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**In what ways can ‘moving and meeting’  
support the long-term integration of  
refugee women and the welfare state?  
A case study of a volunteer-run sports club  
for migrant women in Münster, Germany**

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction: Can we do this again and who will do it effectively?</b>	page 1
<b>1. Why research on sport for the integration of migrant women matters</b>	page 2
<b>2. ‘Move and Meet’ and Methods</b>	page 4
<b>3. Findings: ‘Moving and Meeting’ to assist the long-term integration of refugee women and the welfare state</b>	page 5
<b>3.1. Tailor-made solutions for the individual needs of migrant women</b>	page 5
<b>3.2. Specific activities to promote social networks and employment</b>	page 8
<b>Discussion and conclusion: We can win this together by enabling female Ukrainian refugees</b>	page 11
<b>Bibliography</b>	page 13
<b>Declaration of Authenticity</b>	

## **Introduction: Can we do it again and who will do it effectively?**

In 2015, when large numbers of people began fleeing war in Syria, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel claimed that she would allow a million refugees into her country and uttered the much debated words “We can do this!” (see Zehfuss, p. 172). Seven years later, Europe is experiencing an even greater movement of refugees. As Katsiaficas and Frelak illustrate, “With the Ukrainian government requiring men ages 18-60 to stay and support the war effort, it is largely women and children, as well as elderly men, who are currently crossing into the EU” (p. 1). Politicians like Merkel faced many dilemmas in 2015 and all across Europe, policy makers eventually admitted to having made mistakes. Addressing new challenges and past failures, European Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson told the press in March 2022, “We have learned a lesson, I hope, from 2015” (Crowcroft). Should it be the case, then it can be assumed that this time in Europe “we can do this better” with the millions of Ukrainian refugees, possibly with the help of civil society again.

Civil society organizations in Germany played an important role in organizing support for refugees in 2015 (Karakayali and Kleist). In the past they have often developed innovative projects where governing bodies failed to provide for the specific needs of newly arrived migrants (Meyer, p. 333; and Schönert and Friese, p. 75). This paper closely examines the local voluntary association ‘Move and Meet’ that was originally founded in 2016 in Münster, Germany, soon after the 2015 refugee crisis to support and include female migrants through physical activity into society.<sup>1</sup> Annette Zimmer argues that welfare states should increasingly look at the novel ideas of civil society actors (p. 50). In 2015, few governmental projects focused on specifically facilitating the integration of female migrants by means of physical group activity and in the wake of the recent refugee crisis, an examination of the ‘Move and Meet’ sport initiative can provide beneficial integration lessons coming from the field of civil society and its players.

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<sup>1</sup> Instead of using the term immigrant, throughout this paper I use the broader term ‘migrant’, which the United Nations defines as any “individual who moves across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is” (United Nations 2020; and Perruchoud and Redpath-Cross). Regarding terminology, the title of this paper plays with the name of the initiative ‘Move and Meet’. Moving is used here to describe physical activity. It is also used in the sense of development for migrant women, and in the sense of furthering welfare state provisions in the field of integration. I am deeply indebted to Dr Laura Verweyen of ‘Move and Meet’ for her support in answering questions quickly and professionally.

After outlining the purpose of the paper, the first section identifies appropriate literature. Assessing that political scholars have focused in the past on the benefits of team sports (primarily football) for migrant men and children in the field of integration studies, this section argues that there are few examinations that concentrate on the advantages of group exercise specifically for migrant women. The second section firstly introduces the local voluntary association ‘Move and Meet’. It then discusses and explains the data collection methods used to analyse in which ways a sport club for women can play a central role in facilitating social integration and supporting the welfare state. The third section will present the findings of the case study. The conclusion wraps up the argument that civil society initiatives that are considerate of gender-related challenges are crucial team players in the reinforcement of the welfare state and recommends strategies regarding who and what may help new Ukrainian women refugees in towns like Münster. For the new wave that includes mostly women, it is beneficial to look at successful examples of civil society initiatives that were established to help female migrants who arrived to Europe in 2015. It is through these players and their games that this time politicians may exclaim: “We can win this!”.

