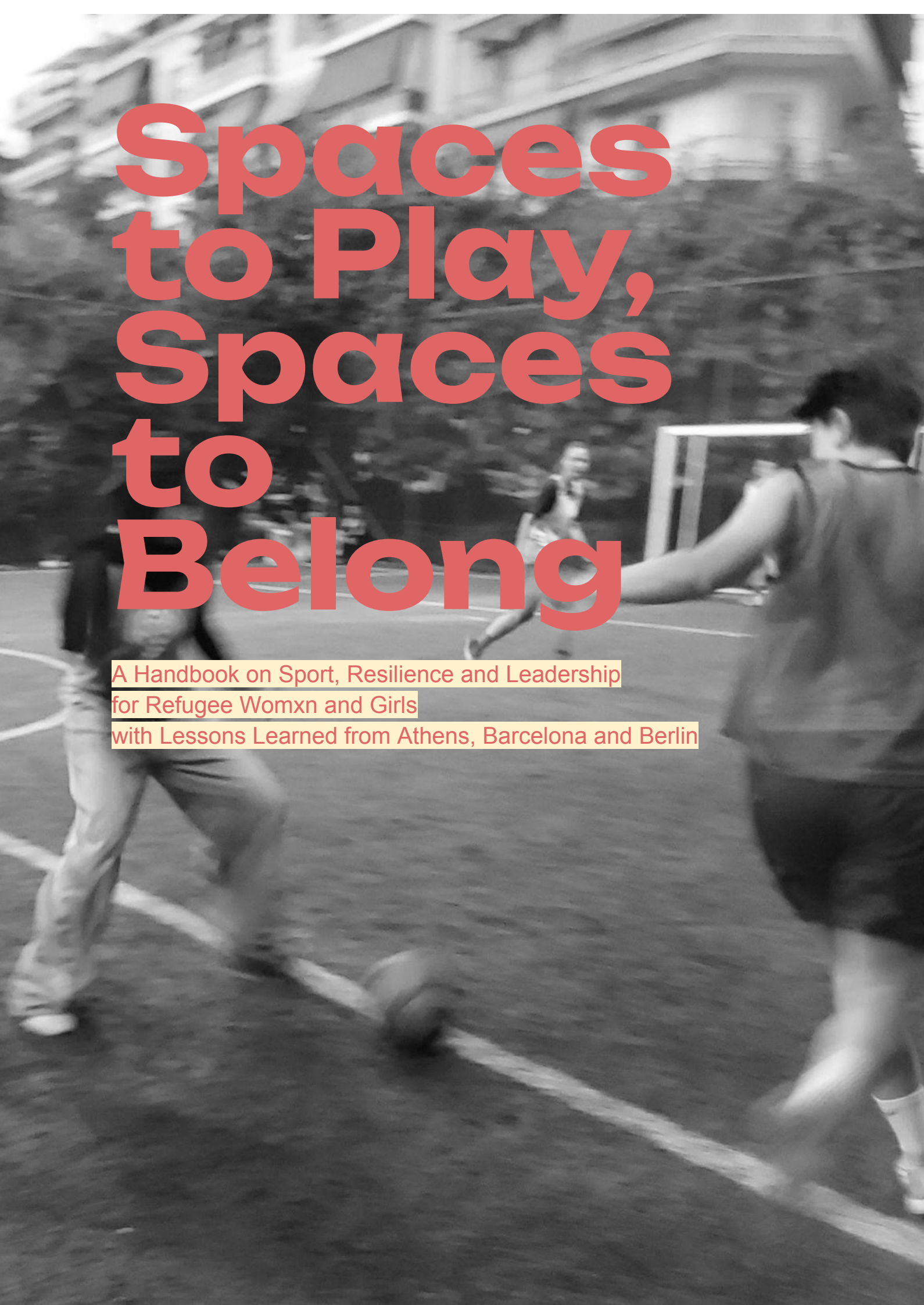




Spaces to Play, Spaces to Belong

A Handbook on Sport, Resilience and Leadership
for Refugee Womxn and Girls

with Lessons Learned from Athens, Barcelona and Berlin

Introduction

This booklet brings together the experiences, reflections, and practices developed through the collaboration between CHAMPIONS ohne GRENZEN e.V., Organization Earth, and Associació Esportiva Ramassà within the framework of the joint project *Game Changers*, funded by Erasmus+.

Although rooted in different local realities across Germany, Greece, and Spain, the three partner organisations share a common understanding: sport can become a powerful tool for empowerment, belonging, participation, and collective care — especially for refugee womxn and girls navigating displacement, uncertainty, and structural exclusion.

The booklet documents practices developed in football trainings, resilience workshops, mentoring structures, leadership pathways, and inter-generational community work. It focuses particularly on the experiences of refugee and migrant womxn, queer people, unaccompanied minors, and caregivers who are often excluded from mainstream sports structures and decision-making spaces. Across all three contexts, the project explored how low-threshold and community-based sports programmes can contribute not only to physical wellbeing, but also to social inclusion, emotional resilience, political participation, and long-term empowerment.

A central objective of this booklet is to highlight the importance of collaborative work between organisations with different expertise and local knowledge. The partnership combines:

- Organization Earth's experience working with unaccompanied minors and resilience-centred methodologies in Athens,
- AE Ramassà's work with migrant and refugee women in Barcelona through community football and social inclusion,
- and CHAMPIONS ohne GRENZEN's more than ten years of experience creating sports and counselling spaces for refugee FLINTA communities in Berlin.

By sharing lessons learned, best practices, challenges, and reflections, this publication aims to contribute to broader discussions on inclusion, refugee participation, trauma-sensitive sports practices, mentoring, and democratic community-building. It is also intended as a practical resource for organisations, coaches, educators, and community workers who seek to develop more accessible, participatory, and responsive programmes for refugee and migrant communities. Sharing values and practices, it's been just as important for us to pay close attention to local particularities. Hence, language, wording and concepts might vary at times throughout this booklet.

At the centre of the project stands the belief that refugee womxn and girls should not only be understood as beneficiaries of support structures, but as active participants, mentors, organisers, and leaders shaping the spaces around them.

*Gute Lektüre! Καλή ανάγνωση! ¡Feliz lectura!
Enjoy your Read!*

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Political and Local Contexts: The Urge to Act and To Come Together

Berlin, Germany: The Situation for FLINTA Refugees as experienced by CHAMPIONS ohne GRENZEN

In the heart of Berlin, near the iconic Television Tower, a group of womxn and queer individuals meets every Friday to play football. CHAMPIONS ohne GRENZEN intends to offer a joy-oriented space for people to play and grow together. The afternoon sessions are complemented by an "additional play time" immediately afterward, creating a space to hang out, network, learn, advocate, and plan collectively. For the past ten years, the team has aimed to reduce barriers to inclusion and participation by offering a centrally located, cost-free, and welcoming environment. We currently use the term FLINTA, referring to FemaleLesbianInterNonbinaryTransAgender People.

However, showing up weekly is by no means a given. Societal pressures, lived realities, and the systemic challenges members face often stand in the way. The current political and social climate, combined with the living conditions in a "capital(ist)" city, has taken a heavy toll on the pathways available to them.

A Glimpse into Lived Realities

Most members live in remote areas on the outskirts of the city. The vast majority have been placed in shelters that were never intended for long-term residency. Discrimination in the housing market, a general housing crisis in one of Europe's

most popular cities, and the steady withdrawal of social support systems have left many participants stuck in inadequate environments. These architectures are not designed for privacy, rest, or well-being. The hunt for an apartment is soul-draining. Furthermore, these circumstances force many young womxn and queers to remain living with their families of origin, a situation that significantly shapes their daily lives.

While 2015 was characterized by the so-called "long summer of migration" and a visible surge in social engagement, today's support landscape looks very different. Not only has volunteer engagement declined, but the social sector is facing severe budget cuts. Support systems have become increasingly professionalized, yet there is a lack of funding and political priority to maintain, let alone expand, these structures.

