women are undervalued. We have to claim our rights. We do not have to talk about wages, but let's start with infrastructure: do not force us to play on synthetic grass, changing rooms must be available, we must have the opportunity to play at prime times. There are teams that continue to train at nine at night because the boys are playing, and that is not fair.

### **Do you see changes for future generations of girls?**

I think we are on the right track. Today there are many more girls who want to play football and that shows that there is also a growing interest on the part of the parents, who now support and allow their daughters to play football. It seems to me that there is a wonderful generation coming in now. When I was 19, 20 years old I tried to train in a boys club to do extra training, but only one club accepted me while all the others refused. I am sure that today they would no longer refuse.



# HELIA MIRZAEI

**FOOTBALL PLAYER,  
AUSTRIA,  
BORN 1998 IN IRAN**

Since 2015 in Austria, she is player and trainer at Kicken Ohne Grenzen and Austrias women's team to the Homeless World Cup



## FOR ME, I AM THE BEST!

### How did you get into football?

I have always loved sports. In Iran I often practiced with my siblings, but then at some point I stopped. Nobody wanted to play with a girl. When I came to Austria in 2015, I often watched the boys, and wanted to join in. Then a coach drew my attention to a football team for women.

### What problems did you face as a woman playing football?

Women are not allowed to do this and that – as kids we always heard this. Even as adults it is difficult to break out of it, especially for the first one to do it. When I started with football, I often heard that I am not a good girl because I don't wear a headscarf, I play football – even with men – and for laughing a lot.

### How did you overcome these barriers?

I know that what I'm doing is the right thing, but many people still can't accept that. But I don't care. I can't just do the things that other people want just for their sake. I have to be like this and do what I want.

You continually have to motivate yourself, encourage yourself.

If everyone is always saying "no we shouldn't", then we can never gain good experiences in life.

### What does sport mean to you?

When I came to Austria, I was depressed and didn't want to go to the German course, I didn't want to meet people. Football means a lot to me and it really helped me. When I go to training, I go in and leave all my difficulties outside the door. When I am on the field, I think about the positive things. I often say to myself, Helia, you are the best! No matter what you are for the others, you are the best for yourself.

When I play football, I feel freer.

### Is there any advice you want to give other girls?

They should stay strong and trust themselves. Yes, they can do anything they want. They just have to start somewhere, sometime. I hope that all girls, no matter their country or culture, will be what they want to be in the future. And they must not forget to laugh.

I often share my story with other girls, so that they might have it easier.



# VERA DUMSER

**FOOTBALL REFEREE,  
AUSTRIA,  
BORN IN FORMER YUGOSLAVIA**

Managed 548 games for the Austrian Football Association to date (2021)



## ONLY MEN? THAT'S JUST NOT RIGHT!

**How did you get into football and become a referee?**

I never played football myself, I wasn't allowed to. I grew up in a very patriarchal family where football was a man's thing. And then the war in Yugoslavia drove me out of the country. In Austria I began to be a referee at a slightly advanced age. I am a justice fanatic and wanted to prove that women are just as good as men.

**What barriers do you see for women in sports?**

It was incredibly hard for me – and it still is today. There is less support for women in football than there is for men. You always have to be better, more present, more assertive, you always have to prove yourself. Women often lack self-confidence, which is understandable when there is no one backing you and you are the only woman on the pitch. If you look around, it's all men in football. That's just not right.

**As a woman of migrant origin, who speaks with an accent, what have you had to listen to on the pitch?**

People often asked why I do this to myself. A common experience is Austrians speaking to me in a foreign accent. And yelling things like "Go home", "Woman belong in kitchen", "Where is your wooden spoon?" and worse. How can I as a referee gain the respect of the children on the pitch when their parents slur me like that?

As a referee you are used to dealing with criticism. Emotions are part of the deal. But when it's below the belt it's something else. Sexism, racism, discrimination have no place in the game.

**What advice would you offer girls to encourage them?**

My appeal to young women in particular is to develop their own ideas about what they like. We need this attitude on the football field. It takes assertiveness and courage.

Structurally what is required is people you can trust in the association, mentors who you can always go to for advice. Not just swallow discrimination and take it back to the locker room!