### **1. Why Research on Sport for Migrant Women Matters**

Sport is a crucial topic to be included in debates on the future of welfare states, social investment and the integration of migrants. Whereas in the past many welfare states have focused on protecting their societal members by means of economic and social security, attempts are now made to shift to policies that are both activating and preventive (Jenson, p. 73). Sport is also activating and preventive and may offer long-term physical benefits, which in turn may also promote a state’s economic situation.

Many political scholars and sociologists have focused in the past on how sport activities in clubs can lead to migrant integration (for example Agergaard; and Doidge et al.). These studies however have generally focused on football for migrant men and children in the field of integration studies. Ekholm and Dahlstedt examine the Swedish association ‘Football for Integration’, whereas Flensner et al.; Pahl and Zimmer (p. 362); and Zimmer (pp. 43-44) all primarily discuss activities for children. While Blachnicka-Ciacek and Trąbka discuss a Polish refugee football league that must have at least three women per team (p. 9), up to date, few examinations focus specifically on the advantages of local and non-competitive group exercise for migrant women. As Agergaard et al. point out, in sport clubs, competition “may clash with the actual needs

of refugees”, who might require “welcoming, safe and supportive” environments that encourage “enjoyment and social interaction” (p. 621). Whereas Ekholm et al. identify the lack of studies that concentrate on girls’ participation in sport in Sweden and argue in this respect that “girlhood scholars tend to ignore sports activities and sport scholars tend to neglect girls” (p. 1044), it must be recognised that there is also a lack in research literature related to local women-only sports activities.

Unlike past assumptions of many policy makers, as Meyer argues, migrants are not a homogeneous group (p. 321). Additionally, as Liebig and Tronstad illustrate, refugee women are a “particularly vulnerable migrant group” (p. 8). Thus rather than providing social integration support based on the assumption that migrants are a homogeneous group, it is crucial to address the particular needs and barriers experienced by refugee women in order to offer those most at risk of societal exclusion sustainable specific support. Discussing changes over time for policy makers, Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx point out that the “multitude of national models of integration policies in existence has been criticised for overlooking the importance of the transnational and local levels” (p. 25). They illustrate that in the past there was a tendency to consider two dimensions (the immigrant and the receiving society) in the process of integration (p. 16). In light of transnational perspectives on migration (Basch et al.), there is now a shift towards thinking in terms of three way processes. The third party to take into consideration are the sending societies because migrants now participate in social systems that are predominantly not confined to the nation state but that cross borders (Bommes). Furthermore, whereas in the field of social investment, scholars have focused on how social capital may be enhanced through sport (Hoye and Nicholson; and Walseth), studies on sport as a tool for improving the quality of human capital have so far been less explored.

Using ‘Move and Meet’ as a rare example of a volunteer-run sports club for female migrants, this paper expands discussion on the role of *local* sport clubs in integrating women migrants who come from diverse sending countries, and as a human capital. Studies of this type are useful at a time when large numbers of women are fleeing Ukraine. For Meyer, debates on German governance of migrant integration focus on two very different views. On the one hand, migrants are viewed as a strength for the welfare state (“*Chance*”), on the other hand, they (particularly the new unemployed migrants) are considered by some as a threat (“*Bedrohung*”) to Germany’s economy (p. 327). Political studies that focus on both the integration of migrant women and on how civil society may contribute to relieving the welfare state

in the field of integration are timely because the new wave of refugees is likely to affect new debates regarding the welfare state.

## 2. 'Move and Meet' and Methods

This qualitative descriptive case study is based on Münster's 'Move and Meet'. The sport initiative was chosen both because it is run locally by volunteers and because it was founded for female migrants. At the time of this study, many women from Ukraine were arriving to Germany after fleeing from their war-torn homeland. The idea behind 'Move and Meet' was originally conceived in 2016 by sport ethnologist Laura Verweyen, soon after the 2015 refugee wave. Sport activities began to be offered in 2017 to women and girls who had experienced migration and flight by the project called 'Integration of Women in Sports' as part of Verweyen's PhD thesis. Since then the project continuously grew together with financial support from the town of Münster and in 2021 it expanded to become the non-profit organisation 'Move and Meet'. As of 2022, it is also supported through the town's local sport federation as part of the wider Federal programme 'Integration through Sport' that is overseen by the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees and the German Olympic Sports Confederation. The club is also offered idealistic support by local companies and institutions that offer spaces in which the club can offer their activities. With the exception of some courses (such as swimming due to entrance fees at pools), most of the club's activities are free of charge. Currently, there are 19 volunteers and examples of their voluntary work is sports training or babysitting (Verweyen 2022).