Political Climate, Bureaucratic Limbo

At the same time, anti-migration discourse is gaining ground. This is exemplified by the rise of new political parties using migration-critical rhetoric, as well as the "hardline" approach of the current government—seen, for example, in the resumption of deportation flights to Kabul under Taliban rule and the classification of Senegal as a "safe country of origin" despite new laws criminalizing queers. These policies are marked not only by hostility toward migrant realities but also by clear anti-feminist tendencies, such as cuts to child support for single parents and the demonization of gender-inclusive language.

Beyond the political rhetoric, many members live in a state of institutional suspension. Navigating the labyrinth of German bureaucracy often results in a precarious legal status—such as a *Duldung* (tolerated stay)—which frequently comes with restrictive work bans. This enforced passivity is soul-crushing; it strips individuals of their agency and prevents them from building a self-determined life, even when they possess the skills and the drive to contribute to society.

The Gap in Psychological Care

Furthermore, access to specialized healthcare remains a significant hurdle. For FLINTA refugees, the need for trauma-informed and gender-sensitive psychological care is immense. However, the reality is a system paralyzed by long waiting lists and a severe shortage of multilingual specialists. Specifically, the lack of non-German speaking therapists leaves many individuals unable to process their experiences in their own language. Facing intersectional discrimination—where racism, sexism, and queerphobia overlap—many are forced to "power through" chronic mental strain without the professional support they deserve.

The Impact on Players and Mentors

For participants and mentors, the consequences are concrete:

- **Education Barriers:** B2-level language courses—a prerequisite for starting most vocational training in Germany—have been fundamentally defunded.
- **Legal Uncertainty:** Players find themselves caught in loops of uncertainty as their asylum applications are rejected, even when based on sexual orientation.
- **An Exhausting Everyday Reality:** Due to being housed in remote shelters on the city's periphery, many players face commutes of 90 minutes or more each way to reach the center. This makes "daily life" time-consuming and physically draining, leaving little energy for self-care or social life.
- **Individualization of Support:** Accessing help has become a "high-threshold" hurdle. Instead of receiving structural, low-barrier support, individuals are forced to navigate a fragmented system on their own. This shifts the burden of finding help onto the individual, making the pathway into the support system opaque and incredibly difficult to manage without a personal "navigator" or mentor.
- **Medical Neglect:** The systemic lack of trauma-informed care and the language barrier (specifically the shortage of Persian-speaking therapists) leads to a state of medical abandonment. Chronic conditions—both physical and mental—often go untreated, as the effort required to secure an appointment exceeds the person's remaining daily capacity.
- **Limited Political Participation:** Despite being the most affected by shifts in migration and social policy, FLINTA refugees are largely excluded from political decision-making. Their voices are missing from the forums where their rights are debated, leading to a sense of powerlessness and a lack of agency in shaping the city they live in.
- **The Burden of Responsibility:** Most players carry the weight of an entire family system. They are often the ones learning the

language and navigating the German school system, resulting in immense pressure to act as translators and "model students" while simultaneously caring for their families.

More Than Just Sports

Against this backdrop, the importance of a low-pressure space for playing together becomes clear. It is a welcoming environment where people can show up whenever their capacity allows. It is more than just a place for sports; it is a hub for navigating these hardships. It is a place to share vital information—how to reach relatives in Iran or how to navigate the *Abitur* (high school diploma)—but also a place to simply create a funny GIF in a world that often gives us very little to laugh about.

Athens, Greece: Invisibility, Uncertainty and the Struggle to Reach the Most Marginalised

The situation for unaccompanied refugee girls in Athens

In Athens, Organization Earth has spent over a decade using sport as a vehicle for personal empowerment and social integration, working primarily with refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people. Within this project, the focus has been on a particularly underserved group: unaccompanied girls residing in designated shelters across the city. These are young people who sit at the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities, as they are minors, alone, female, and navigating an asylum system in a country still recovering from years of migration crisis.

A System Under Pressure

Greece remains one of the EU's main entry points through the Aegean Sea and the land border with Turkey, receiving more first arrivals than almost any other member state, often without the structural capacity to match the scale of reception required. The asylum system continues to be marked by slow procedures, overcrowded facilities, and limited access to integration services. For many people on the ground, the experience has changed less than official narratives suggest.

The broader political climate adds further pressure. Anti-migration rhetoric has grown in Greece, as elsewhere in Europe, and border practices have drawn sustained criticism from human rights organisations. For young people in shelters, this climate is not abstract: it shapes how they are perceived in public space, what access they have to services, and how certain they can feel about their own futures.

The Specific Situation of Unaccompanied Girls

Among all groups arriving in Greece, unaccompanied minors face a distinct set of risks. They are formally recognised as among the most vulnerable within the migration system and are entitled to specific protections under both Greek and European law. In practice, the gap between these protections and lived reality remains significant.

Unaccompanied girls represent a particularly underserved group within this already marginalised population. A notable decrease in their presence within formal shelter structures in recent years does not mean fewer girls are arriving. By that, it means that routes, documentation processes, and classification systems have shifted. Some are misclassified upon arrival. Others are placed in mixed or informal settings that fall outside the

dedicated shelter system. This reduced visibility does not mean reduced need; it means need that is harder to reach.

Daily Life: Waiting, Uncertainty, and Limited Space to Grow

For unaccompanied girls living in Athens shelters, daily life is shaped by a combination of uncertainty, restriction, and waiting. Asylum procedures are slow and frequently retraumatising. Shelter environments, while safer than what many have left behind, offer little privacy and few spaces designed for adolescent development. Access to education is uneven.

Many of the girls Organization Earth works with carry the weight of displacement, family separation, and often direct exposure to violence. They are navigating adolescence, a period that demands security, belonging, and the freedom to explore identity, inside a system that was never designed with their specific needs in mind.

More Than Just Sport

Against this backdrop, Organization Earth's programme offers weekly sports training sessions built around football, movement, and fun games taking place inside or close to the shelters where participants live, and facilitated by coaches trained in working with vulnerable populations. But sport is always a starting point, not an end point.

Alongside the regular training, the programme includes capacity building workshops on resilience and inner strength, developed specifically for this context, using play, movement, and guided reflection to introduce participants to tools for managing stress, building confidence, and working through difficulty together. Environmental education and nature-based activities bring participants into contact with green spaces and open natural environments, by simple practices

of noticing, breathing, and being present outdoors that have a measurable effect on the energy and openness participants bring to the rest of the session. Ongoing psychosocial support and individual accompaniment offer informal check-ins and, where needed, referrals to specialised support. For young people with limited access to mental health services, this consistent relational presence is itself a form of care.

What Sport Can and Cannot Do

In this context, sport is not a solution. It cannot replace legal protection, adequate housing, mental health services, or a functioning asylum system. But it can offer something that is genuinely rare in the lives of many participants: a regular, predictable space where something other than survival is possible, where the body can move freely, where laughter is expected, where belonging is practised rather than promised.

This is the space that Organization Earth tries to create, week after week, alongside the girls in Athens.

Barcelona, Spain: Social Isolation, Survival Pressure and Barriers to Inclusion for Migrant and Refugee Women

Barcelona is often perceived as an open, diverse and welcoming city. However, for many migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women, the reality upon arrival is frequently marked by instability, isolation and significant structural barriers to rebuilding their lives. AE Ramassà works primarily with migrant women, asylum seekers, refugees and newly arrived women from diverse backgrounds, many

of whom have experienced displacement, gender-based violence, family separation, economic hardship or forced migration processes. While each participant has a unique story, many face similar challenges once they arrive in Spain, and these challenges often intersect in ways that make long-term social inclusion extremely difficult.

Social isolation and mental health

For many participants, one of the most immediate and significant challenges upon arrival is social isolation. Many women arrive in Barcelona without family networks, friendships or established community connections, while also coping with separation from loved ones and uncertainty about family members who remain in their countries of origin. Many are also carrying the emotional impact of traumatic migration journeys, experiences of violence or prolonged periods of instability.

