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Review Article

Examining Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Women's Experiences of Sport and Physical Activity: A Qualitative Systematic Review

Ahmet Yasuntimur[1*]

[1]Social Sciences Institute, İnönü University, Malatya-44050, Türkiye.
*Correspondence: Ahmet Yasuntimur; ahmetyasuntimur@gmail.com

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Abstract

Processes of forced migration and resettlement substantially shape women's access to sport and physical activity, as well as the meanings they attribute to these experiences, through a range of social, cultural, and structural conditions. This qualitative systematic review aimed to systematically examine refugee and asylum-seeking women's experiences of participation in sport and physical activity based on findings from qualitative research. The review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, and the Web of Science, Scopus, and PubMed databases were searched on June 5, 2026. A total of 1,075 records were identified. Following duplicate removal and title/abstract screening, 14 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, of which 12 studies were included in the qualitative synthesis. The comparative synthesis identified six overarching themes: physical activity experiences transformed by migration, multilevel barriers to participation, safe and supportive participation environments, physical and psychological well-being, reconstruction of identity, and social connection and belonging. The findings indicate that women's experiences of sport and physical activity were constrained by financial limitations, transportation barriers, caregiving responsibilities, language difficulties, gender norms, cultural expectations, and uncertainties associated with the asylum process. In contrast, women-only and culturally responsive spaces, flexible programme structures, transportation and childcare support, and participatory programme design facilitated access and participation. Sport and physical activity provided meaningful experiences in relation to coping with stress, bodily awareness, self-confidence, autonomy, social connection, and a sense of belonging. Overall, the findings demonstrate that refugee and asylum-seeking women's participation in physical activity should be understood not solely in terms of individual motivation, but in conjunction with the broader social and structural conditions that shape opportunities for participation.

Keywords: Refugee women, Asylum-seeking women, Forced migration, Sport, Physical activity, Qualitative systematic review.

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Introduction

The Forced migration is a multidimensional process that extends beyond a mere change in individuals' geographical environment, reshaping their everyday ways of living, social relationships, health-related behaviours, and opportunities to access public spaces (Enderle, 2024; Murray et al., 2022; Rishbeth et al., 2019; Ryom et al., 2022). For refugee and asylum-seeking women, the resettlement process may unfold within a set of intersecting conditions, including financial constraints, uncertainties related to the asylum process, transportation difficulties, caregiving responsibilities, and gender-based

expectations (Haith-Cooper et al., 2018; Phipps et al., 2025; Spaaij et al., 2024). Alongside these changes, walking and other forms of physical movement that may have constituted a natural part of everyday life prior to migration have been reported to decrease or take different forms following resettlement (Guerin et al., 2003; Persson et al., 2014).

Refugee and asylum-seeking women's participation in physical activity cannot be understood solely in terms of individual motivation or health knowledge. Everyday living conditions, such as financial resources, transportation, childcare, and domestic responsibilities, may constrain women's participation in physical activity (Guerin et al., 2003; Haith-Cooper et al., 2018). In addition, gender expectations, pressures arising from family and cultural contexts, religious requirements, and considerations related to privacy may shape women's experiences of sport and physical activity (Guerin et al., 2003; Phipps et al., 2025). These conditions are not experienced uniformly by all women; rather, women may negotiate cultural, religious, and gender-related expectations through a range of different strategies (Truskewycz et al., 2022).

At the same time, sport and physical activity should not be conceptualised solely as behaviours associated with physical health or fitness. Some refugee and asylum-seeking women have described physical activity as a meaningful experience that enables temporary relief from everyday stress and negative thoughts related to the past, promotes relaxation, and facilitates renewed engagement with the body (Hurly, 2019; Verreault, 2017). Acquiring new physical skills has also been shown to be associated with women's experiences of self-confidence and independence (Lindahl et al., 2025). Similarly, group-based sport and physical activity settings can create social spaces in which women develop relationships, establish mutual support, and connect with others (Hurly, 2019; Knappe et al., 2025).

However, these positive experiences do not arise automatically through sport and physical activity; rather, the characteristics of the environments in which participation takes place appear to be important. The provision of women-only spaces that respect privacy, the adaptation of activities to cultural and everyday needs, consideration of childcare responsibilities, and the involvement of women in programme development may enhance accessibility and support participation (Knappe et al., 2025; Simonsen & Ryom, 2023). Accordingly, whether sport and physical activity become meaningful and sustainable experiences for women depends not only on the availability of activities but also on how and under what conditions those activities are provided.

Despite the potential of sport to contribute to social inclusion, well-being, and empowerment, physical activity should not be assumed to automatically eliminate the broader structural inequalities faced by refugee and asylum-seeking women (Knappe et al., 2025; Phipps et al., 2025). Women may continue to encounter gender-based expectations, family and community pressures, limitations in time and financial resources, discrimination, and uncertainties associated with the resettlement process both within sport settings and in accessing opportunities for participation (Phipps et al., 2025; Spaaij et al., 2024). Therefore, understanding the meaning of physical activity in the lives of refugee and asylum-seeking women requires attention not only to levels of participation, but also to how women make sense of these experiences and to the social, cultural, and structural conditions that enable or constrain participation.

In this context, previous qualitative syntheses examining the intersection of sport and physical activity with migration experiences (El Masri et al., 2021; Jolof et al., 2022; Middleton et al., 2020) have made important contributions to the field, but their scope has

been subject to several limitations. Middleton et al. (2020) synthesised qualitative research on the sport and physical activity experiences of forcibly displaced populations, identifying the benefits of participation, barriers to engagement, and the role of sport in social integration; however, women's experiences were not examined as a distinct analytical focus. El Masri et al. (2021), in contrast, examined factors influencing physical activity participation among Arab migrants through qualitative studies. However, because their review included both women and men and did not use forced migration status as a core inclusion criterion, it did not provide a synthesis specifically focused on refugee and asylum-seeking women. Jolof et al. (2022), who focused on women's experiences of forced migration, provided a comprehensive qualitative synthesis of women's changing living conditions, health-related outcomes, and sources of resilience; nevertheless, the review did not examine sport and physical activity experiences and focused predominantly on experiences occurring before and during migration. Consequently, there remains a need for a women-specific qualitative synthesis that examines refugee and asylum-seeking women's experiences of sport and physical activity not only in terms of barriers and facilitators to participation, but also in relation to physical and psychological well-being, autonomy, social connection, and belonging. Systematically bringing together qualitative findings grounded in women's own accounts may contribute to a more holistic understanding of the barriers to participation as well as the conditions that facilitate engagement, women's physical and psychological experiences, processes of self-confidence and autonomy, and experiences of social connection and belonging. Therefore, the aim of this systematic review was to systematically examine refugee and asylum-seeking women's experiences of participation in sport and physical activity through findings from qualitative research.