'Move and Meet' focuses on providing three crucial services: physical activity (movement), networking (meeting) and learning new skills (education). Further details about its work will be illustrated in the following section when discussing the analysis of the data that was collected. At this stage, it is important to specify that, as their website informs, 'Move and Meet' not only aims to offer activities for "women\* and girls\* with migration and flight experiences, but also people\* who experience different types of discrimination and who are underrepresented in organized sports". Using the German gender star (i.e. an asterisk placed within a noun to emphasise that it refers to women, men and nonbinary people alike), this description shows that 'Move and Meet' makes use of gender-neutral language and that their activities are meant to promote empowerment for minority groups in Münster. For the purpose of this paper, which addresses the importance of physical activity for migrant women in the wake of

the Ukrainian refugee, data was collected that focuses on the activities that “Move and Meet” offers specifically for adult migrant women.

The primary data was gathered by information provided on the official website of the sports club (Move and Meet), from an email interview with the founder of the initiative (Verweyen 2022), and from her scholarly article about social integration for women through sport (Verweyen 2019). The data was complemented by the analysis of secondary literature related to migrant integration through sport, social investment and civil society. The analysis of the activities offered by this initiative provided insight into how civil society organisations identify real-world problems of migrant women not yet tackled by governmental welfare support. The analysis has offered valuable understanding of the ways a local volunteer-run sports club can facilitate the arrival and integration of displaced women who are arriving to Germany from Ukraine.

### **3. Findings: ‘Moving and Meeting’ to assist the long-term integration of refugee women and the welfare state**

The overall purpose of the analysis of the collected data was to explore in what ways a sport club for refugee women run by volunteers can support integration. Migrant women face more challenges compared to men when moving to a new country (Liebig and Tronstad). Notably, the services offered by ‘Move and Meet’ acknowledge both the multiple problems that migrant women from different sending countries face in new host countries, and that members of a sport club may belong to diverse groups with their own specific needs and interests (Tuchel et al.). Therefore voluntary sport clubs should be ready to be flexible (for example due to the different languages members speak and their religions). The results of the analysis of the data collection will be presented in two main points that emphasise the significance for integration work of the recognition on behalf of the volunteers of ‘Move and Meet’ of culture and gender-related challenges.

#### **3.1. Tailor-made solutions for the individual needs of migrant women**

Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx define integration as “the process of becoming an accepted part of society” (p. 14). While they significantly argue that “policy matters, not only policy at the national level but also that at the regional and local levels” (p. 4), in this discourse there is a tendency to omit the importance of gender-specifics. As

Agergaard argues when discussing sports and integration: “ethnic minority groups are often presented in uniform ways in political debates, ignoring the diversity between and within these groups, and within the European populations” (p. 2).

Integration services offered by the welfare state as a consequence of national and federal level policies in Germany, do not always consider gender, local and cultural specifics. When examining the official website of the German Olympic Sports Confederation, which oversees the ‘Integration through Sport’ project together with the Federal Ministry of the Interior and the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, it can be observed that their database only includes a handful of clubs that offer integration work specifically for girls and women (‘Stützpunktvereine’). Notably, this database is only in German, indicating that on a national level, there is little sensitivity towards newly arrived migrants, who might not yet have the necessary German language skills to understand a page dedicated to sports (and significantly to promoting integration too). In contrast, the ‘Move and Meet’ website is bilingual (German and English), which comprises simple and short sentences in both languages. For a woman migrant to become an accepted part of society, who can fully participate in all types of societies around her in the host country, integration services must focus more on developing policies and services that are tailor-made for ‘super-diverse’ groups of migrants (Vertovec) and thinking of local contexts too.