Once in Spain, the pressure to immediately solve practical survival needs often leaves very little space to process these experiences. Women are expected to learn Spanish and, in many cases, Catalan, while simultaneously navigating unfamiliar administrative systems, attending legal appointments, searching for employment and trying to secure stable housing. This constant pressure creates high levels of stress and, for many participants, can reactivate previous trauma.

Access to specialised mental health support remains extremely limited. Long waiting lists, language barriers and a lack of culturally sensitive services often prevent women from receiving adequate psychological care. At the same time, opportunities for leisure, sport and social connection are often inaccessible or

simply unavailable. Many participants describe having very few spaces where they can relax, build friendships or feel part of a wider community, which can deepen feelings of isolation and delay integration processes.

Administrative insecurity and short-term support systems

For women seeking asylum in Spain, institutional support often exists within very limited timeframes. Many participants initially receive temporary accommodation or financial assistance during the early stages of the asylum process, but this support is often short-term and creates intense pressure to achieve financial independence quickly. Within a relatively short period of time, women are expected to secure employment, find housing and navigate complex legal procedures, often while learning new languages and adapting to an entirely new environment.

These expectations can be extremely difficult to meet, particularly for women who are recovering from trauma or caring for children. When asylum applications are denied, the situation often becomes even more precarious. Many women lose access to formal support systems while simultaneously facing major restrictions in accessing formal employment opportunities, leaving them in situations of extreme vulnerability.

Housing insecurity and labour precarity

Housing instability is one of the most significant challenges faced by many participants. Unlike other European contexts, people seeking asylum in Spain are generally not housed in large refugee camps or centralised reception centres. During the first phases after arrival, accommodation is often provided through temporary systems that include hostels,

shared flats and other forms of dispersed housing located across different parts of the city and, in many cases, on the outskirts of Barcelona.

While this model may appear less visibly segregated, it often creates its own forms of instability. Participants may be moved between accommodations with little notice, sometimes having to relocate to another neighbourhood, city or region of Spain depending on available spaces within the reception system. These sudden changes can interrupt social connections, employment opportunities, medical care, language classes and other important routines that individuals are trying to build after arrival.

Once this initial accommodation period ends, many women face the wider housing crisis affecting Barcelona. Rising rental prices, discrimination in the housing market and a severe shortage of affordable accommodation make it extremely difficult to secure stable housing independently. Many participants end up living in overcrowded flats, unstable shared housing arrangements or temporary accommodation, while others are forced to move repeatedly due to rising costs or insecure employment.

Employment opportunities are often equally unstable. Many participants work in precarious sectors such as domestic work, cleaning, hospitality, elderly care and informal labour arrangements, where low wages, irregular schedules and limited protections are common. Some women work multiple jobs in order to cover rent, support family members abroad or meet basic needs. At the same time, many participants arrive with professional qualifications and work experience that are often not recognised in Spain, forcing them into employment far below their skill level.

Barriers for participants with disabilities

Participants living with disabilities face additional layers of exclusion. Several women in the programme have reported waiting up to five years for formal administrative recognition of their disability status in Spain. Without this recognition, access to financial support, specialised services, adapted employment opportunities and other essential rights remains severely restricted. These delays often increase economic insecurity and reinforce long-term exclusion.

Care and gender inequality

Many participants are mothers and primary caregivers who must balance childcare responsibilities with employment, legal appointments, language learning and housing instability. In many cases, they are also supporting relatives in their countries of origin through financial remittances and emotional care. The lack of affordable childcare creates further barriers to participation in education, employment and community life. For this reason, AE Ramassà integrates childcare support into its football activities in order to reduce one of the most significant barriers many women face.

Spaces for rebuilding community

Within this context, sport cannot be understood simply as recreation. For many women involved in AE Ramassà's programme, football provides one of the few consistent spaces where they can build friendships, reduce isolation and experience moments of safety, joy and collective support. The project creates opportunities for women to reconnect with their bodies, strengthen their confidence and build community in a context where

daily life is often dominated by survival pressures.

For many participants, these spaces play an essential role in rebuilding a sense of belonging, stability and long-term wellbeing.

Our Shared Challenges and Claims

Shared Challenges

- Housing insecurity and precarious living conditions
- Social isolation and lack of belonging
- Limited access to trauma-informed mental healthcare
- Bureaucratic uncertainty and unstable legal status
- Language barriers and restricted access to education
- Racism, sexism, queerphobia, and intersectional discrimination
- Financial precarity and exploitative labour conditions
- Care responsibilities and lack of childcare support
- Limited political participation and representation
- Waiting, uncertainty, and lack of future perspectives
- Lack of long-term, low-threshold support structures

Shared Claims

- Sports as a tool for empowerment, wellbeing, and participation
- Low-threshold and accessible community spaces matter
- Refugees should be recognised as active participants and leaders
- Trauma-sensitive and culturally sensitive approaches are essential
- Community and belonging are central to resilience
- Resilience is built collectively through relationships, trust, and participation
- Inter-generational and peer support strengthen participation
- Collaboration between organisations creates stronger support systems
- Care work and motherhood must be structurally considered
- Refugee womxn and girls need more visibility in decision-making spaces
- Sustainable inclusion requires long-term funding and political commitment

Why Collaborative Projects Matter

The three organizations behind the *Game Changers* project did not arrive at this collaboration by accident. Each had been working independently, for years, on versions of the same question: how can we use sport to support people who have been displaced, and how do we do it well?

Greece, Germany, and Spain are not the same country. The legal frameworks, demographics and the social and political climate around migration differ considerably between the three cities.

And yet, when the three organizations began sharing their experiences in detail, the similarities were striking. The same questions emerged repeatedly. How do we create safety without creating dependency? How do we offer structure while remaining responsive to participants' realities? How do we understand and measure impact in ways that reflect what actually matters?

Comparing contexts is not only intellectually interesting. It is practically useful. When Organization Earth described the particular challenges of reaching unaccompanied girls in a system where their visibility is often limited, CHAMPIONS ohne GRENZEN recognised parallel dynamics in Berlin, where structural barriers have become more complex even as the initial emergency has faded from public attention. When AE Ramassà shared its experience of building a programme from scratch as a newcomer organisation, both partners could offer practical knowledge from their own development processes.

The exchange also worked in the other direction. Organization Earth's integration of nature-based practices into sports sessions

opened new conversations within the partnership. Ramassà's experience of building inclusive football programmes for adult women informed reflections on expanding work beyond younger target groups. CHAMPIONS ohne GRENZEN's experience of combining sports activities with counselling, mentoring, and community-building helped all three organisations develop a clearer language for practices they were already implementing in different ways.

None of this knowledge transfer happens automatically. Meaningful collaboration requires significant coordination, trust, and a willingness to have one's own assumptions questioned. It requires a shared language—not only linguistically, but also in how organisations understand their work and their role within it. It requires flexibility when realities on the ground diverge from what was originally planned.

For smaller organisations like ours, Erasmus+ funding created the conditions that made this collaboration possible. Without it, the time and resources required for sustained exchange would have been difficult to mobilise. We mention this not to undersell what was achieved, but to acknowledge that meaningful partnerships require infrastructure, commitment, and long-term investment.

One of the most important lessons is that collaboration is not simply about exchanging good practices. It is about creating spaces where organisations can think together, challenge one another, and develop stronger responses to shared realities. In a field often shaped by complexity and limited resources, that process is valuable in itself.

Sports and Resilience: Insights and Lessons Learned

Sports and Resilience - What does this mean really?

Resilience is the ability to cope with challenges, adapt to difficult situations, and grow stronger through adversity. It can be strengthened through supportive relationships, positive experiences, and learning new ways to deal with stress and change. With regard to the living conditions described above, resilience is an especially important factor in the lives of our participants, as stress levels often remain high over much longer periods of time than many had anticipated before arriving in Athens, Berlin, or Barcelona.

We genuinely believe that sports strengthens resilience because it connects body, mind, and community. Through movement, teamwork, play, and shared experiences, people can rebuild confidence, reduce stress, develop trust, and experience a sense of belonging. Sports also create spaces where participants can practice coping with challenges, experience success, support one another, and regain a sense of agency and joy in everyday life.