Material and Methods

Literature Search and Study Identification

In accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) 2020 guidelines, the identification, screening, and selection of studies were conducted systematically (Page et al., 2021). The literature search was conducted on 5 June 2026 using three electronic databases: Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, and PubMed. The search strategy was developed around three main conceptual domains relevant to the review question: (1) refugees and asylum seekers, (2) women, and (3) sport and physical activity.

The search terms included combinations and variations of keywords such as refugee, asylum seeker, asylee, forced migrant, refugee background, woman/women, female, mother, sport, physical activity, exercise, fitness, recreation, leisure, football, soccer, cycling, walking, running, dance, and active transport. Boolean operators (AND/OR), truncation, phrase searching, and database-specific field tags were used to tailor the search strategy to each database. In Web of Science, searches were conducted within the Title field; in Scopus, the TITLE-ABS-KEY field was searched; and in PubMed, free-text Title/Abstract terms were combined with relevant Medical Subject Headings (MeSH). The PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the study identification and selection process is presented in Figure 1.

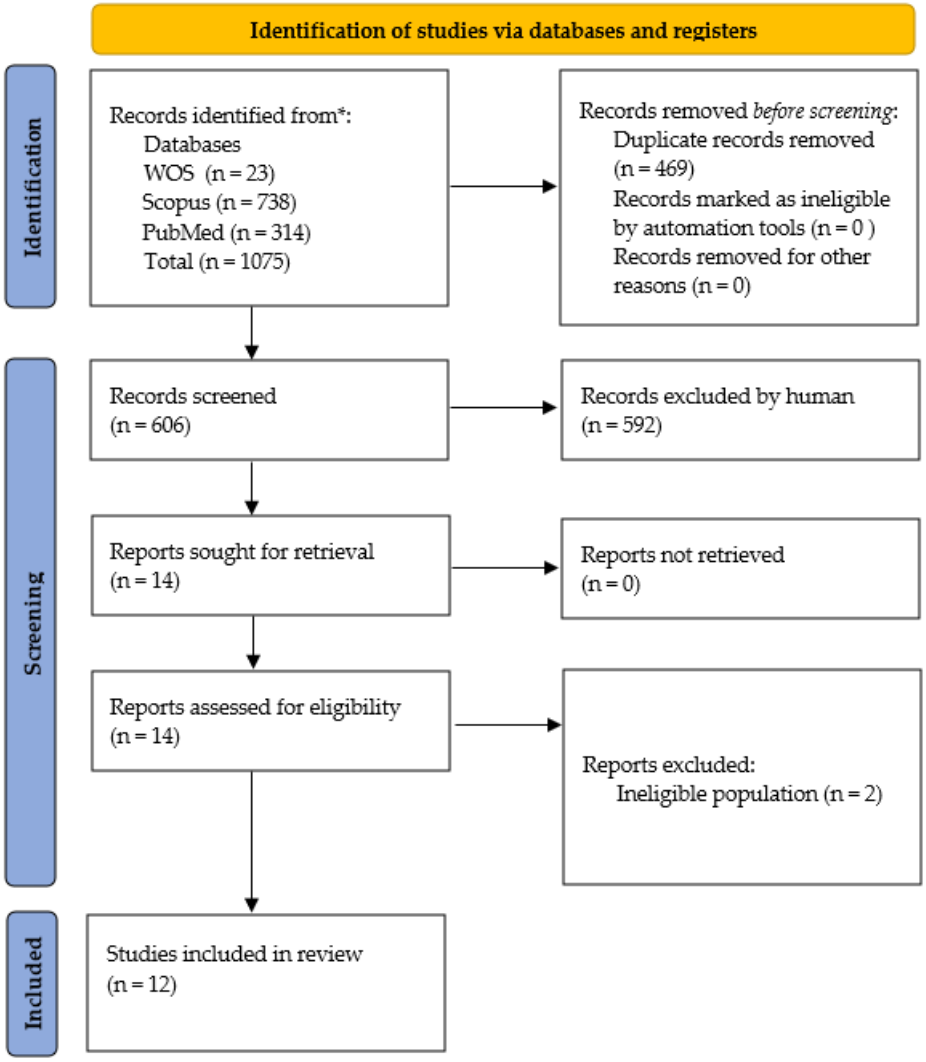

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

Eligibility Criteria for Studies Included in the Analysis

To be eligible for inclusion in the review, studies were required to meet the following criteria: participants had to be women aged 18 years or older who were refugees, asylum seekers, forcibly displaced migrants, or explicitly identified as having a refugee background; the study had to examine at least one form of sport, exercise, physical activity, fitness, football, cycling, walking, or physically active recreation/leisure; and it had to provide qualitative data on women's experiences of participation, barriers, facilitators, access, belonging, social connection, identity, social inclusion/exclusion, or related experiential processes.

Studies were also required to be original qualitative research or mixed-methods studies in which the qualitative findings could be independently extracted. Eligible studies had to employ at least one recognised qualitative data collection approach, including interviews, focus groups, ethnography, participant observation, Photovoice, phenomenology, narrative inquiry, participatory action research, or other established qualitative methods, and had to be published as original research articles in peer-reviewed journals.