# NADIA EJJAFINI

**ATHLETICS, LONG DISTANCE  
RUNNER, ITALY  
BORN 1977 IN MOROCCO**

Ejjafini holds the Italian record for half marathon  
with the time of 1:08:27 run 2011 in Cremona



## LIKE A FISH WITHOUT WATER

**What barriers have you encountered in your career as a sports woman?**

In Morocco, as a girl, I encountered no obstacles in becoming an athlete. As the first African and muslim woman, the Moroccan Nawal El Moutawakel won gold at the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984. The King organised such big celebrations that made athletics very well known as a sport. I left Morocco because I really wanted to demonstrate my potential but it was difficult to compete there because of the sports system.

When I arrived in Italy at the age of 21, I felt like a fish without water. But I have not found it difficult to integrate and I have always found great respect for my work and for the sacrifice behind it. My dream has always been to run for the Azzurri.

**What have been successful strategies to overcome barriers?**

From a sporting point of view, the key is the love for the sport. It requires many sacrifices, both physically and socially – many sacrifices that can only be endured with a big love for the sport.

From a cultural point of view, I tried to spend as much time as possible with Italians, I learned Italian by myself through reading newspapers, watching television and asking my manager to speak to me in Italian. The sports environment itself is very multicultural and therefore open.

**What would you recommend young girls in sport?**

For a foreign person the first thing to do is to learn the language, if you don't understand what you are told, you feel inferior. If a person is very talented it will be easy for her to succeed, otherwise it will take a lot of training and even more sacrifices. In general, I think a serious coach would never discriminate against a girl because she wants to wear a veil or wants to practice her religion.



# FATNA MARAOU

**ATHLETICS, LONG DISTANCE  
RUNNER, ITALY  
BORN 1977 IN MOROCCO**

Three times winner of the Italian 10km Road  
Championship, twice winner of the IAAF World  
Half Marathon Championships



## INTEGRATION MEANS TO LIVE WHERE YOU ARE

**What barriers have you encountered in your career as a sports woman?**

When I came to Italy in 1998 I had to face many difficulties. I think it is the same everywhere: as soon you arrive you are made to feel “inferior”. When I wanted to participate in a competition, organisers often told me that they already had too many foreigners or that they did not want foreign people to run. It made no difference that I personally felt 100% Italian and already had an Italian passport!

On the other hand I often met foreign people who continued to live exactly the same way they used to live in their country of origin. Especially in the sport world this doesn’t help either.

**How did you overcome these barriers?**

I tried to hide how much I was hurt by these rejections. I continued to insist, to smile, to show that I was more than just “a foreigner”. I suffered inside, but I did not show it. This is something sport teaches you as well: to face everything smiling and to not surrender. As time went by it got better. The same people who did not want me to compete, now called me. Another very important aspect is the support of your club, in my case the Italian army.

**What advice would you give other migrant girls who want to make their way in sport?**

Integration is very important. Sport is not like a private company where you do your work and then leave. Integration means learning the language, making friendships. That does not mean renouncing your own identity, culture or religion, it means to live where you are and as you are! Without language you cannot even express what you want or if you are suffering.

It is also crucial that parents know that for kids, sport is a lot more than competing and going home. Making friendships, celebrating parties after the competitions, these moments make children love sport. If you prevent them from participating in this, they will probably drop out. In my experience accepting these social aspects is fundamental, especially for girls.



# TUĞBA TEKAL

**FOOTBALL PLAYER,  
GERMANY, BORN 1985 TO  
A KURDISH-YAZIDI FAMILY**

Played with HSV and 1. FC Cologne,  
founding member of HÁWAR.help,  
a human rights organisation advocating for women



## MY FOOTBALL SHOES WERE A GATEWAY TO FREEDOM

### How did you grow up and get into football?

My parents came to Germany in the 70s as Kurdish-Yezidi refugees from Turkey. I grew up in Hanover with ten siblings. My parents brought us up pretty traditionally, but education was very important to them. It all started when my brothers took me along to the football field. It quickly became apparent that I was quite good at it. From then on, I frequently accompanied them to the field.

### What difficulties did you have to overcome in order to get to where you are today?

I started playing football relatively late because my parents had forbidden me to play as a child. They believed that it wasn't appropriate for a girl to get all dirty and sweaty and come home with skinned knees. So I kept my passion secret. Only when they realized how much good the sport did me and how it increased my self-confidence, did they finally give in and support me.