At the same time, we believe that resilience can also serve as a valuable framework for reflecting on the working and organisational cultures of our associations in the future: How can we create structures that are sustainable, caring, collaborative, and supportive not only for participants, but also for coaches, mentors, and staff members themselves?

Resilience In Practice: Organization Earth, Athens

At Organization Earth, we work primarily with unaccompanied girls between 13 and 17 years old, living in designated shelters across the Athens urban area. Most come from Somalia, Syria, and Afghanistan. They arrived in Greece without a parent or guardian. Many have been in transit for months or years. Some arrived as children and are now approaching adulthood inside a system that was never designed to support them toward independence.

Our work starts on a sports pitch, but it never stays there. Over six years of

working with this target group, we have learned that physical activity alone is not enough. What the girls we work with need is not just a training session. They need a space where they can feel safe enough to breathe, to make mistakes, to say no and to gradually trust that an adult's presence does not mean danger. Building that space consistently, week after week is itself a form of resilience work.

The Meaning of Resilience in This Context

The word "resilience" can easily become a way of placing the burden of adaptation back onto people who have already adapted enormously just to survive. We try to use it differently. For us, resilience is not

about telling young people to cope better with circumstances that should not exist. It is about creating conditions in which they can reconnect with their own strength, experience pleasure and playfulness, and begin to develop a sense of what they want from their lives.

For unaccompanied girls in Athens shelters, the structural pressures are significant. Asylum procedures are slow and frequently retraumatizing. Shelters are shared, and provide little privacy. Many girls have experienced violence back at their countries or during migration, or in camp settings. Access to psychosocial support is often limited and sometimes not available in their mother tongue. In Greece, as the first point of entry into the EU for many, the broader political climate around migration is shaped by years of crisis management rather than integration policy. Against this backdrop, showing up to a sports session on a Tuesday afternoon is already a significant act. Our work begins with recognizing that.

Integrating Resilience into Training: What This Looks Like

Rather than adding resilience as a separate element, meaning a workshop delivered occasionally by an external expert, we have gradually tried to weave it into the fabric of every session. This did not happen all at once. It came from paying attention to what the girls were telling us, both directly and through their bodies. Many of the girls we work with have had very little stability. The same coach arriving at the same time, with the same warm greeting and the same opening routine, communicates something important: this is a safe space, and it will be here again next week.

Their choice within the session

Trauma often involves the removal of choice. One of the most direct ways we

integrate resilience into training is by offering choices wherever possible: which warm-up game to play, whether to sit out a drill, who to partner with, how to end the session. This sounds simple, but in practice it requires coaches to let go of a rigid plan and stay genuinely responsive to the group's energy on a given day.

Play as a doorway

Abstract concepts, such as emotional regulation, trust, problem-solving under pressure can become accessible through physical games. We have used activities where teams must complete a challenge together after one round fails; where participants navigate an obstacle blindfolded with only verbal guidance; where a group must keep something in the air without letting it drop. After each game, we pause, form a circle and make questions like:

What made it difficult? What helped? What would you do differently next time?

These are the same questions that apply to difficult moments outside the sports session. The body learns the answer first, and the mind follows.

Nature as a resource

The urban environment of Athens being crowded, fast-moving and often hostile to those without documents can feel like not friendly and a place to calm. Bringing participants into contact with trees, open sky, and the texture of the ground underfoot consistently produces a different quality of presence. Breathing slows. Conversations open up. Tensions that had been held through the whole week begin to release. We integrated simple nature mindfulness exercises into our sessions: noticing what you can hear, feel, and see; breathing with awareness of the air; brief moments of stillness at the start or end of a session. These practices are not therapeutic interventions. They are small invitations to be present and for young

people whose nervous systems are often in a state of chronic vigilance, they are more powerful than they look.

The Capacity Building Workshops

Within this project, we developed two rounds of structured capacity building workshops for the girls we work with. These built on what we had been doing informally in regular sessions, and gave us the space to go deeper. The workshops were facilitated by a professional with experience in trauma-sensitive work with young people, working alongside our own staff who held the relational knowledge of each participant. This combination proved essential. The facilitator could introduce new frameworks and exercises therefore our staff could attune them to what individual participants needed on that day.

Each workshop followed a loose structure that we learned to hold flexibly: An opening circle where participants could share how they were feeling, in one word, a gesture, or simply a colour. Not as therapy, but as a moment of acknowledgment. It also attuned us to who might need extra care during the session. A physical warm-up designed to build energy and group connection before any individual challenge was introduced. Trust games, cooperative movement, activities where laughter was built in. A group that has laughed together in the first ten minutes is a different group from one that has not. A core activity combining physical challenge with reflection, usually something that required communication and collective problem-solving, followed by a structured debrief. We used questions like:

Where did you feel stuck? Who helped you? What surprised you?

A body awareness practice guided breathing, a brief body scan, or a short mindful movement sequence. Often done

outdoors if the space allowed. We introduced these gently, explaining what we were doing and why, and always making them optional.

A closing reflection where each participant shared one thing she was taking away. Short and simple, but surprisingly important: it named something real and it made each person visible to the group.

What We Learned

Several things stand out from this work that we want to share with other organisations. The workshops worked because the girls already had a relationship with our staff and with each other through the regular training sessions. Dropping a resilience workshop into a group that does not yet trust each other produces very different results.

Sports are not just an activity alongside the resilience work, but it is the space in which the resilience work grows.

Coaches need preparation too. Working with this group requires coaches to have their own forms of support and reflection. We have tried to build in regular team conversations where staff can share what they are noticing and process the emotional weight of this work together. This is still an area where we want to do more.

The girls know what they need, if we ask them. The most useful adaptations to our program, is the choice to move workshops outdoors, the decision to end a session early when the group was exhausted, the activity that was dropped because it reminded someone of something painful, all came from listening carefully to what participants were communicating. Formal feedback mechanisms matter, but so does informal attentiveness.

Resilience is collective, not individual.

Perhaps the most important thing we have learned: the girls who show the most visible growth are not always those who arrived with the most individual coping resources. They are the ones who found a group in which they felt they belonged. The experience of being seen, chosen as a partner, cheered for, and missed when absent does something that no technique or exercise can replicate.

Resilience Workshops in Berlin

As mentioned above, many players in the FLINTA training sessions—as well as their relatives—are navigating difficult daily realities while having only limited access to supportive services. A central issue here is visibility within society. The needs of refugee FLINTA communities often receive the least public attention and are rarely reflected in mainstream support structures. To counter this, sports organisations need to actively create spaces for participation, shared decision-making, and programmes shaped by the realities of those most affected. For us as project coordinators, this means for example to take participants' ideas seriously and work collaboratively to turn them into practice. One example of this approach became the resilience workshops, which developed into a core pillar of the *Game Changers* project.

Due to the stress many participants experience—and the significant barriers to accessing psychological support—participants repeatedly expressed the wish to learn coping strategies for dealing with pressure, uncertainty, and emotional strain. At the same time, many resilience or capacity-building programmes available in

Berlin lacked a direct focus on migrant experiences and did not offer the cultural or linguistic sensitivity needed by our group. After extensive research, it became clear that there was not a single existing course with translation options suitable for our participants. Through this process, contact was established with Carolyn, a physician trained and educated in various body-based therapeutic approaches, herself from NYC and SWANA region, who agreed to develop a course specifically aligned with the wishes and needs expressed by the participants.

When registration for the course opened, the first people to sign up were the mothers of our players. This led to the creation of a particularly meaningful group: young active players from the football team, some former participants, and women over the age of sixty who were mothers of players.

Together, the group explored questions of body-based resilience: *How does stress manifest in the body? How can bodily awareness influence feelings of stress? What practices can support calm, grounding, and recovery?* The workshops quickly became more than a training format. They developed into a protected space for exchange, mutual support, careful listening, and collective reflection on stress and wellbeing. Participants shared experiences across generations and found common language for challenges that are often carried individually and in silence.

Another recurring topic was the importance of connection to nature. All participants in the resilience group had grown up in Afghanistan, many in smaller villages in mountainous regions. One participant described how she had once been used to landscapes that felt open and entirely her own. Berlin, by contrast, was experienced as crowded, loud,

expensive, and difficult to navigate. Participants repeatedly expressed the wish to leave the city temporarily.

