

‘Moving and Meeting’ to Action: Who Can Create Momentum to Support Refugees in Europe?

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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 “Wir schaffen das!” ‘We can do this’ (Zehfuss 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.” Politicians faced many dilemmas in 2015 and eventually,

across Europe, policymakers 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 this be the case, it can be assumed that this time in Europe “we can do this better” with regard to the millions of Ukrainian refugees – possibly with the help of civil society again. It is, in fact, civil society that is often eager to maintain the momentum of the search for sustainable solutions for refugees.

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 when governing bodies failed to provide for the specific needs of newly arrived refugees (Meyer 333). This paper closely examines the local voluntary association ‘Move and Meet’ that was originally found in 2016 in Münster, Germany, soon after the 2015 refugee crisis, to support and help integrate female refugees into society through physical activity.¹ Annette Zimmer argues that welfare states should increasingly look at the novel

¹ I am deeply indebted to Dr. Laura Verweyen of ‘Move and Meet’ for her support in answering questions quickly and professionally. This paper is based on a longer political science term paper that can be found on the ‘Move and Meet’ webpage: https://jimdo-storage.global.ssl.fastly.net/file/cf1ae7d4-5b66-4e86-81ae-ce005083b2c3/Olivia_Schulz_final_Integration_Move_Meet_Website.pdf. The ‘Move and Meet’ webpage explains that the club offers sport activities for women and girls from refugee and migrant backgrounds. Thinking along the lines of the United Nations and believing that it should be acknowledged that refugees have specific needs and rights, throughout this paper, I will also refer to mixed groups of people on the move, using the two distinct terms: refugees and migrants. Here, the term refugee refers to “a person who is outside their country of origin for reasons of feared persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order and requires international protection,” whereas migration refers to changing one’s country “irrespective of the reason for migration or legal status” (Definitions, United Nations). The phrase “women and girls from refugee and migrant backgrounds” is used in this paper to denote first and second-generation refugees and migrants.

ideas of civil society actors (50). In 2015, few governmental projects focused on specifically facilitating the integration of female refugees by means of physical group activity, which is why, in the wake of the recent refugee crisis, an examination of the 'Move and Meet' sports initiative can provide integration lessons coming from the civil society and its players. This paper argues that, for the new notable movement of refugees that includes mostly women, it is beneficial to look at successful examples of civil society initiatives that were established to help accommodate and integrate women who arrived in Europe in 2015. It is through these players that the momentum can be maintained so that, this time, politicians may exclaim: "We can win this!"

Why Research on Sport for Refugee Women Matters

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

Political scholars and sociologists have focused in the past on how sport activities in clubs can lead to refugee integration (for example, Agergaard; and Doidge et al.). However, these studies have generally focused on football for refugee men and children. While Blachnicka-Ciacek and Trąbka discuss a Polish refugee football league that requires to have at least three women per team (9), few examinations focus specifically on the advantages of local and non-competitive group

exercise for refugee 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" (621). On the other hand, Ekholm et al. identifies the lack of studies that concentrate on girls' participation in sport in Sweden and argue that, in this respect, "girlhood scholars tend to ignore sports activities and sport scholars tend to neglect girls" (1044), it must be recognized that there is also a lack in research literature related to local women-only sports activities.

Thus, rather than providing integration support based on the assumption that refugees and 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 and specific support.

Unlike past assumptions of many policymakers, as Meyer argues, refugees and migrants are not a homogeneous group (321). Additionally, as Liebig and Tronstad illustrate, refugee women are a "particularly vulnerable migrant group" (8). Thus, rather than providing integration support based on the assumption that refugees and 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 and specific support.

Discussing changes over time, policymakers, 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" (25). They illustrate that in the past, there was a tendency to consider two dimensions within the one host nation in the process of integration (16). The first dimension refers to the efforts made by immigrants to settle in the host society. Whereas the second dimension concerns the structures of the receiving or host society to promote the inclusion of immigrants. In light of transnational perspectives on migration (Basch et al.), there is now a shift towards thinking in terms of cross border processes and the connections that immigrants keep with their home countries as well as their relationships in general across multiple countries (Bommes). Using 'Move and Meet' as a rare example of a volunteer-run sports club for women and girls from refugee and migrant backgrounds, this paper expands the discussion on the role of local sports clubs in integrating female refugees and migrants who come from diverse sending countries. Studies of this type are especially useful at a time when large numbers of women are fleeing Ukraine.