Agergaard importantly points out that “in sports-related integration policies, sport is often depicted as a uniform instrument that is integrative as such” (p. 2). If one is to consider the local specifics of a town like Münster, which for many years was Germany’s most bicycle friendly (with 200,000 to 500,000 inhabitants) town (ADAC), it is crucial to provide migrant women with safe and cheap offers for learning how to ride a bicycle. Refugees all over the world often live in marginalised areas (Horwood and Jacobsen, p. 164) and restrained mobility and financial poverty might mean that they cannot fully participate in daily social and labour life. The volunteer initiative ‘Move and Meet’ helps to improve the mobility of female migrants, who might not have had the chance to learn how to ride a bicycle in their home countries, at times due to gender-gaps, economic or geographical reasons. This example indicates that the ‘Move and Meet’ team has seriously thought of how to respond to the many challenges of migrating to new urban areas, such as women’s needs (safe spaces for learning and moving), local specifics (significance of bicycle as local form of mobility) and super-diversification (varying origins of migrants).

Related to issues of limited mobility for migrant women living in the outskirts of the town, it can be noticed that the team of ‘Move and Meet’ have been mindful of the challenges of physical activity participation and thought about which groups needed more stimulation to participate in their offers. In order to overcome the challenges of participation due to restrained mobility, the volunteers have become mobile themselves and offer courses in the outskirts of Münster or directly in housing areas for refugees. As an example, from the 12<sup>th</sup> August until the 30<sup>th</sup> September 2022, ‘Move and Meet’ trainers teach migrant women how to ride a bicycle in Coerde, a socially disadvantaged neighbourhood of Münster. The club’s website informs about this course: “In small steps our female trainers show you everything you need for road traffic or help you to refresh old knowledge. You do not need your own bike for the course” (Move and Meet). The club does not wait for the sport participants to come to them, but they actively go to the participants, offering them free courses and free bicycles on which they can practice, learn about German road regulations, become more mobile, independent and empowered for their future in Münster.

Blachnicka-Ciacek and Trąbka discuss the “importance of establishing frameworks for safe and egalitarian participation for refugees and migrants in public urban space” (p. 2). Recognising the cultural-specific needs of some migrant women and the importance of learning how to swim in safe places, ‘Move and Meet’ also offers swimming courses only for women. Both the Dortmund-Ems Canal and the Aa lake in Münster are popular recreational areas and the team of ‘Move and Meet’ acknowledge that swimming for many people is a life skill and not a recreation or physical activity. If migrant women are not offered safe empowerment spaces that are considerate of gender and religious differences, then they might be at risk locally in recreational areas. Some women, due to their own religious beliefs or those of their families; or for example due to body-image issues, might not feel comfortable in a standard mixed bathing swimming course. The ‘Move and Meet’ volunteers have been sensitive to the problems of these women and the fact that their website informs that currently “swimming courses are fully booked. Interested swimmers are being placed on a waiting list” shows that there is a high demand for this course. This might also be due to the fact that courses of this kind are rarely offered by other clubs.

Regarding tailor-made sport activities that are sensitive to super-diversification, which means that there is generally greater ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity due to migration, the ‘Move and Meet’ volunteers offer courses that are mindful of various religious observations throughout the year. As Verweyen specifies, during the

fasting month of Ramadan, for example, the trainers of a fitness and relaxation course made sure that the focus was more on yoga and relaxation than on strenuous activities, in order to accommodate to the needs of their Muslim participants (p. 568).

Timing is generally an important point for the ‘Move and Meet’ team and in an interview, Verweyen, the founder of the club, points out that there are many issues that need to be considered when fixing appropriate times for the courses for migrant women. She explains that ultimately, due to many family obligations, child care, and for example local language courses, which generally take place in the mornings, the time frames in which women can practice sport in their club are very limited (Freda-Koch). Additionally, some women do not feel at ease going back home when it is dark after courses at winter. The team that organises the course timetable must thus take all of these special requirements into consideration and a majority of the courses that are offered in the city centre of Münster take place roughly between 4 and 5 pm.

As Verweyen points out, many migrant women are responsible for child care. Verweyen writes that in a relaxation or yoga course, it was distracting in the past for women to have their children with them (2019, p. 568). Accordingly, a special feature of many courses currently offered by ‘Move and Meet’ is that the women can benefit from volunteers who babysit in rooms adjacent to the sport halls.

After having examined some of the ways in which the ‘Move and Meet’ team have addressed the multiple obstacles that migrant women, who want to be part of a sport club must face locally, the ways in which the club’s activities can promote the women’s integration processes will be explored.