With the support of the course facilitator, private donations and the cooperation of the landlords of a small cabin complex in Brandenburg, a three-day retreat became possible. The group spent a weekend by a lake. Heating the space with firewood and cooking over an open flame reminded many participants of earlier times and familiar rhythms of life. Nature, quietness, and shared time had a visibly positive impact. Walks, cooking together, and being surrounded by people who understood similar hardships created a rare sense of ease. Each day also included guided resilience sessions with the facilitator. In this environment, many

Resilience and Inclusion Through Creativity, Sport and Mentoring in Barcelona

At AE Ramassà, we work with refugee, asylum-seeking, and migrant women aged 18 to 40 living in and around Barcelona. Through our Inclusive Women's Project, we use sport as a tool for social inclusion, wellbeing, and community building. The *Game Changers* project provided an opportunity to strengthen this work by introducing structured capacity-building workshops and personalised mentoring activities focused on resilience, personal development, and integration.

For many of the women participating in our programme, daily life involves navigating complex challenges. These may include adapting to a new culture and language, rebuilding social networks, finding employment and housing, and overcoming experiences of displacement

women were able—for the first time in a long while—to focus attention on their own bodies: which parts were aching, where tension was held, and what signals had been ignored in the pressure of everyday life. They exchanged practical ways of caring for their bodies, spoke about rest, movement, pain, and recovery, and learned from one another's experiences.

What we learned: resilience work cannot be reduced to individual coping techniques. For participants living under structural pressure, resilience also emerges through community, recognition, rest, inter-generational exchange, and access to spaces where people can reflect and reconnect with themselves.

or exclusion. While football creates an important space for connection and belonging, we recognised the need to complement physical activity with opportunities for reflection, creativity, and personal growth.

Through the *Game Changers* project, we organised a series of capacity-building workshops that used creative and artistic methodologies to explore personal experiences, identity, aspirations, and wellbeing. Each workshop was designed around a specific theme and objective, providing participants with tools to reflect on their journeys and share experiences with others in a supportive environment.

In one workshop, participants created collages representing their personal journeys, reflecting on significant experiences, achievements, and challenges while also identifying future goals and aspirations. This process encouraged participants to recognise their own strengths and envision the next steps

they wished to take in their personal and professional lives.

A second workshop focused on body mapping. Participants created visual representations of their bodies and explored how different activities, people, Other workshops explored participants' experiences since arriving in Barcelona. Using maps of the city as a starting point, women identified places that held personal significance and shared stories connected to their journeys of settlement and integration. These activities often sparked meaningful conversations about belonging, identity, challenges, and moments of joy. The maps became a tool for storytelling, allowing participants to learn from one another's experiences and discover common themes despite their diverse backgrounds.

Alongside the group workshops, we delivered highly personalised mentoring sessions. Each participant identified a personal goal based on her individual circumstances and aspirations. These goals varied considerably: some women wished to find employment, others wanted to improve their Spanish or Catalan language skills, pursue further education, access training opportunities, or secure stable and suitable accommodation. The mentoring process provided tailored support, guidance, and encouragement, helping participants identify practical steps towards achieving their objectives while

and places made them feel. Through this process, they reflected on sources of wellbeing, stress, safety, and support, developing a greater awareness of the factors that positively or negatively influence their daily lives.

building confidence and autonomy. One of the most valuable outcomes of the project was the creation of spaces where women felt able to share experiences, reflect on their journeys, and support one another. **The combination of creative workshops, mentoring, and sport fostered trust, strengthened social connections, and encouraged participants to recognise their own capacities and achievements.**

What we learned through this experience is that integration is not only about access to employment, education, or services. It is also about having opportunities to tell one's story, reflect on one's experiences, build meaningful relationships, and develop a sense of agency and belonging. **Creativity can be a powerful tool for this process, offering alternative ways to express experiences that may be difficult to put into words. Combined with personalised mentoring and the community created through sport, these activities helped participants strengthen their wellbeing, confidence, and ability to navigate their lives in a new environment.**



Sports and Mentoring: Insights and Lessons Learned

Best Practices in Mentoring in Refugee, Migrant and Asylum-Seeking Contexts

Mentoring can play an important role in supporting refugees, asylum seekers and migrants as they navigate new systems, rebuild confidence and access opportunities. However, mentoring approaches designed for more stable educational or professional environments often fail to respond to the realities many participants face. In contexts shaped by displacement, legal uncertainty, financial precarity, trauma, housing instability and social isolation, mentoring requires a more flexible, trauma-informed and person-centred approach.

Prioritising wellbeing and mental health

One of the most important lessons in refugee and migrant contexts is recognising that participants are often operating under significant levels of stress. Many are simultaneously navigating asylum procedures, unstable housing situations, language learning, financial insecurity, childcare responsibilities and concerns for family members in their countries of origin. For some, these pressures are compounded by previous experiences of violence, forced displacement or prolonged uncertainty. Mentoring programmes must recognise that participants may not always have the emotional or practical capacity to focus on long-term professional or educational goals when immediate survival needs remain unresolved. Stress, anxiety, burnout and trauma responses can

directly affect participation, communication and decision-making. While mentors are not expected to act as therapists, they should create spaces that are emotionally safe, non-judgemental and responsive to participants' changing capacities. This includes recognising when someone may need additional specialist support and understanding that inconsistency is often linked to structural pressures rather than lack of motivation.

Building trust and creating safe relationships

Trust is particularly important in refugee and migrant contexts. Many participants have experienced institutions that are highly bureaucratic, inaccessible or disempowering. Others may have repeatedly sought support without receiving meaningful outcomes. Effective mentoring therefore requires time, consistency and clear boundaries. Trust often develops gradually and should not be rushed. Clear communication around confidentiality, expectations and the role of the mentor helps create safer and more stable relationships.

In many cases, the simple act of showing up consistently and following through on commitments becomes an important part of rebuilding trust.

Maintaining flexibility

Participants' circumstances can change rapidly due to legal appointments, changing work schedules, childcare responsibilities, health issues, transportation barriers or sudden housing moves. Mentoring models that rely on rigid schedules or highly formalised structures may unintentionally exclude those facing the greatest levels of precarity. Successful mentoring programmes often combine

structured sessions with greater flexibility, including online meetings, phone calls, informal check-ins and alternative meeting times when needed. This flexibility helps maintain continuity while adapting to participants' realities.

Recognising that progress is rarely linear

Progress in refugee and migrant contexts is often interrupted by external factors such as rejected asylum applications, administrative delays, housing instability, financial crises or family emergencies. Mentoring programmes should acknowledge that setbacks are often caused by structural barriers rather than personal failure. Progress may not always look like employment outcomes or educational achievements. In some cases, progress may involve stabilising a difficult situation, maintaining participation, improving confidence or building stronger social networks. Recognising these forms of progress helps create more realistic and humane mentoring relationships.

Language accessibility

Many participants are learning the language of their host country while trying to navigate complex legal, employment and healthcare systems. Mentoring spaces should therefore prioritise accessible communication. This may involve simplifying information, avoiding technical language, allowing more time for reflection and using translation tools or multilingual mentors when possible. Language should never become an additional barrier to accessing support.

Peer mentoring and community support

Peer mentoring can be particularly effective in refugee and migrant contexts. Individuals who have already navigated similar migration systems or integration challenges often provide valuable practical guidance, emotional support and hope. These relationships can help participants share knowledge, reduce isolation and build stronger community networks. In many cases, participants feel more comfortable discussing challenges with someone who has lived similar experiences.

Supporting autonomy

Finally, effective mentoring should focus on empowerment rather than dependency. The goal is not to solve problems for participants, but to support them in identifying their own goals, reflecting on challenges and making informed decisions. Approaches based on active listening, reflective questioning and goal-setting frameworks such as GROW can be particularly useful in this process, as they help participants build confidence and agency over time while remaining at the centre of decision-making

Final reflection

In refugee, migrant and asylum-seeking contexts, effective mentoring is rarely defined by speed or immediate outcomes. Its value often lies in creating stability, trust and supportive relationships in environments where participants may otherwise experience constant uncertainty.