Why 'Move and Meet' Matters

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 specifically for female refugees and migrants. The idea behind 'Move and Meet' was originally conceived in 2016 by sport ethnologist Laura Verwey, soon after the 2015 arrival of refugees. Sports activities began to be offered in 2017 to women and girls from refugee and migrant backgrounds by the project called 'Integration of Women in Sports' as part of Verwey'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'. Since 2022 it has been supported through the town's local sports 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 carry out their activities. Except for a few courses (such as swimming due to entrance fees), most of the club's activities are free of charge. Currently, there are nineteen volunteers who engage in sports training or babysitting as part of their voluntary work (Verweyen 2022).

'Move and Meet' focuses on providing three crucial services: physical activity (movement), networking (meeting) and learning new skills (education). It is important to note that, as their website notes, 'Move and Meet' not only aims to offer activities for "women and girls" from refugee and migrant backgrounds, but also for "people who experience different types of discrimination and who are under-represented in organized sports."² Here, they give the example of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour. Their terminology illustrates that 'Move and Meet' has thought about racial, gender and disability discrimination, and that their activities are meant to promote empowerment for minority groups in Münster of all genders.

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 on social integration for women through sport (Verweyen 2019). The data is complemented by the analysis of secondary literature related to refugee 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 refugee women not yet tackled by governmental 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 coming to Germany from Ukraine.

'Moving and Meeting': Keeping up the Momentum for Long-Term Support of Refugee Women Through Tailor-Made Solutions

The overall purpose of the analysis of the collected data was to explore in what ways a sports club for refugee women run by volunteers can support integration. Refugee women face more challenges compared to men when moving to a new country. They are, for example, generally expected to take care of children and elderly family members, and they are at risk of exploitation and gender-based violence (Liebig and Tronstad). Therefore, voluntary sports clubs should be flexible, for example regarding the different languages members speak and their religions (Tuchel et al.). Notably, the services offered by 'Move and Meet' acknowledge both the multiple problems that refugee and migrant women from different sending countries face in their new host countries, and that members of a sport club may belong to diverse groups with their own specific needs and interests.

Garcés-Mascarenñas and Penninx define integration as "the process of becoming an accepted part of society" (14). While they argue that "policy matters, not only at the national level but also at the regional and local levels" (4), in this discourse, there is a tendency to neglect 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" (2).

Integration services, offered by the welfare state because 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, that 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 includes only a handful of clubs that offer integration work specifically for girls and women ('Stützpunktvereine'). It is significant to note that this database is only in German, indicating that on a national level, there is little sensitivity towards newly arrived refugees and migrants, who might not yet have the necessary German language skills to understand a page dedicated to sports. In contrast, the 'Move and Meet' website is bilingual (German and English), which comprises simple and short sentences in both languages. For a refugee and migrant woman to become "an accepted part of society," who can fully participate in all types of activities in her host country, integration services must focus more on developing policies and services that are adjusted for both local contexts and 'super-diverse' groups of migrants (Vertovec).

² The homepage of 'Move and Meet' is in both German and English. In this paper, the quotes are taken from the English version of the website. For their German texts, the club replaces generic masculine forms with gender-inclusive ones.

Agergaard points out that “in sports-related integration policies, sport is often depicted as a uniform instrument that is integrative as such” (2). If one is to consider the local specifics of a city like Münster, which is Germany’s most bicycle friendly (with 200,000 to 500,000 inhabitants) city (ADAC), it is crucial to provide refugee and migrant women with safe and affordable opportunities to learn how to ride a bicycle. Refugees all over the world often live in marginalised areas (Horwood and Jacobsen 164). Restrained mobility and financial poverty might mean that they cannot fully participate in daily social and professional life. ‘Move and Meet’ helps to improve the mobility of female refugee and migrants, who might not have had the chance to learn how to ride a bicycle in their home countries. This example indicates that the ‘Move and Meet’ team has 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 (bicycles as the local form of mobility) and super-diversification (varying origins of refugees and migrants).