Studies with mixed-gender samples were considered eligible only when qualitative findings relating specifically to women participants could be identified separately. Similarly, studies examining refugees together with other migrant groups were included only when findings pertaining specifically to refugee or asylum-seeking women could be independently extracted. No restrictions were imposed on publication year or country, and the databases were searched from inception to the date of the final search.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies focusing exclusively on women who were economic or voluntary migrants, where participants' refugee or asylum-seeking status could not be established, were excluded. Similarly, studies were excluded if their samples consisted solely of children or adolescent girls; if they included mixed-gender samples without reporting findings for women separately; or if findings pertaining to refugee or asylum-seeking women could not be distinguished from those relating to other migrant groups.

Studies that did not provide direct and independently extractable qualitative data related to sport or physical activity were also excluded. Research examining only the perspectives of coaches, programme providers, policymakers, healthcare professionals, or representatives of non-governmental organisations regarding refugee women, rather than the experiences of refugee or asylum-seeking women themselves, was considered ineligible.

In addition, studies employing exclusively quantitative methods, mixed-methods studies from which qualitative findings could not be independently extracted, systematic reviews, meta-syntheses, scoping reviews, narrative reviews, editorials, commentaries, research protocols, book chapters, and studies published only as conference abstracts were excluded from the analysis.

Data Analysis

The findings of the studies included in the qualitative synthesis were analysed using a comparative and iterative approach. Qualitative findings directly related to refugee and asylum-seeking women's experiences of sport and physical activity were identified in each study and brought together for synthesis. In studies with mixed-gender samples, only findings that could be clearly attributed to women participants were considered. Likewise, in studies including refugees together with other migrant groups, only findings that could be specifically distinguished as relating to refugee or asylum-seeking women were included in the synthesis. During the synthesis process, the findings of the included studies were repeatedly reviewed and compared across studies. Findings reflecting similar experiences were considered together, while differences arising across social, cultural, and resettlement contexts were retained. The comparison focused on women's understandings of physical activity and changes in movement patterns following migration; individual, social, and structural conditions constraining participation; programme and environmental characteristics facilitating participation; the relationship between physical activity and physical and psychological experiences; experiences related to self-confidence, autonomy, and identity; and findings concerning social connection and belonging. Through comparison of findings with similar content and meaning across studies, both shared and context-specific patterns were identified and integrated into broader thematic categories. The final synthesis generated six overarching themes: (1) physical activity experiences transformed by migration, (2) multilevel barriers to participation, (3) safe and supportive participation environments, (4) physical and psychological well-being, (5) reconstruction of identity, and (6) social connection and belonging. In interpreting the

findings, attention was given not only to recurring similarities across studies but also to differences associated with participant characteristics, forced migration and resettlement contexts, types of sport and physical activity, and the conditions under which programmes were delivered. Accordingly, the synthesis was based on the comparative interpretation of similarities, differences, and experiential patterns across the included studies rather than on the quantitative calculation of the frequency of individual findings.

Results

The findings of the 12 studies included in this systematic review illustrate refugee and asylum-seeking women's experiences of sport and physical activity across diverse social, cultural, and resettlement contexts. The included studies employed a range of qualitative methods, including interviews, focus groups, ethnographic observation, autoethnography, phenomenological approaches, and participatory research. In addition to identifying barriers and facilitators shaping women's participation in physical activity, the studies reported findings related to well-being, social connection, belonging, autonomy, and embodied experiences. Through the comparative synthesis of the qualitative data derived from the included studies, both shared and context-specific patterns explaining women's experiences of sport and physical activity were identified. The characteristics of the included studies are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics and Key Findings of Studies Included in the Qualitative Synthesis

Study	Country	Participants	Sport / Physical Activity	Qualitative Design, Data Collection, and Analysis	Key Findings
Lindahl et al. (2025)	Denmark	24 resettled Syrian refugees; 14 women; aged 30–50 years	Group exercise, therapeutic exercise, cycling	Participatory action research; field notes and 3 focus groups; phenomenological/Giorgi-inspired analysis	Participants valued enjoyable physical activities, body awareness, and a sense of togetherness. Therapeutic exercise was associated with pain relief and increased confidence in using the body. Among women who completed cycling training, learning to cycle enhanced self-confidence and independence and was viewed as a means of independent transportation, family activity, and access to employment opportunities.
Abooali (2022)	Iran–Bangladesh–Canada–USA	n = 1 adult woman; former asylum seeker and recognised refugee; exact age not reported	Traditional karate / martial arts	Autoethnography; research journal, parental interviews, and visual materials; phenomenological analysis	Traditional karate was experienced as a highly sensory and embodied practice that provided a safe space through which experiences associated with forced migration could be explored and reinterpreted. The study highlights the importance of bodily and sensory experience, safety, and the management of tension and creative risk in sport-based interventions.
Hartley et al. (2017)	Australia	29 adult asylum seekers; 6 women and 23 men	Walking, swimming, and other physical activities	Semi-structured in-depth interviews; inductive	Physical activity could provide a coping strategy for managing prolonged uncertainty and psychological distress, but restrictive living conditions substantially