Practice Example from Berlin: Sports Training meets Educational Counseling

Careful listening during sports training sessions has revealed that many participants and mentors are at **crossroads in their lives** and facing major decisions related to their **education**.

Their starting points vary greatly: Some people have only a **temporary residence** permit in Germany and find themselves in precarious limbo. A potential residence permit based on vocational training in so-called “shortage occupations” is, in some cases, their only hope. Others have received **minimal schooling** in Germany and are already starting vocational training, primarily in nursing. These training programs are often characterized by the exploitation of their specific living conditions and the suspension of fundamental labor rights. The participants want to expand their knowledge on their own rights and duties.

Another group has managed to earn their **Abitur in Germany**. Now they wonder: *Should I do an apprenticeship? Go to college? Work first to earn enough money for my family? What options are there? And how to go about that?*

There is also a fourth group that was already university-educated before migrating to Germany and is seeking recognition of their **diplomas and qualifications** through other channels. Their lives and pathways into the labour market are also marked by uncertainty.

There are only a few resources that provide detailed information about the complex German vocational training system. Vocational trades continue to be

highly valued in Germany and can often serve as a stepping stone to studying at a university of applied sciences later on. Even more important than mere information, however, are spaces where questions can be asked and where individual strengths and interests can be explored. Better yet: establishing a direct connection to the job and training market.

Against this backdrop, CHAMPIONS ohne GRENZEN has partnered up with another organization (“Rat zur Ausbildung”) that is implementing a pilot project in Berlin to inform caregivers and mentors about the training system in Berlin. So both organizations came together and developed a programme set in place bi-weekly after the regular sports training: **Every two weeks, all interested parties and mentors come together to discuss specific training topics.**

The organization “Rat zur Ausbildung” provides input and answers questions. The topics include: assessment of current situation, ideas, and strengths; general orientation; detours and paths to the dream job; applications and support—strengths and development potential; training and finances; career and role models. CHoG, on the other hand, provides a space for implementation in the weeks in between, and builds bridges to practical application. In this attempt, different partners with their fields of expertise come together. **Synergy effects are created here, demonstrating how dispersed expertise can be pooled successfully!**

Mentoring Programme Checklist

- 
- Have we listened carefully beforehand?
 - Have we given different choices in the lead up?
 - What are participants' current realities and stress factors?
 - Is the programme trauma-sensitive and low-threshold?
 - How will trust and confidentiality be built?
 - Is the structure flexible enough for unstable living situations?
 - Are language and communication accessible?
 - Are mentors trained and supported themselves?
 - Is peer mentoring or community support included?
 - How will care responsibilities and childcare be considered?
 - How do we define "progress" beyond formal success?
 - Are participants involved in shaping the programme?
 - Which organisations or experts can collaborate and complement each other?
 - Does the programme strengthen autonomy rather than dependency?

Sports, Democracy & Participation

Mainstreaming Motherhood and Inter-Generational Connectivity

At CHAMPIONS ohne GRENZEN, we have come to centre motherhood as a key element of our programme. By “mainstreaming motherhood”, we mean actively integrating care responsibilities, family realities, and inter-generational dynamics into the design of our sports activities.

Our FLINTA work started with regular football training sessions, which initially attracted younger womxn and queer participants, mostly between 18 and 30 years old. Over time, many of them expressed a shared concern: their mothers, aunts, and older relatives had little to no access to sports activities, despite a strong need for both physical and mental wellbeing. Through the trust we built with the younger generation, we were able to connect with a group that is often excluded from organised sports: older migrant womxn without prior experience in structured physical activity. Engaging this group required us to rethink key aspects of our programme—from scheduling and training design to childcare and spatial arrangements.

The following sections outline key areas we reflected on, the practical steps we took, and what we learned in the process.

1. Mainstreaming Motherhood

Mothers and caregivers are present everywhere. However, sports structures often fail to take their realities into

account. If care responsibilities are not considered, participation remains limited. At the same time, opening up to motherhood should not reinforce narrow or stereotypical ideas of womanhood. Not all women are mothers, and not all want to be. Mainstreaming motherhood therefore means creating structures that are inclusive of care responsibilities—without making them a defining or limiting identity.

Moreover, mainstreaming parenting is ultimately not only relevant for “women’s sports”. Care work is often unevenly distributed, and making it visible helps to question broader structural inequalities—for example, who is able to participate in leisure sports, and under what conditions? And who is taking care of kids whilst the men’s football team plays their game?

What we did: We treated care responsibilities as a structural factor rather than an individual issue. Instead of expecting participants to “manage somehow”, we have adapted (and are trying to adapt) our programme to their realities. This included rethinking schedules, testing childcare options, and creating spaces where participants could engage without being reduced to their role as caregivers. This is a work in progress and a rolling task.

What we learned: Mainstreaming motherhood is not a separate add-on—it reshapes the entire programme. It also opens up a broader discussion about access, gender roles, and participation in sports more generally.

2. Scheduling

When working with mothers and caregivers, scheduling is a central question of accessibility. Training times need to align with existing daily routines, especially school and childcare schedules.

Key questions: When are participants realistically available? How do training times align with school hours and family responsibilities?

What we did: We tested different time slots in close exchange with participants, being limited by infrastructural issues and availability. We now offer a time slot in the afternoons, and offer extra curricula at changing times, catering to different needs.

What we learned: Rigid schedules exclude caregivers. Being late should never be an issue. Flexibility and ongoing communication are essential. Co-creating training times with participants significantly increased both attendance and long-term engagement.

3. Caretaking

For many mothers, access to childcare is a precondition for participation. Without addressing this, programmes risk excluding those they aim to reach.

Key questions: Can childcare be provided alongside training? How can trust and safety be ensured? How can care work be recognised and compensated?

What we did: We introduced a pilot childcare setup during training sessions, focusing on extra-curricular happenings and highlights (such as going to the swimming pool together). Care was provided by a trusted person from within

the community, who received financial compensation. We developed basic safeguarding practices and introduced the offer gradually to build trust. For training hours, we got lucky to ensure a safe space for child care nearby.

What we learned: Childcare is not an optional service—it is a key component of inclusive programming. Childcare needs to be asked for in calls for funding. Building trust takes time.

4. Training Expertise

Designing training for mothers requires specific awareness of different physical conditions, including post-partum recovery and long periods without structured physical activity.

Key questions: How can training be adapted to different bodies and experiences? How can coaches be prepared to work with participants with diverse physical needs?

What we did: We adapted our training approach to be more flexible and inclusive. This included integrating low-impact exercises, offering different intensity levels within the same session, and encouraging participants to communicate their physical limits. We also incorporated basic pelvic floor awareness into warm-ups and sought external expertise to strengthen our approach. We also invited a midwife to share basic information with coaches and participants in exchange for fitness training.

What we learned: Standard training models often assume a baseline level of fitness that does not reflect participants' realities. Small adjustments can make a significant difference in accessibility, safety, and confidence.

5. Inclusive and Exclusive Spaces

Working across generations brings both opportunities and challenges. While inter-generational exchange can strengthen community bonds, participants may also have different needs regarding privacy, autonomy, and social interaction.

Key questions: How can spaces be designed to allow both connection and independence? How can participants engage without feeling responsible for their family members during training?

What we did: We created both shared and separate spaces within our programme. Trainings for different age groups were sometimes held in parallel but in distinct areas, allowing for proximity without overlap. We also organised joint social events to encourage exchange across generations. To support communication and have the younger participants “off duty”, we worked with one designated translator during sessions when needed.

What we learned: Inter-generational work requires careful balancing. Creating both inclusive encounters and exclusive spaces helps participants feel comfortable and respected in their individual needs.

6. Coaches Who Are Parents

Care responsibilities do not only affect participants, but also coaches, mentors and staff. Without structural support, programmes risk losing trained coaches when they become parents.