I was very fortunate to have people in my life who believed in me and gave me the strength to understand and pursue my own dreams.

### What does football mean to you?

Being able to do what I love was something I could never take for granted. My football shoes were a gateway to freedom. On the football field, what really counted was athletic performance – ethnicity or skin color didn't matter all that much. This was an important experience for me as I was often confronted with discrimination during my childhood. When I play I feel completely in my own element, my only job is to focus on the ball and I can let go of everything else.

### What advice would you give to other girls and young women?

Life wasn't easy for me – I experienced discrimination and had to stand up for myself and against the more traditional views of my parents. Nevertheless, I managed to make it to the top of the German Bundesliga. I hope that my story will inspire and encourage young women and girls both with and without a migrant background, to pursue their dreams and believe in themselves.



# ALEX- ANDRINA CABRAL BARBOSA

**HANDBALL PLAYER,  
PORTUGAL, BORN 1986**

Former Portuguese youth national team, now Spanish national team player, elected to the All Star team of the 2019 World Cup



## I EXPERIENCED A LOT OF DISCRIMINATION

**When did you start playing handball?**

I started playing handball when I was 9 years old and at 17 I signed my first professional contract. I grew up in Bairro Pedreira, and my sisters and I were approached by Assunção Fernandes, a handball trainer from the Assomada initiative who invited us to join her handball team. We did not have a lot of opportunities to have fun. She talked to our father, and after some discussion he agreed to let us play. Before we were allowed to go, we had to do our duties like housework and helping our mother.

**Your parents come from a Portuguese speaking African country, how do you see the situation regarding migrant women and ethnic minorities in sport?**

After several years of high-level sport, I know that women still have a long way to go.

I experienced a lot of discrimination, I remember several cases of racism in the Portuguese youth national team. This bothered me a lot, I had to be very strong. Almost two years ago I was discriminated against because I got pregnant. This kind of discrimination happens a lot. I signed a 2-year contract in France. When I got pregnant and informed the team president of Nantes Atlantique Handball he wanted to break the contract because he did not believe that I could get back in shape and play at a high level again. But in France, women are protected against things like this. 6 months after giving birth I returned to play and in 2019 I was with the Spanish national team at the World Cup in Japan.



# MARIA ASSUNÇÃO TAVARES

**HANDBALL COACH, PORTUGAL,  
BORN 1966 IN CAPE VERDE**

Founder of Assomada women's team supporting  
migrant women through handball



## HANDBALL AS A SOCIAL STRATEGY

### **What is your relationship to sport?**

When I arrived in Portugal in 1989, I noticed that there were many children and young people from migrant families on the street with few opportunities. I thought about how I could help. When I was a child I played handball in Cape Verde, and so I decided to share what I know and thus I founded handball teams for girls in an area where most of them are daughters of immigrants.

I am now President of the Association of Social Solidarity Assomada and coach of the project's handball team. The sport I practiced as a girl has become a tool for social integration in Portugal, not only for me, but also for the various generations of young people I have worked with.

### **What impact can sport have on the lives of migrant girls?**

My dissertation dealt with the topic of handball as a social inclusion strategy for daughters of Cape Verdean immigrants. In this context I interviewed 22 athletes from three different generations who were part of the Assomada women's team. The testimonies suggest that handball positively contributed to their course of education, as well as to their personal and social development. Sport was a source of empowerment and helped to build a positive identity and promoted social inclusion. And it was important to affirm a culture of double belonging – as both Cape Verdean and Portuguese.

### **What specific barriers do girls face in sport?**

I can tell you the story of Alexandrina Cabral Barbosa, who is also portrayed in this exhibition. I was her first trainer and she later played for the Portuguese national team. She and her sisters had difficulties in the beginning of her career because of their father's culture, his machismo. In his opinion girls should not play sports but rather help their mother with the housework. The first time her father ever saw her play was on television, when Alexandrina played for the Portuguese national team. I contacted and informed him. Then, of course, he was very surprised, happy and proud to see his daughter on TV.