				thematic analysis	constrained participation. Of the six women interviewed, only one was actively engaged in physical activity, primarily through walking and swimming when affordable. Financial hardship and the broader conditions of seeking asylum limited opportunities for participation.
Enderle & Ravensbergen (2026)	Germany	10 women, aged 26–45 years; from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, India, Tunisia, and Somalia; migration pathways described as forced migration and resettlement trajectories	Learning to cycle and active transport	Qualitative case study; 10 narrative interviews, participant observation, and field notes; hybrid thematic analysis	Learning to cycle was associated with increased confidence, altered perceptions of personal capability, and new possibilities for everyday mobility. The women-only, low-threshold, and non-hierarchical structure of Bike Bridge supported safe relational environments, mutual encouragement, social connection, and relational autonomy. Community support was important, although it could not substitute for broader structural change.
Haith-Cooper et al. (2018)	Northern England	36 asylum seekers; 20 women; overall sample aged 18–59 years; participants from 18 countries	Physical activity and exercise	Two-stage qualitative study; semi-structured interviews and nominal group technique; TDF-based framework analysis	Participation was shaped by the stress of the asylum process, living in uncertainty, poverty, lack of knowledge about local facilities, weather, time constraints, childcare, and social and cultural influences. Previous physical activity experience and awareness of its physical and mental health benefits could facilitate participation. Some women described gendered and social restrictions on physical activity prior to migration, whereas living in the UK was perceived as offering greater opportunities.
Verreault (2017)	Netherlands	8 women, aged 19–50 years; 2 refugees and 6 asylum seekers	Dance/Movement Therapy	Exploratory phenomenological study; observation, post-session focus groups, 2 in-depth interviews, and memory roll	Dance/Movement Therapy supported body awareness, grounding, relaxation, present-moment awareness, and recognition of bodily and emotional boundaries. Safety emerged as a central condition of participation. Moving together also fostered togetherness, social support, creative expression, and opportunities to draw on cultural and spiritual resources.
Simonsen & Ryom (2023)	Denmark	Phase 1: 4 Syrian refugee women; Phase 2: additionally, 1 female refugee representative; women aged 20–40 years	Everyday physical activity, walking, cycling, fitness, dance, and co-designed activities	CBPR/action research; focus group, interview, and workshop; inductive open and content coding	Women understood physical activity broadly, including everyday movement, recreational activities, and activities undertaken with family members. They expressed awareness of its benefits and a desire to be active in various ways and with others. An "expectation gap" emerged between women's preferences and providers' assumptions, highlighting co-creation as an important strategy

					for developing contextually appropriate opportunities.
Hashimoto-Govindasamy & Rose (2011)	Australia	12 Sudanese refugee women, aged 25–41 years; mean age 31 years	8-week exercise programme; walking, dance, volleyball, swimming, etc.	Ethnographic process evaluation; participant-as-observer field notes and interpretive group interview; framework approach	Women viewed the programme positively, particularly because it provided educational opportunities and respite from everyday demands. Transport and childcare support were considered essential for participation. Broader resettlement stressors included acculturation, housing difficulties, language learning, limited employment opportunities, and family separation, underscoring the need for sustainable and culturally responsive programmes that build on women's existing strengths.
Knappe et al. (2025)	Greece	54 forcibly displaced individuals; 24 women; age categories: 16–25, 26–35, and >35 years	Co-designed fitness, dance, ball sports, and combat sports	Ethnographic qualitative research; 13 focus groups and 6 semi-structured interviews; reflexive thematic analysis	Reception-centre conditions created inactivity, monotony, uncertainty, and psychological strain. Co-designed exercise and sport provided temporary mental relief, helped participants leave their accommodation units, created a sense of movement and progress, and supported social interaction and personal growth. Co-design particularly improved accessibility for women and older participants, although sport could not resolve the structural conditions underlying camp life.
Guerin et al. (2003)	New Zealand	37 interviewed Somali refugee women; mean age 33 years, range 17–67 years	Women-only exercise classes, fitness centre activities, walking, and sports groups	Semi-structured interviews, observations, and informal conversations	Women generally enjoyed the physical activity opportunities, but participation was strongly influenced by childcare, transportation, cultural and religious considerations, privacy, and programme location. Childcare was the most frequently reported barrier to both community exercise classes and fitness-centre attendance. Findings also demonstrated that women differed in their preferences, indicating that programmes should be adapted through ongoing consultation rather than assuming a single culturally appropriate model.
Truskewycz et al. (2022)	Australia	11 women of African background, aged 18–24 years; 6 explicitly identified as refugees	Football	Constructivist narrative design; interviews and focus groups; thematic narrative analysis / social-ecological framework	Women's football participation was shaped by intersecting cultural, religious, gendered, familial, and migration-related influences. Although participants experienced varying levels of sociocultural pressure and bicultural tension, they actively negotiated these conditions using different personal and social resources,

					demonstrating agency in sustaining their participation in football.
Hurly (2019)	Canada	3 adult former refugee women from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo; exact ages not reported	Walking, cycling, dance, active play with children, and nature-based active leisure	Hermeneutic phenomenology; semi-structured interviews	Physically active leisure was associated with fitness, enjoyment, restoration, and temporary relief from stress and traumatic memories. Nature-based activities undertaken with family, friends, and ethnocultural communities supported relationships and social networks. Leisure experiences were also closely connected to faith, companionship, learning, and community belonging.

Note: n = number of participants/sample size; PA = physical activity; CBPR = Community-Based Participatory Research; TDF = Theoretical Domains Framework; DRC = Democratic Republic of the Congo.

As shown in Table 1, the included studies were conducted across different countries, diverse forced migration and resettlement contexts, and a range of physical activity forms. Despite this variation in sample characteristics and research designs, the findings point to intersecting and recurring patterns in women's experiences of physical activity. The qualitative synthesis organised these patterns under the following themes: physical activity experiences transformed by migration, multidimensional barriers and facilitators shaping participation, conditions of programme delivery, physical and psychological well-being, self-confidence and autonomy, and social connection and belonging. These themes are presented sequentially below.

Physical Activity Experiences Transformed by Migration

Women's understandings of physical activity were not limited to planned exercise or organised sport; everyday mobility, household tasks, walking, transportation, family-based activities, and recreational forms of movement were also understood as part of physical activity (Simonsen & Ryom, 2023; Haith-Cooper et al., 2018). Syrian refugee women considered not only sport, cycling, and fitness, but also gardening, everyday transportation, household chores, and movement involved in caring for children as forms of physical activity (Simonsen & Ryom, 2023). Similarly, women participants in Haith-Cooper et al. (2018) described everyday activities such as cleaning, cooking, ironing, and walking instead of using transport as exercise or physical activity.