Related to issues of limited mobility for refugee and migrant women living in the outskirts of the city, it can be noted that the team of ‘Move and Meet’ has been mindful of the challenges of physical activity participation as well as of the groups that need more support to participate in what they offer. In order to overcome the challenges of participation due to restrained mobility, the volunteers have become mobile themselves and started offering courses outside of Münster as well as directly in housing areas for refugees. As an example, from August 12 until September 30, 2022, ‘Move and Meet’ trainers taught women how to ride a bicycle in Coerde, a socially disadvantaged neighbourhood of Münster. Their website reads: “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). ‘Move and Meet’ thus does not wait for their participants to come to them, but they actively go to the participants, offering them free courses and free bicycles on which they can practice riding a bike, learn about German road regulations, become more mobile, independent and empowered for their future lives 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” (2). Recognising the cultural-specific needs of some refugee and migrant women and the importance of learning how to swim in safe places, ‘Move and Meet’ also offers

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swimming courses only for women. Both the Dortmund-Ems Canal and the Aasee in Münster are popular recreational areas. The team of ‘Move and Meet’, however, acknowledges that, for many people, swimming is not just a recreational or physical/sporty activity, but a life skill. If refugee and migrant women are not offered safe empowering spaces that are considerate of gender and religious differences, then they might be at risk locally. 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 people of the fact that currently, “swimming courses are fully booked. Interested swimmers are being placed on a waiting list” demonstrates 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 sports 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 practices 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 (568).

Timing is generally important for the ‘Move and Meet’ team. In an interview, Verweyen points out that there are many issues that need to be considered when deciding for the course time slots offered for refugee and migrant women. She explains that, ultimately, due to many family obligations, childcare, as well as 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 outside. The team that organises the course timetable must thus take all these requirements into consideration. As a result of this, most of the courses that are offered in the city centre of Münster take place roughly between four and five pm.

As Verweyen points out, many women in their club are responsible for childcare. Verweyen writes that during a relaxation or yoga course in the past, it was distracting for women to have their children with them (2019, 568).

Accordingly, many courses currently offered by 'Move and Meet' also offer babysitting opportunities in rooms adjacent to the sports halls. In this respect, 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 several ways" (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 can be tackled. By taking part in sports, networking and advocacy activities – particularly those who are single caretakers like many Ukrainian women who are arriving in Germany – female refugees and migrants can encourage their children to understand the long-term importance of exercise.

Conclusion: We Can Win This Together by Empowering Female Ukrainian Refugees

This study has presented insights into how a volunteer-run sports club for female refugees and migrants offer activities to promote long-term integration. The 'Move and Meet' team recognizes that refugee and migrant women are a diverse group that faces complex challenges in local contexts. Applying these findings to a broader scale, one of the main conclusions is that integration support services must make efforts to meet the specific needs of various groups of refugees. This means thinking about differences in terms of specific characteristics such as gender, ability and disability, age, cultural and ethnic background as well as language skills. It has been noted that, to find sustainable solutions for their local integration through physical and social activities, this civil society organization has thoroughly analysed modern day's super-diversification as well as the real-world needs of refugee and migrant women in Münster. 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. This suggests that smaller, local civil society organizations may contribute to finding solutions to obstacles faced by refugees and migrants that have not yet been adequately addressed by wider national support services. Where the state may

has not yet have implemented changes that meet the needs of super-diverse refugees in Germany, civil society may propose innovative projects for integration. This study has shown that by investing in gender and culturally specific activities, female refugees and migrants learn valuable new skills, 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, the state of NRW, the national government, and it receives idealistic support by local companies and institutions. This sports initiative is thus exemplary of the crucial relationship between civil society, private businesses and the state. Working in cooperation and in support of the state, the club promotes integration. The volunteers offer courses in which female members of all backgrounds can move and grow together, instead of playing against each other in opposing teams. This is a good metaphor for the collaboration that welfare states should enhance. They should increase movement, dialogue and partnerships with civil society actors to find lasting solutions to the refugee crisis. The way civil society is globally responding to refugee crisis has a strong influence on migration policy. Ultimately, the positive momentum of the civil society can help other teams stay focused on creating durable solutions for refugee empowerment.

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