# CARMEN PIMENTEL

**VOLLEYBALL COACH,  
ITALY,  
BORN 1961 IN PERU**

1980 and 1984 player at the Olympic Games  
for Peru, coach of Italian third league  
team “Progetto VolLei”



## YOU ARE NEVER NOT GOOD ENOUGH

**When did you start to play volleyball?**

I discovered the sport at school. I devoted my life to this sport because I loved it and I had the idea that it could be a way to support my family. I played in several junior Peruvian national teams, participated in the Olympic Games and World Championship and won the Peruvian and South American Club Championship several times.

I quit my active career in 2003 and started working as a coach.

**Have you encountered any barriers in your career as a foreign sports woman?**

As many foreign volleyball players, I came to Italy because a club wanted me to play for them, and I was treated well because they needed me. For me inclusion is up to each of us, we all have to contribute. In my case I was called to play for the Brindisi team in 1983. I was seen as a “team rescue” because of my experience. I immediately felt at home. I did not face any problems because of my origin.

**What have been successful strategies for you to feel at home in Italy?**

Obviously my commitment was very high, both from a sporting point of view and from a cultural point of view. I trained a lot, focusing on my goals. I know I am a lucky person, and this is not the case for everyone, but it was also because of what I did that I made it. When you arrive in a new place you cannot just continue to act as you did in your country of origin, you have to accept the customs of that new country.

**What advice would you give other migrant girls and women who want to make their way in sport?**

Kids who want to do sport must enjoy it, first of all. Sport teaches you values, how to share, respect, and educates you as a social being. Women are the driving force of everything. But women still have to be steadfast, persevering and intelligent, in order not to be brushed aside. We have to be stronger than men. And we must seize the fleeting moment, be brave and open to adventure, to try, to make a run for it. We should never ever surrender, never accept that someone tells us we are not good enough to do something.



# NADA ARBAJI

**BASKETBALL AND FOOTBALL  
PLAYER, GERMANY,  
BORN 1981 IN LEBANON**

Football coach at a grassroots level,  
planning to become a referee



## YOU CAN MAKE IT WHEN YOU HAVE A GOAL!

### How did you get into football?

I played basketball professionally for 14 years in Beirut. I have been living in Berlin since 2014. One day, a friend in Berlin asked me if I would like to play football. In Lebanon, it is difficult to play football as a girl or woman. I said yes, and I've been playing it ever since.

### What difficulties did you have to overcome?

I had wanted to be a coach in Lebanon, but they don't take women seriously there, and I wasn't brave enough to try for all that. But when I arrived here in Berlin and started at the "Discover Football" club, I still had this desire, and I realised that there is a place for women here in football.

### Who supported you on your way?

At first I didn't believe that as a woman with a migrant background I would succeed to become a football coach. But you have opportunities here, and every girl and woman should take advantage of that! There are many who are much smarter than men, but they are timid and need motivation. I had the backing of "Discover Football", which encouraged me, and was very important for me. Now, I also want to become a referee. Why not?

### Are you working as a football coach right now?

I used to volunteer as a coach for several girls' and women's teams, but now my girlfriend has had a baby, and we take turns looking after the baby. So I'm only coaching one football team right now.

### What are you most proud of?

I am very proud that I managed to complete my coaching license. If I were still in Lebanon, they wouldn't take me seriously because I'm a woman. They would tell me to just stay at home and cook. Here you have that chance. I've been able to coach different teams, do training camps, and gain so much experience as a coach. I'm so happy about what I've accomplished.

### Is there anything you would like to pass on to other women?

You must have a goal and not get discouraged. You can't make it without a goal in life. If women have goals, they will achieve them if they want to. They need support, but any woman can make it!



# MOZHGAN AZAR- KASHB

**FOOTBALL PLAYER,  
GERMANY, BORN 1985 IN IRAN**

Former Iranian national team player,  
now coaching three clubs



## FOOTBALL IS EVERYTHING TO ME

### How did you get into football?

There didn't used to be any women's football in Iran. But I've been interested in football since I was a kid, and used to play with my siblings on the street. When I was 16, a women's club opened in my city and I was finally able to join. Many people thought women shouldn't play football because it is a male sport. But my family always supported me to achieve my goals.