Migration and resettlement altered not only the amount of physical activity but also the ways in which movement was embedded in everyday life (Hashimoto-Govindasamy & Rose, 2011; Guerin et al., 2003; Simonsen & Ryom, 2023). Sudanese refugee women reported that structured exercise had not been a prominent concept in their lives in Sudan and that physical movement had largely occurred through everyday activities. Following resettlement in Australia, however, they perceived a more sedentary lifestyle as having negative effects on their health (Hashimoto-Govindasamy & Rose, 2011). Accounts from adult Somali women likewise indicated that everyday life in Africa involved more walking due to farming, shopping, and other daily needs, whereas car use, traffic, climate, and lifestyle changes in New Zealand reduced this everyday mobility (Guerin et al., 2003). Syrian women's physical activity experiences in both Syria and Denmark were also shaped primarily by everyday movement, family activities, walking, and recreation, while experience with organised sports clubs remained limited (Simonsen & Ryom, 2023).

At the same time, previously acquired sporting experiences provided a familiar source of continuity in post-migration life for some women (Truskewycz et al., 2022; Haith-Cooper et al., 2018). In Truskewycz et al. (2022), a South Sudanese participant explicitly identified as having refugee status associated the opportunity to participate in football, netball, rugby, and similar activities in Australia with feelings of relief, pride, and being able to do something she loved. Similarly, women participants in Haith-Cooper et al. (2018) reported previous experience with physical education and various sports before migration and indicated that these earlier skills shaped their desire to engage in physical activity.

Multilevel Barriers to Participation

Women's participation in physical activity was constrained not by a single factor, but by the intersection of psychological well-being, financial resources, time, transportation, language, caregiving responsibilities, gender expectations, and the characteristics of physical activity environments (Guerin et al., 2003; Hashimoto-Govindasamy & Rose, 2011; Hartley et al., 2017; Haith-Cooper et al., 2018; Hurly, 2019; Simonsen & Ryom, 2023; Knappe et al., 2025). In particular, the uncertainty and psychological burden associated with the asylum process were linked to reduced energy and motivation to engage in physical activity among some women (Haith-Cooper et al., 2018; Knappe et al., 2025). One woman in Haith-Cooper et al. (2018) described how stress related to the asylum process sometimes made it difficult even to get out of bed and move. Women aged 26–35 years in Knappe et al. (2025), meanwhile, associated the monotony of life in the reception centre, limited opportunities for activity, and prolonged waiting related to the asylum process with inactivity, low morale, and the repetitiveness of everyday life.

Financial constraints and transportation difficulties also limited access to physical activity opportunities (Guerin et al., 2003; Hartley et al., 2017; Simonsen & Ryom, 2023). Of the six female asylum seekers in Hartley et al. (2017), only one was actively engaged in walking and attended swimming sessions during weeks when she could afford to do so; she explicitly described the cost of swimming as a determining factor within her budget. In Simonsen and Ryom (2023), in addition to financial and transportation barriers, cold weather, fatigue, back pain, lack of time and mental energy, limited skills, and language difficulties were identified as factors preventing women from being more physically active. In Guerin et al. (2003), transportation difficulties were also among the main practical barriers to participation, particularly because the women-only fitness facility was located far from participants' residential areas.

Childcare and domestic responsibilities reduced both the time women could devote to physical activity and their freedom of movement across different contexts (Guerin et al., 2003; Hashimoto-Govindasamy & Rose, 2011; Haith-Cooper et al., 2018; Hurly, 2019). In Guerin et al. (2003), childcare was among the most frequently reported reasons for not attending either exercise classes at the community centre or the fitness facility. Sudanese refugee women explicitly stated that childcare provision and door-to-door transportation support were necessary for continued participation in the programme (Hashimoto-Govindasamy & Rose, 2011). In Haith-Cooper et al. (2018), the time demands of family life and the absence of support with childcare made participation in physical activity more difficult. Similarly, in Hurly (2019), the combined demands of employment, housework, and childcare reduced women's leisure time, while lack of access to childcare limited some women's ability to leave the home. Hartley et al. (2017) reported that four of the women were responsible for childcare; however, because participants did not explicitly identify

this as a direct barrier to physical activity, it should be interpreted as a contextual finding rather than as a directly reported barrier.

Gender, religion, and cultural norms did not emerge as fixed barriers operating uniformly across women's experiences; rather, they appeared as conditions that were negotiated in different ways by different women (Guerin et al., 2003; Haith-Cooper et al., 2018; Truskewycz et al., 2022; Knappe et al., 2025). In Truskewycz et al. (2022), women identified as refugees negotiated community expectations that football was incompatible with femininity, family pressure, and considerations related to religious dress in different ways. Some participants constructed a positive relationship between football and faith, whereas others expressed religious concerns about the visibility of the body and hair. Some women in Haith-Cooper et al. (2018) reported that gendered and social conditions prior to migration had restricted their participation in sport, while they perceived greater opportunities for physical activity after arriving in the United Kingdom. In Knappe et al. (2025), one adult woman described her husband's support as facilitating her participation in sport; the study also highlighted the need for women-only activities, private spaces, and appropriate scheduling. The accounts of adult women in Guerin et al. (2003) further demonstrated variation in women's preferences regarding music, clothing, prayer times, and privacy.

Safe and Supportive Participation Environments

One of the recurring features facilitating women's access to physical activity was the extent to which programmes attended to physical and cultural safety and were adapted to women's everyday circumstances (Guerin et al., 2003; Hashimoto-Govindasamy & Rose, 2011; Verreault, 2017; Knappe et al., 2025; Lindahl et al., 2025; Enderle & Ravensbergen, 2026). In Guerin et al. (2003), Somali women considered women-only exercise spaces that were not visible to men to be particularly important; modifying the doors and windows of the community centre to ensure privacy created an environment in which women felt comfortable and safe. The same study also showed that some women were concerned about encountering derogatory comments or discriminatory behaviour while walking in public spaces, indicating that social visibility, as well as physical safety, influenced the conditions of participation (Guerin et al., 2003).

In Verreault (2017), safety emerged as a central theme in women's experiences of Dance/Movement Therapy. Respecting physical and emotional boundaries, introducing movements gradually, incorporating body-awareness and grounding practices, and maintaining a balance between movement and rest supported women's sense of safety. Through movement, participants were able to express themselves non-verbally and connect with other group members while remaining attentive to their own bodily boundaries. Similarly, in Enderle and Ravensbergen (2026), the women-focused, low-threshold, and non-hierarchical structure of the Bike Bridge programme created an environment that enabled supportive relationships to develop among peers, instructors, and volunteers.