### **3.2 Specific activities to promote social networks and employment**

As Flensner et al. specify, “there is a widespread assumption in both research and sport policies that participation in sports leads to integration” (p. 65). For Hoye and Nicholson sport is “an institution capable of creating substantial social capital” (p. 2), where social capital is defined by them as “the resources available to and accessed by an individual or community through social networks” (p. 6). The name ‘Move and Meet’ highlights that the sport club not only offers sport activities, but also the opportunity to ‘meet’ other people and consequently promote social networking.

In this respect it is important to point out that the website of ‘Move and Meet’ lists activities in separate sub-sections called ‘Move’, ‘Meet’ and ‘Educate’. Some of the sport activities mentioned in the ‘Move’ course catalogue have been mentioned

above. Under the section ‘Meet’, one can read: “Whether a walk, hiking or a visit in the museum, sport-workshops, picnics or a guided city tour – we organize our activities in regard to you and your interests! In a small team we plan and develop the activities together” (Move and Meet). Past activities of this type include walks and bike tours around Münster, or a visit to a local museum or the Christmas markets. One is additionally not to forget that non-competitive group sport activities may also allow the chance to get to know other participants and trainers.

Considering Hoyer and Nicholson’s discussion of the “idea that the more connections individuals make within their communities the better off they will be emotionally, socially, physically and economically” (p. 3), it can be observed that the ‘move’ and ‘meet’ activities offered by the club that are mentioned above, are aimed at both enhancing the social relations of the participants and at supporting their physical well-being. Hoyer and Nicholson, however, also include financial benefits in their list of the productive benefits that might arise as a consequence of carrying out sport activities. At a time in which welfare states are starting to shift to policies that are both activating and preventive, instead of only passively protecting their societal members by means of economic and social security, in sport and integration discourses, it is important to adopt social investment perspectives and thus explore how a sport club like ‘Move and Meet’ might promote human capital.

In this respect, the focus of social investment in the context of the welfare state is on boosting employment and career prospects in order to prevent long-term disadvantages and to ultimately advance economic growth for a state. Morel et al. explain that “While fostering greater social inclusion”, the social investment approach “rests on policies that both invest in human capital development” (such as lifelong training and education) and “that make efficient use of human capital” (p. 2). If this approach is applied to ‘Move and Meet’, then it is important to explore that ways in which a volunteer-run club can facilitate the integration of migrant women into the labour market, and not only, as we have seen above, into the local social community.

In the ‘Educate’ section of the club’s website, readers are informed that the club’s staff combine “information with talks and movement” because they “regard movement and meeting other people as a unit. This is also important in our educational program”. As an example of this thinking they write: “we end our try-out-trainings with a question-and-answer session about the topic of sports for women in Münster. Our lectures and information events always include discussions as well as small, practical sports sessions” (Move and Meet). In this section of the website, one can

additionally find files to download, for example about how to combine language teaching in a sport's class. In sum, through the activities offered by the club, migrant women can improve their physical well-being, they can form networks with a diverse group of people, and they can learn skills that may help them increase their economic value or their human capital. Defining human capital, Schuller writes that it

focuses on the economic behaviour of individuals, especially on the way their accumulation of knowledge and skills enables them to increase their productivity and their earnings – and in so doing, to increase the productivity and wealth of the societies they live in. The underlying implication of a human capital perspective is that investment in knowledge and skills brings economic returns, individually and therefore collectively (p. 91).

It has been seen that 'Move and Meet' offers courses in which migrant women can learn how to ride a bicycle, thus reducing limited mobility. This in turn may help the women get to a prospective work place more easily. Increasing their language skills while practising sports can also be considered as, what Bailey et al. call, a gain "in terms of earning power, job performance, productivity and job attainment" (p. 149). Regarding job performance, it has been argued that migrants may be at risk of poor physical and mental health (Lecerof et al.; Manesis; and Pelters et al.). Participating in empowering activities offered by 'Move and Meet', the physical and mental well-being of refugee women may be reinforced and this could in the long run reduce costs of health care and "absenteeism" from work (Bailey et al., p. 149).