Key questions: How can coaching roles be made compatible with care responsibilities? How can programmes prevent the loss of experienced coaches due to structural barriers?

What we did: We began to consider childcare not only for participants, but also for coaches. This included adapting coaching schedules and advocating for budget allocations that take care responsibilities into account. Early training hours allow the head coach to be at home for her kids’ bedtime.

What we learned: If care work is not structurally considered, it creates barriers at all levels of a programme. Supporting coaches who are parents is essential for long-term sustainability and equity within the organisation.

7. Inter-Generational Connectivity

Bringing together younger and older participants created new forms of connection within our programme. Relationships between daughters, mothers, and extended family members became an entry point into sports participation.

What we did: We actively built on existing family and community networks. Younger participants often introduced their mothers or relatives to the programme, which helped to establish trust. We created opportunities for both separate and shared activities, allowing relationships to develop naturally over time.

What we learned: Inter-generational approaches can significantly expand outreach and deepen engagement. At the same time, they require sensitivity to different expectations, communication styles, and levels of experience with sports.

8. Body-Positivity

Many participants—especially those with little or no prior experience in organised sports—associate physical activity with pressure to lose weight, perform, or conform to narrow body ideals. These assumptions can create strong barriers to participation. Creating an inclusive sports space therefore also means actively challenging dominant body norms and making it visible that all bodies are welcome.

What we did: We communicated clearly that our trainings are not centred on weight loss or performance, but on wellbeing, strength, and enjoyment. This was reinforced both verbally and visually. In our training spaces, we used posters and materials that represent diverse body types, ages, and abilities. Coaches were encouraged to use inclusive language, avoid body-shaming narratives, and offer exercises that focus on capability rather than appearance. We also created a training environment where participants could move at their own pace, without comparison or pressure to “keep up”.

What we learned: Inclusion needs to be visible and consistent. It is not enough to say “everyone is welcome”—participants need to see and feel it in the space, in the communication, and in the training itself. Shifting the focus from performance and aesthetics to wellbeing and appreciation of the body can significantly lower entry barriers and increase long-term engagement.

Conclusion

“Mainstreaming motherhood” and working across generations is not a fixed model, but an ongoing process. It requires flexibility, continuous dialogue with participants, and a willingness to adapt established structures. By treating care responsibilities as a central design factor rather than an individual obstacle, sports programmes can become more inclusive and reach participants who are often excluded from traditional formats.

Reading Recommendation: *Citizenship in flux: The figure of the activist citizen* by Engin F. Isin

Activist citizenship, as coined by Engin F. Isin, refers to a form of citizenship that is not defined solely by legal status, such as nationality or formal membership in a state, but by **acts of political agency**. In this understanding, people become “citizens” through practices of claiming rights, creating visibility, and intervening in public life.

Citizenship is therefore not a fixed condition but an ongoing process that emerges through action, especially in contexts of exclusion or precarity. New political subjects arise when individuals or groups disrupt established orders, speak in public, and demand recognition beyond existing legal or institutional frameworks.

An illustrative example can be seen in a group of our participants in Berlin who engage in public protest and digital activism, whilst being excluded from voting in Germany. In a demonstration in front of the Brandenburger Tor, they raised awareness of gender-based violence both in Afghanistan and in Europe. Their action combines speeches, performance, and social media broadcasting to reach both German society and international audiences. Having met in refugee camps under precarious conditions, they later built networks of mutual support and political solidarity in Berlin.

Through these practices, they do not simply express identity but actively produce it in political terms. They frame gendered and ethnic violence as interconnected, while also challenging exclusionary migration regimes in Europe. In doing so, they embody activist citizenship: **they claim the right to have rights, expand the spaces of political participation beyond formal institutions, and transform streets, media platforms, and transnational networks into sites of political action and recognition.**

In the context of refugee work in Europe, this concept is particularly useful because **it shifts the perspective from viewing refugees primarily as recipients of protection or integration measures to recognizing them as political actors.** Refugees often develop forms of collective organization, care networks, and advocacy that operate across formal and informal spaces. These practices challenge the idea that political participation is tied only to formal citizenship status and instead highlight how rights are actively produced through social struggle. Activist citizenship thus helps to understand how displaced people navigate and transform conditions of marginalization while simultaneously claiming visibility, dignity, and belonging; and it might lead our way also when looking for ways of participation and combined activism.

Leadership Pathways

Parinaz and Zahra: Becoming Coaches and More

Parinaz and Zahra are coaches of HAPPY BODY, a sports group for elderly women with refugee experience that is conducted mainly in Farsi and German in Berlin. While Parinaz brings many years of professional coaching experience from Iran, Zahra contributes as a youth leader, translator, and assistant coach, helping to create a welcoming and supportive environment for participants.

Tell us a bit about your pathway to becoming a coach.

Both coaches were drawn to coaching through their love of sport and working with people.

Parinaz explains: "I became a coach because I love sports. In Iran, I worked for many years as a coach with women. I want to help people, especially women, become stronger, healthier, and happier through sport."

Zahra's pathway combined sport with community work: "I started coaching children's football and supporting mothers in fitness classes as an assistant and translator. I really enjoy helping people get active, build confidence, and feel connected to a community."

What does it mean to you being a coach today in Berlin?

For both women, coaching in Berlin means connecting people from different cultures and creating inclusive spaces.

Parinaz says: "I would like to continue my path as a coach in Berlin and get to know people from different cultures through sport. I am very happy to have found Champions ohne Grenzen and to be part of this positive and supportive group."

Similarly, Zahra describes coaching as "a chance to create a friendly and welcoming space where everyone feels respected, supported, and encouraged to join in," while also learning from participants themselves.

What's important in coaching your group?

Creating trust, safety, and a positive atmosphere is central to both coaches' work.

"For me, it is important that everyone feels comfortable, welcome, and motivated," says Parinaz. "I try to create a positive and cheerful atmosphere so people can enjoy sports without pressure."

Working mostly with women both in Iran and Germany, she has learned that sport is often about much more than physical exercise. Many women spend their days caring for households, children, and family members. A sports class can therefore become a place to meet others, exchange experiences, talk about personal concerns, and simply have time for themselves.

“That is why it is very important to me that the space, the team, and the coaches are trustworthy, friendly, and open. Women should feel safe, welcome, and comfortable.”

Zahra shares a similar approach. Whether working with children or mothers, she focuses on creating an environment where people feel safe, included, and appreciated. “With mothers in fitness classes, I try to create a positive and supportive atmosphere where everyone can move at their own pace and feel comfortable.”

Both coaches are motivated by seeing participants grow in confidence. Parinaz explains: “I try not only to train the body but also to strengthen women’s self-confidence. I motivate them to keep going and remind them of the progress they have already made.”

She recalls one participant, Razieh, who recently told her that her back and leg pain after childbirth had improved since she started training regularly and doing the exercises at home. Another participant, Fatima, an older woman with several physical complaints, often says: “I can’t do everything, but I still love coming to the course. Afterwards I feel better and have more energy.”

“For me, these moments are the most valuable reward and show how important sport can be in people’s lives,” says Parinaz.

What would you like sports clubs to be aware of?

Both coaches emphasize that sport is about much more than physical activity.

Parinaz hopes sports clubs understand that sport can support “mental health,

self-confidence, community, and integration.”

Zahra adds that people need places where they feel welcome, understood, and represented. Being flexible, accessible, and respectful of different life situations can make participation possible for many more people. For people living far from their homeland or families, sports clubs can help create friendships, a sense of belonging, and meaningful connections across cultures.

How do you envision your future in sports?

Looking ahead, both coaches want to continue developing their skills and supporting others through sport.

Parinaz hopes “to grow as a coach, learn new things, work professionally, and help more people through sport.”

Zahra would like to continue supporting both children and adults while helping to create more opportunities for women, mothers, and young people. Through coaching, she hopes to contribute to building strong, connected communities where everyone has the chance to participate and thrive.

Fatima Ahmadi: “What matters is knowing that we can face challenges together”

I started playing football with Champions ohne Grenzen at a time when I was searching for community and a place where I could “free my mind.” Arriving in a new country came with many challenges: stress, language barriers, and a feeling of

isolation. I was looking for something that could help me step out of my daily routine and reconnect with myself.