Adapting programmes to women's needs was associated not only with cultural responsiveness but also with involving participants in programme design and development (Simonsen & Ryom, 2023; Knappe et al., 2025; Lindahl et al., 2025). In Simonsen and Ryom (2023), an "expectation gap" between Syrian women's preferences and sport providers' assumptions became visible through the co-creation process, and women's preferences for being physically active together, with other women, or with family members contributed to shaping programme recommendations. In Knappe et al. (2025), the co-design process resulted in concrete adaptations such as women-only combat-sport activities,

gender-segregated sessions, private exercise spaces, childcare provision, and scheduling arrangements that did not conflict with responsibilities such as meal preparation. In Lindahl et al. (2025), women's expressed desire to learn to cycle directly led to the development of a separate cycling programme, which was progressively adapted to their existing levels of experience.

Practical forms of support such as transportation and childcare also emerged not as peripheral additions to physical activity programmes, but as fundamental conditions enabling women to access them in practice (Guerin et al., 2003; Hashimoto-Govindasamy & Rose, 2011; Knappe et al., 2025). Sudanese women stated that participation would have been very difficult without organised transportation and childcare support, while transportation and childcare also directly influenced continued participation among Somali women (Hashimoto-Govindasamy & Rose, 2011; Guerin et al., 2003). In the intervention described by Knappe et al. (2025), providing childcare and scheduling activities at times compatible with women's domestic responsibilities were among the concrete adaptations used to improve women's access to sport.

Physical and Psychological Well-Being

Physical activity was experienced by women across different contexts as a means of temporarily distancing themselves from stressful thoughts, relaxing, and achieving a sense of mental renewal (Hashimoto-Govindasamy & Rose, 2011; Verreault, 2017; Haith-Cooper et al., 2018; Hurly, 2019; Knappe et al., 2025). In Hurly (2019), physically active leisure activities such as walking, cycling, and dancing were associated by women with relaxation, freedom, mental refreshment, and stress relief. Walking or cycling, in particular, was described as providing temporary distance from negative thoughts related to the past and allowing women to return home with a "fresher" mind. Walking and other forms of active leisure undertaken in natural environments were also associated with temporarily setting aside worries, relaxation, and restoration (Hurly, 2019).

Similarly, in the accounts of women undergoing the asylum process, walking and sport emerged as means of coping with everyday stress (Haith-Cooper et al., 2018; Knappe et al., 2025). Women participants in Haith-Cooper et al. (2018) used walking to regulate psychological distress; one participant reported that a long walk with a friend following a stressful development in her asylum process helped her to calm down and sleep better. In Knappe et al. (2025), an Afghan woman aged 26–35 years explained that while exercising she did not think about the recurring concerns of camp life, such as money, food, and the asylum decision, and that participation created a period of time that was "just for themselves." The study also emphasised that this relief was temporary and that the conditions of camp life remained unchanged once the activity ended (Knappe et al., 2025).

The relationship between bodily movement and well-being was not limited to mental distraction; some studies also reported changes in body awareness, relaxation, and a sense of bodily control (Verreault, 2017; Abooali, 2022). In Verreault (2017), body-awareness practices, grounding, creative movement, and relaxation were associated with stress relief, being in the "here and now," recognising bodily boundaries, and regaining a sense of control over the body. At the same time, participants also experienced pain, fatigue, and difficulty initiating movement, highlighting the importance of adapting activities to participants' individual levels of tolerance (Verreault, 2017). In Abooali's (2022) autoethnography, the continued practice of traditional karate in adulthood was described as a safe space in which the embodied and sensory traces of forced migration could be reinterpreted and experiences of achievement and belonging could emerge.

Group-based physical activities also appeared to support psychological relief and cultural continuity simultaneously (Hashimoto-Govindasamy & Rose, 2011; Verreault, 2017). Sudanese refugee women reported that cultural practices such as singing and dancing enabled them to temporarily "forget" past difficulties while also reconnecting with their cultural identity (Hashimoto-Govindasamy & Rose, 2011). In Verreault (2017), the incorporation of prayer postures, dance, culturally meaningful movements, and rituals into movement therapy enabled women to integrate cultural and spiritual resources with embodied experience.

Reconstruction of Identity

The acquisition of new physical skills and the experience of accomplishing movements that had previously been perceived as unattainable were associated with strengthened perceptions of personal competence among women (Verreault, 2017; Abooali, 2022; Knappe et al., 2025; Lindahl et al., 2025; Enderle & Ravensbergen, 2026). This pattern was particularly evident in experiences of learning to cycle (Lindahl et al., 2025; Enderle & Ravensbergen, 2026). In Lindahl et al. (2025), three Syrian women who completed cycling training reported that learning to ride a bicycle increased their self-confidence and sense of independence; one woman stated that being able to cycle alone in traffic made her feel stronger and more self-assured. The women viewed cycling not only as a form of exercise, but also as a functional means of independent transportation, an activity that could be shared with family members, and a way of accessing employment opportunities such as home-based care work (Lindahl et al., 2025).

In Enderle and Ravensbergen (2026), learning to cycle was similarly associated with women's self-confidence and with perceiving themselves as capable individuals. Some participants described how learning to cycle encouraged them to engage in other activities, such as swimming, or renewed their motivation to learn the local language. The study further showed that autonomy did not arise solely from individual independence, but developed within supportive relationships involving instructors, peers, volunteers, and community members (Enderle & Ravensbergen, 2026).

Experiencing achievement through movement and acquiring new skills were also associated with a sense of mastery and self-efficacy in Verreault (2017). In Knappe et al. (2025), sport activities enabled participants to feel that they were making progress, accomplishing things they had previously thought they could not do, and experiencing a sense of movement and advancement in contrast to the stagnation of camp life. A Somali woman aged 26–35 years associated beginning to participate in sport with being able to go outside and experience a sense of freedom.