### How did your passion for football continue?

I studied sports at university, and a friend took me to her football club in Teheran. The club's coach suggested me for a tryout with the Iranian Women's National Team, which had just been formed. I went to the tryout and was selected. That was in 2004, and it was a great honor for me to be part of the first generation of the Iranian National Team. We went to two football tournaments in West Asia and came second. I played in the Iranian league for eight years.

### What does football mean to you?

Football is my favorite sport and it is everything to me: fun, life... Football means communicating with children and adults, staying fit and healthy, teaching others.

### How did you find a club in Germany?

It was very challenging for me at the beginning in Germany to communicate with other people because I didn't know German that well. I met a former teammate in Berlin who invited me to join "Champions without Borders", a club where many refugee women and girls play. The club supported me in getting my coaching license. I have also worked as a coach in Iran, and now I volunteer here to train girls and boys in three different clubs.

### What would you like to pass on to other young women?

I had a lot of difficulties at the beginning in Germany. But now I do sports here with other young people. It's always important not to give up and to motivate yourself. I have a lot of motivation and know that I can continuously improve myself.



# GERTRUDE NNEKA ONYEJIAKU

**ATHLETICS, SHORT DISTANCE  
RUNNER AND TRAINER,  
HUNGARY, BORN 1970 IN NIGERIA**

She won competitions in various disciplines for her school  
and now empowers refugees through sport



## MY FAMILY PREVENTED ME FROM BECOMING AN ATHLETE

### How did you get into sports?

I started showing interest in athletics when I was in primary school. My main focus was the 100m, 200m, and the 400m. I developed additional skills in long jump when I entered secondary school at the age of 14. I represented my school many times and won medals. In my university days, I represented my university in Imo State's long jump competition.

### What difficulties did you have to overcome?

At the beginning my parents were not supportive. I had to pause my primary school education because my parents did not want me to engage in sporting activities for the school. I eventually convinced them when I won the 1st runner up award in a regional school athletics competition in Imo State, Nigeria.

Despite my parents' later support, my grandmother was a strong barrier to my goal of being a sportswoman. She forbade my parents to encourage me because she held a non-contestable belief that a sports-woman cannot give birth to a child. Due to the influence and power of my grandmother, I gave up my dream of becoming an active full-time athlete. I decided to focus on sports coaching and management.

### How have you changed the situation for girls – in Nigeria and Hungary?

I worked as a secondary school teacher in Nigeria for five years. I also taught physical education. It was very important for me to encourage my students, in particular girls, to do sports, and to excel in order to build a sporting career.

When I came to Budapest, I started to work as a social worker, and I have been active in initiatives and conferences that target women's inclusion in sports. Currently I work with Oltalom Kantativ Egyesület, a shelter for refugees and homeless people. I am in charge of sporting athletics at the center as an athletic trainer. Sports can change a lot.



# SARAH ANULIKA NWEREMIZU

**ATHLETICS & SPORTS NUTRITIONIST,  
HUNGARY, BORN 1989 IN NIGERIA**

After stopping her active career very early due to injuries,  
Nweremizu encourages girls to live their dreams



## GIRLS SHOULD FOLLOW THEIR PASSION

### How did you get into sports?

I started doing sports (athletics) when I was in secondary school and I won many awards in the school's competition for girls. I received a lot of prizes both in cash and in kind from teachers and regional education officers. My love for athletics grew even stronger when I won the maiden trophy at the college sports festival, a big and important event.

### What difficulties did you have to overcome?

In my case, the barriers I faced did not come from my family but from two other angles. I believed in the falsehood that being a female athlete would make me look like a man. I did not put in much time for training and competitions so that I would not become too muscular.

Later, I realised my mistake after attending a sports conference. Secondly, I had some personal health challenges that affected my ambition. I suffered many injuries, particularly when I was at college. Due to the medical advice I received, I decided not to pursue my ambition of becoming a professional athlete.

### How have you changed the situation for girls – in Nigeria and Hungary?

I started to educate myself about women in sports and I decided to engage in sports management. I have a background in home economics and I started to work for my community athletics club in Nigeria specialising in diet and nutrition. My family believed in me and always supported my decisions. I know this is unfortunately not always the case, but it is so important and encouraging.

I currently live in Budapest, but I am still supporting my community athletics club. With my experience, I encourage young girls to follow their passion for sports, especially athletics.