Participants who are accustomed to the work of 'Move and Meet' can offer to become a sports mediator and as the website of the initiative informs, they are a "contact person for the participants\*," and in this role "you share your own experiences with immigration and sports in Münster. You support in your native language and translate when necessary." Discussing integration, sport and the civic engagement of refugees, Agergaard et al. emphasise the importance of "supporting refugees in their efforts to become volunteers in sports club" (p. 620). Sports mediator work may help migrant women acquire valuable teamwork skills, which might in turn help to succeed in attaining a job in their new host area. Additionally, the sports mediating activities may help the new volunteers feel that they are working for and included into a local German community while working on a global level because they are helping and solidarising with other migrants with different origins to theirs.

If sport may offer long-term physical and mental benefits to migrants, which may in turn also promote a state's economic situation, one must not forget the significant role of sports mediators, particularly for children. As Bailey et al. argue, parents are crucial "social influencers for sports and physical activities. They are the first and most enduring presenters of activity to children and young people, and have been found to influence their children's experiences of exercise in a number of ways" (p. 150). Acknowledging that single mothers and their children may have higher health disadvantages compared to other groups, Dahlgren and Whitehead explore how inequalities in health may be tackled. In taking part in sport, networking and representational activities, migrant women actively participating in the 'Move and Meet' work, particularly those who are single caretakers like many Ukrainian women who are arriving to Germany, may encourage their children to understand the long-term importance of exercise.

### **Discussion and conclusion: We can win this together by enabling female Ukrainian refugees**

This study has presented insights into how a volunteer-run sport club for female migrants may offer activities to promote long-term integration. The 'Move and Meet' team recognises that migrant women are a diverse group that face complex challenges in local contexts. Applying these findings to a broader scale, one of the main conclusions based on the analysis of the sport club is that integration support services must make efforts to accommodate to the specific needs of various groups of migrants. This means thinking about differences in terms of specific characteristics such as gender, ability and disability, age, cultural and ethnical background and language skills. It has been noted that this particular civil society organisation has thoroughly analysed modern day's super-diversification and the real-world needs of migrant women in Münster, in an attempt to find sustainable solutions for their local integration through physical and social activities. Their website uses simple and short wording in both English and German, as opposed to, for example, the digital database of the wider national Olympic Sports Confederation, suggesting that small local civil society organisations may contribute to finding solutions to obstacles faced by migrants that have not yet been suitably tackled by wider national support services.

Where the state may not have yet adjusted to changing circumstances and the super-diversity of migrants arriving to German, civil society may propose innovative projects for integration. Whereas this study has shown that by investing in gender and

cultural-specific activities that may enable migrant women to accumulate valuable skills and to increase their productivity; and that a civil society initiative can be a crucial team player in the reinforcement of the welfare state, it would be reductive to conclude that in the social investment game, civil society wins against the welfare state. 'Move and Meet' is currently financially supported by the town of Münster locally, by the state of NRW, by the national government, and it receives idealistic support by local companies and institutions. This sport initiative is thus exemplary of the crucial relationship between civil society, private businesses and the state. Working in partnership and in support of the state, the club promotes integration. The volunteers offer courses in which female members of all backgrounds can move and develop together instead of playing against each other in opposing teams. This is a good metaphor of the collaboration that welfare states should enhance. They should increase movement, meetings and partnerships with civil society actors to find lasting and winning solutions to refugee crises at times when the welfare state is under pressure.

Considering refugees now arriving from Ukraine, the analysis of 'Move and Meet' shows how significant it is for governments to work with local partners to support new migrants absorb into communities, and for minority groups, with a limited support network, to have access to safe spaces for empowerment. This study predominantly used data collected from the website of 'Move and Meet' and from questions answered by the founder of the initiative. Acknowledging that in order to thoroughly explore how a volunteer-run sport club for migrant women can help female Ukrainian refugees (and generally other minority groups) with long-term benefits for the welfare state and the broader society, future studies should include interviews of past female participants. These studies should focus on the ways in which the participants are now integrated as opposed to integration before they began taking part in physical activities. In this respect, the motivation of the participants should be analysed in order to explore whether they are generally societal members who are keen on furthering their status and who might thus not require high levels of long-term public welfare support. Considering transnational concepts, it would also be helpful to explore whether club participants have encouraged other women in their home countries to practice physical activity. Finally, analysing who participates in these physical activities, future studies should address which minority groups are still absent at a local level and which barriers hinder their participation in order to ensure fair play in the societal game for all.

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