In football-related experiences, autonomy and self-realisation were more visible in the ways women sustained their participation in sport while navigating social, familial, and religious expectations (Truskewycz et al., 2022). One participant explicitly identified as having refugee status described football as a space that belonged solely to her, allowing her to distance herself from external pressures for approximately one hour. Another participant associated the opportunity to engage in different sports in the new country with feelings of pride and with being able to do something she loved (Truskewycz et al., 2022). Other refugee participants sought to maintain their involvement in football through different strategies despite family or community criticism, expectations regarding religious dress, and limited family knowledge of sport systems (Truskewycz et al., 2022). Accordingly, autonomy within physical activity appears to be related not only to the acquisition

of physical skills, but also to the capacity to sustain one's own choices within social conditions that may constrain participation.

Social Connection and Belonging

Physical activity and movement-based programmes created social spaces in which women could build relationships with others and engage in shared activity under safe and supportive conditions (Hashimoto-Govindasamy & Rose, 2011; Verreault, 2017; Hurly, 2019; Knappe et al., 2025; Enderle & Ravensbergen, 2026). In Verreault (2017), moving together, movement circles, games, mirroring, and shared rituals supported a sense of "togetherness," while support, empathy, and social connection were fostered through movement. Sudanese refugee women likewise emphasised the importance of meeting friends and spending time together; however, they also reported that they continued attending the programme not only for social interaction, but also for educational and activity-related reasons such as learning English and participating in games and different forms of exercise (Hashimoto-Govindasamy & Rose, 2011).

In Hurly (2019), physically active leisure experiences such as walking, cycling, playing with children, and spending time in nature were closely intertwined with family and friendship relationships. Women described friendship not only as a form of socialisation, but also as a source of guidance, emotional support, and mutual assistance. Activities undertaken in natural environments with family and friends contributed not only to restoration but also to the maintenance of relationships. In Enderle and Ravensbergen (2026), Bike Bridge functioned as a community space in which women formed relationships with people they might not otherwise have encountered, developed social ties through shared cycling experiences, and, in some cases, later took on roles as volunteers or instructors.

Within the reception-centre context, sport also appeared to facilitate contact across different groups. In Knappe et al. (2025), an Afghan woman aged 36–54 years reported that the distance between different national groups gradually decreased following participation in sport activities and that mutual trust and a sense of being "like family" developed through these activities. At the same time, the study showed that sport did not automatically produce social integration, as communication difficulties and conflicts persisted among some participants. In Abooali's (2022) autoethnography, the dojo was similarly described as a space in adulthood where experiences of belonging, connection with others, and safe social and embodied interaction could emerge.

Discussion

The aim of this systematic review was to systematically examine refugee and asylum-seeking women's experiences of participation in sport and physical activity through findings from qualitative research. The first major finding of this review is that refugee and asylum-seeking women's physical activity experiences changed markedly between pre-migration and post-migration living conditions. Forms of movement that had previously occurred more naturally through everyday tasks, walking, transportation, and family life could become more structured, yet simultaneously more difficult to access, following resettlement. Enderle (2024) demonstrated that mismatches between the mobility practices refugee and asylum-seeking women had developed in their countries of origin and the urban mobility culture of the host country influenced women's cycling practices and everyday transportation choices in Germany. Similarly, Dawid (2025) reported that bicycle courses provided refugee and migrant women in Germany with new skills and mobility opportunities, although these gains did not always translate into routine cycling because of broader transportation and infrastructure conditions. A study of Somali

migrant women found that regular walking associated with shopping and everyday needs in Somalia decreased in Sweden as shopping became less frequent and transportation became easier, while leisure-time physical activity emerged as a relatively new practice after migration (Persson et al., 2014). Another study showed that recently resettled refugee women's experiences of physical activity were closely intertwined with everyday life and caregiving roles within the family, and that women could compromise their own physical activity in order to fulfil expected caregiving responsibilities (Ryom et al., 2022). These findings indicate that physical activity should be understood not merely as an individual behaviour, but in relation to changes in the social and spatial environments in which women live.

A second major finding is that participation in sport and physical activity is too multidimensional to be explained by any single barrier. Financial hardship, transportation difficulties, caregiving responsibilities, language barriers, uncertainty within the asylum process, psychological burden, gender expectations, and cultural or religious requirements often intersected to constrain women's opportunities for participation. Consistent with this finding, Phipps et al. (2025), examining the sport experiences of Afghan migrant and refugee women living in Iran, showed that family- and culture-based gender restrictions, limited time and financial resources, and discriminatory experiences simultaneously shaped women's access to sport. Spaaij et al. (2024) likewise demonstrated that the sporting experiences of Afghan women footballers resettled in Australia were shaped by gender-based constraints alongside uncertainty and instability associated with resettlement, requiring women to negotiate multiple interconnected constraints at the same time. The importance of financial and time-related barriers was also demonstrated by Yoshino et al. (2022) among Syrian refugees living in Jordan. High cost was the most frequently reported barrier to physical activity, lack of time was particularly prominent among physically inactive participants, and women had significantly lower levels of walking than men. In this context, explaining physical activity participation solely in terms of motivation or individual choice is insufficient; structural conditions must also be taken into account.

Another prominent finding of the review is that women's participation in physical activity may depend less on the activity itself than on how and under what conditions the programme is delivered. Ensuring privacy, providing women-only spaces, adapting programmes to cultural and everyday needs, supporting transportation and childcare, and involving women in programme design emerged as key factors facilitating participation. Consistent with these findings, El Masri et al. (2021) showed that a culturally tailored physical activity intervention for Arab-Australian women was highly acceptable to participants, particularly because of its women-only setting and culturally appropriate content. Similarly, Murray et al. (2021) reported that a culturally adapted physical activity intervention for Somali women, delivered in a community-based setting in both English and Somali and facilitated by research team members from the bicultural Somali community, was feasible and acceptable. They also found that time spent in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity increased significantly more in the intervention group than in the waitlist control group. The importance of involving participants in programme design was further demonstrated by McKeon et al. (2024) in a co-design study with refugees and asylum seekers, in which cultural and psychological safety, accessibility, and social connection were identified as central priorities for a new physical activity service. Accessibility, therefore, should not be understood solely as the physical ability to reach a programme,

but also as the creation of an environment in which women feel safe, accepted, and that their needs are recognised.