When I found Champions ohne Grenzen, I found much more than football. “The whole community impressed me because it was much bigger than I expected—not in terms of numbers, but in how people understood me and made me feel.” For the first time, I felt at home. I realized I was not the only person who had gone through similar experiences, and that sense of belonging helped me move beyond the stress and anxiety I was carrying at the time.

My journey from player to organizer happened gradually. Through different projects and leadership opportunities, I gained confidence and started to see myself in a new role. “It helped me understand how to organize a team and how to see myself from a different perspective.” The experience showed me that leadership was something I genuinely enjoyed and that it could become a way of supporting others.

My motivation was simple: I wanted to help people who had experiences similar to mine. When I first arrived, there were people who listened to me, guided me, and helped me through difficult moments. Most of them were leaders within the community. I wanted to become that person for others. Whether organizing events, coaching, or translating, I discovered that helping people navigate challenges gave me a strong sense of purpose.

One of the most important factors that helped me stay involved was friendship. **“The friendships I had in the football community helped me stay.”** I was surrounded by teammates and colleagues who supported me when I felt unsure or

did not know what to do. At the same time, I faced challenges. I often doubted myself and wondered: “Am I doing it right? Am I enough for this role?” Moving from the football field into organizational work also changed my relationship with the sport. At times, football became a place of work rather than a place to relax. Over time, I learned to find a balance and remind myself that helping others was worthwhile.

One thing I particularly value in sports communities is language support. “When you come to a country and don’t know the language, and then you join a sport or an organization, you don’t feel welcome if you can’t understand what is happening.” **I still remember that when I first joined Champions ohne Grenzen, there were people around me who translated for me. “I thought: I belong here.”**

I believe sports clubs should pay attention to how they welcome new people. Joining a team is already challenging, especially when language barriers, or insecurity are involved. New players need time to feel that they belong. **Rather than expecting them to immediately fit in, clubs should actively introduce them, create connections, and make them feel part of the group.**

Looking back, the most important lesson I have learned about leadership is that it starts with listening. “You have to listen to people and understand what their needs are.” Good leadership is not about being perfect. For a long time, I worried: “What if nobody shows up? What if they don’t enjoy it? What if I translate something wrong?” **But eventually I realized that leadership is not about perfection.**

“The point is not to be perfect. The point is to be there and help someone who is in need.”

For me, leadership is also about vulnerability. We often imagine leaders as strong, confident people who always know what to do. But real leadership means being present with people, listening to their stories, sharing experiences, and creating a space where everyone feels seen. “You don’t have to be strong all the time.” **What matters is knowing that we can face challenges together—and helping others believe that they belong.**

Rubi Cuervo: From Participant to Facilitator

One of the most inspiring outcomes of the project “resilience and inclusion through creativity, sport and mentoring” at AE Ramassà, Barcelona, comes from the experience of Rubi Cuervo, who participated in both the capacity-building workshops and the mentoring programme.

Throughout the workshops, Rubi engaged deeply with the creative methodologies used to explore wellbeing, resilience, and personal development. Inspired by these experiences, she identified a personal goal during the mentoring process: to design and implement an art therapy programme that could support the wellbeing of other women within the team.

With guidance and encouragement through the mentoring sessions, Rubi developed her idea into a structured project. She worked on defining the

objectives, methodology, and activities of the programme, while reflecting on how art could be used as a tool for emotional expression, self-awareness, and community building. As her project evolved, she gained confidence in her ability to lead and facilitate activities for others.

Once the project had been fully designed, Rubi presented her proposal to the organisation's leadership team for approval. The proposal was well received and subsequently adopted as part of the programme's activities.

Since then, Rubi has successfully implemented the *Resilience Through Art Therapy* programme and now leads monthly sessions for participants in the Inclusive Women's Project. The sessions regularly attract more than ten participants and provide a safe and creative space where women can reflect on their experiences, express themselves through artistic activities, and strengthen their sense of connection and wellbeing.

Rubi's journey demonstrates the transformative potential of combining capacity building with personalised mentoring. What began as a personal development goal evolved into a community initiative that now benefits many other women. Her experience highlights how participants can become leaders and changemakers when given the opportunity, support, and confidence to develop their own ideas and put them into practice.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

The experiences gathered through *Game Changers* point towards a simple but important conclusion:

Sports programmes can become powerful spaces for inclusion, wellbeing, participation and leadership when they are designed around people's realities rather than around sports alone.

To achieve this, organisations, funders and policymakers must invest not only in activities, but also in relationships, community-building and long-term support structures. Because lasting change rarely happens through a single project. It happens when people are given the opportunity to belong, participate and shape their own futures together.

Sport is not the goal – it is the entry point

Sport creates low-threshold spaces where trust, belonging and participation can emerge. What often begins as a football training, a movement session or a walk outdoors becomes a space for information sharing, mentoring, psychosocial support, leadership development and community building. Across Athens, Berlin and Barcelona, participants repeatedly described sports activities as one of the few consistent and welcoming spaces in their lives.

- Participation grows through relationships, not through sports alone.
- Regularity and reliability matter more than performance.
- Joy, play and movement can open doors that formal support services often cannot.

Resilience is collective

Throughout the project, resilience emerged as a central theme. We understand resilience not as an individual's ability to simply endure difficult circumstances, but as the capacity to navigate challenges through connection, support and access to meaningful opportunities.

The strongest protective factor was not a specific exercise or workshop, but belonging to a group.

What strengthens resilience?

✓ Supportive relationships ✓ Feeling safe and seen ✓ Opportunities to make choices
✓ Meaningful participation ✓ Connection to nature and movement ✓ Positive role models and mentors ✓ Community and mutual support

Key insight: People do not become resilient alone. Resilience grows through relationships, trust and collective experiences.



Women and girls face specific barriers to participation

Across all three countries, refugee and migrant women and girls face multiple and intersecting challenges: Care responsibilities, Social isolation, Housing insecurity, Legal uncertainty, Limited access to healthcare, Language barriers, Lack of safe leisure space. Many sports structures unintentionally exclude women by failing to account for these realities.

What helps?

- ✓ Childcare support
- ✓ Female coaches and role models
- ✓ Language accessibility
- ✓ Flexible participation formats
- ✓ Safe and welcoming environments
- ✓ Long-term relationship building

Key insight: Participation is not simply a matter of motivation. It depends on whether structures are designed to be accessible.

Leadership pathways need to be created, not assumed

One of the most powerful developments within the project was seeing former participants become volunteers, mentors, translators, youth leaders and coaches.

Leadership did not emerge through one training course. It developed through trust, accompaniment and opportunities to take responsibility gradually.

What supports leadership development?

- ✓ Long-term mentoring
- ✓ Peer support
- ✓ Practical responsibilities
- ✓ Recognition of existing skills
- ✓ Safe spaces to learn and make mistakes
- ✓ Accompaniment by trusted staff

The stories of participants such as Parinaz, Zahra and others demonstrate that refugee women and girls are not only beneficiaries of programmes. They are community builders, educators and leaders.

Participation means sharing power

The project repeatedly highlighted the importance of moving beyond consultation towards genuine participation. Participants were not only invited to attend activities; they helped shape them by choosing, by designing, by defining mentoring needs, by becoming coaches or by bringing family members into programmes.

Key insight: Participation becomes meaningful when people influence decisions that affect them.

Imprint

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Partner Organisations

Organization Earth

An award-winning Greek NGO founded in 2010, working towards community-driven change and a fairer, more resilient society through sustainability, education, and sports initiatives.



Associació Esportiva Ramassà

A sports and social organisation from Vallès Oriental (Barcelona) with nearly 50 years of history, using sport as a tool for gender equality, education, peace-building, and social inclusion.



CHoG - CHAMPIONS ohne GRENZEN e.V.

Since 2014, CHAMPIONS ohne GRENZEN has organised football and other sports activities with and for people with refugee experience, creating low-threshold spaces for encounter, participation, and community-building through sports and social support.



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