The findings further indicate that sport and physical activity are not associated solely with physical health for women, but also with coping with stress, gaining temporary mental distance from everyday concerns, relaxation, body awareness, and a sense of bodily control. Particularly in the context of uncertainty during the asylum process and the everyday stress associated with resettlement, movement created a temporary space of relief and reconnection with the self for some women. The findings indicate that sport and physical activity are not associated solely with physical health for women, but also with coping with stress, gaining mental distance from everyday concerns, relaxation, body awareness, and a sense of bodily control. Particularly in the context of uncertainty during the asylum process and the everyday stress associated with resettlement, movement created a temporary space of relief and reconnection with the self for some women. Consistent with these findings, Nilsson et al. (2019), in a qualitative study involving trauma-affected women and men with refugee backgrounds, showed that physical activity and exercise could provide a temporary break from everyday problems and stressful living conditions, with participants reporting relaxation, increased self-awareness and self-confidence, and a greater sense of bodily control. Persson et al. (2014), who reported women-specific findings, similarly found that Somali migrant women living in Sweden experienced considerable everyday stress after migration and viewed physical activity as an experience that could support health and well-being. However, the psychological and embodied benefits of physical activity should not be assumed to eliminate the structural problems women face. Indeed, Phipps et al. (2025) showed that even Afghan migrant and refugee women who were actively involved in sport continued to encounter gender norms, limitations in time and financial resources, and discriminatory experiences. Physical activity may therefore constitute an important resource for coping and well-being, but this experience does not occur in the same way for all women and cannot be understood independently of the social and structural conditions in which it takes place.

Another notable finding of the review is that acquiring new physical skills was associated with women's experiences of self-confidence, competence, and autonomy. Experiences such as learning to cycle, participating in sport, or successfully performing a movement that had previously been considered unattainable contributed to some women perceiving themselves as more capable and independent individuals. Consistent with the autonomy and agency dimensions of this finding, Spaaij et al. (2024) showed that Afghan women footballers resettled in Australia sustained their agency through football despite various gender-based and resettlement-related constraints, negotiating these limitations through creativity, resourcefulness, and the development of future aspirations. Similarly, Truskewycz et al. (2022) demonstrated that African refugee and migrant women were able to negotiate their participation in football by drawing on personal resources and skills despite cultural, religious, and gender-based pressures and tensions associated with navigating two cultures. Sport and physical activity may therefore be understood not only in terms of bodily performance, but also, under particular conditions, as experiences that expand women's everyday mobility, sense of independence, and capacity to act in accordance with their own choices.

Finally, physical activity and sport settings emerged as social spaces in which women could develop relationships, establish mutual support, and experience a sense of belonging. Group activities, moving together, shared experiences, and volunteering contributed to some women's ability to build connections both within their own communities and

with broader social networks. Consistent with these findings, Spaaij et al. (2024) showed that Afghan women footballers resettled in Australia experienced football as an important space for maintaining friendships and social connections. Similarly, Luguetti et al. (2022), in participatory action research with young African Australian women from refugee backgrounds, showed that participants experienced the power of collective action and the importance of having a voice within the programme. At the same time, sport should not be assumed to automatically produce social integration. In the same study, inadequate representation of women was identified as an important barrier to participation (Luguetti et al., 2022), while Afghan migrant and refugee women have also been shown to continue experiencing gender-based constraints, limitations in time and financial resources, and racist and discriminatory behaviour within sporting environments (Phipps et al., 2025). The opportunities that sport provides for social connection and belonging must therefore be understood as dependent on the social relationships and broader structural conditions within which participation occurs.

This review also has several limitations. First, restricting the literature search to three databases—Web of Science, Scopus, and PubMed—does not eliminate the possibility that relevant studies indexed in other databases were missed. Second, the inclusion of only original research articles published in peer-reviewed journals meant that theses, reports, and other forms of grey literature were excluded, which may have introduced publication bias. Third, the included studies showed considerable heterogeneity in terms of sample characteristics, migration status, resettlement contexts, types of sport and physical activity examined, and qualitative methods employed, which limits the direct comparability of findings. In addition, the fact that the studies were conducted predominantly in high-income resettlement countries may limit the transferability of the findings to contexts of first asylum, transit, or low- and middle-income countries. Finally, in studies including mixed-gender samples, mixed age groups, or participants with different migration statuses, only data that could be clearly distinguished as relating to refugee or asylum-seeking women and the eligible age group were included in the synthesis. This may have resulted in the partial loss of contextual richness and the broader interpretive context provided by some studies.

Conclusions

The This systematic review demonstrates that refugee and asylum-seeking women's experiences of sport and physical activity cannot be explained solely by individual desire, motivation, or health awareness; rather, these experiences are jointly shaped by conditions of migration and resettlement, financial resources, caregiving responsibilities, gender norms, cultural and religious expectations, transportation, language, and the accessibility of physical activity environments. The findings indicate that sport and physical activity can provide meaningful opportunities for women in relation to coping with stress, body awareness, self-confidence, autonomy, social connection, and belonging; however, these benefits may remain limited when appropriate conditions for participation are not in place. Women-only spaces that ensure privacy, culturally responsive practices, flexible programme structures, transportation and childcare support, and the involvement of women in programme design emerged as key factors facilitating participation. Accordingly, sport and physical activity initiatives for refugee and asylum-seeking women should move beyond approaches focused solely on individual behaviour change and instead be developed on the basis of accessible, safe, and participatory models that take into account women's everyday living conditions and the structural barriers they face. Future research should further strengthen the evidence base by adopting qualitative and

participatory research designs that make women's experiences more visible across diverse migration and resettlement contexts and that clearly distinguish refugee/asylum-seeking status and women-specific findings.

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