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Project Information:

Grant Agreement Number	101241770	**Acronym**	WWW!
Project Name	**Enhancing adult women's lifestyle by promoting walking football practice**		
Call	ERASMUS-SPORT-2025-SCP		
Duration	24 months		
Start Date	1 November 2025	**End date**	31 October 2027
Project Consortium	Coordinator: Fudbalski Klub Crvena Zvezda (Serbia) Partner: Usma Padova ASD (Italy) Partner: Knowledge and Empowerment Hub for Citizen and Innovation Approach (Luxembourg) Partner: Asociatia Obsteasca Clubul Sportiv De Fotbal Feminin Noroc (Moldova) Partner: Futbolen Klub Apolonia Pontika Sdruzhenie (Bulgaria) Partner: Zavod - Cerc Skupnost Raziskovalni in Izobrazevalni Center (Slovenia)		
General Objective	To encourage healthy lifestyles and physical activity among adult women by involving them in innovative sports activities, such as Walking Football, at the grassroots level. This initiative promotes an easy, accessible, and low-injury sport that everyone can participate in while also fostering EU values such as equality and the fight against discrimination.		

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Document Information:

Contributing partners	Leader: USMA Padova Contributors: All project partners
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Work Package	WP2
Deliverable	Deliverable D2.1 - Report on women's participation: challenges and opportunities
Dissemination level	Public
Description	Comprehensive report on findings of T2.1 and T2.2 combining both data from literature as well as evidence from individual questionnaires. Report - ENG

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Disclaimer

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Introduction & Context

This work package is specifically designed to strengthen and empower sports clubs by providing them with the tools, knowledge, and practices needed to successfully implement and promote walking football, with a particular focus on increasing the participation of adult women. WP2 will develop a detailed and up-to-date engagement strategy for sports clubs, outlining practical approaches to support the implementation of the project's core activities. Within participating clubs, the work package will identify the most effective methods for reaching coaches, trainers, volunteers, and administrative staff, enabling them to become key agents in engaging, training, and retaining adult women in walking football activities.

A central component of this work package is the generation of a robust evidence base through two complementary activities: **Developing a Qualitative and Quantitative Research on Women's Participation in Sports Activities (M1-M4)** and **Conducting a Survey on Women's Participation in the Contexts Involved (M2-M4)**. These activities are fundamental to ensuring that the project's interventions are grounded in the realities, needs, motivations, and barriers experienced by women across different communities and sporting environments.

The qualitative and quantitative research will provide a comprehensive picture of the current state of women's participation in sports, identifying key trends, participation patterns, socio-cultural barriers, motivational factors, and opportunities for engagement. By combining statistical data with qualitative insights, the project will gain a deeper understanding of the structural and personal factors that influence women's involvement in physical activity and organized sport, particularly in later stages of adulthood.

Complementing this research, the survey will collect direct feedback from women within the target contexts, ensuring that the project captures authentic voices and lived experiences from the ground. This participatory approach will enable the consortium to understand not only what the barriers to participation are, but also how women themselves perceive sports clubs, physical activity opportunities, and walking football as a potential avenue for engagement. The survey findings will provide valuable information on preferences, expectations, motivations, and support needs, allowing project partners to tailor activities and communication strategies accordingly.

Together, these two tasks are essential for creating a concrete and evidence-based picture of women's participation in sport. Rather than relying on assumptions or generalized data, the project will gather both empirical findings and first-hand perspectives from the target groups. This dual approach ensures that the walking football model developed through the project is relevant, inclusive, and responsive to the actual needs of women. The resulting evidence will directly inform the design of club engagement strategies, training materials, awareness-raising actions, and recruitment approaches, ultimately increasing the effectiveness, sustainability, and long-term impact of the project. The Deliverable has been led by partner USMA Padova, with a strong collaboration with Kehsia and Noroc, the partners responsible for T2.1 and T2.2, as well as by the contribution of all partners for the profiles required.

Walking Football Engagement Model



2. Section 1: Developing Qualitative and Quantitative research on women's participation in sports activities

This section has been aimed to Identifying the topics for the reviews about women's participation in sports and providing partners forms and templates to the review. It has been enriched by collecting papers, reports, policies and creating a common archive of sources. Partners contributed by collecting national papers and policies fill in the form, provided by KEHSIA

The analysis of the selected studies, reports, policy documents, and awareness campaigns reveals that despite significant progress in recent decades, women across Europe continue to face multiple and interconnected barriers to regular participation in sport and physical activity. These obstacles operate at individual, social, cultural, institutional, and structural levels, limiting both access to sport and long-term engagement.

Persistent Gender Stereotypes and unequal access to opportunities and resources

One of the most common barriers identified across all countries is the persistence of traditional gender stereotypes. Sport, particularly competitive and team sports such as football, is still often perceived as a predominantly male domain. Women and girls frequently encounter social expectations that prioritize caregiving, family responsibilities, or traditionally "feminine" activities over sporting participation.

In the reference literature, specific studies from Bulgaria and Serbia particularly highlight how women involved in football, coaching, officiating, and sports leadership continue to face doubts regarding their competence, authority, and legitimacy. Such stereotypes discourage participation from an early age and contribute to lower levels of confidence and self-identification as athletes.

Women often have fewer opportunities to participate in organized sport compared to men. The reviewed documents reveal disparities in a series of situations, namely access to sports facilities and infrastructure, availability of women's teams and programmes, training schedules compatible with women's daily responsibilities, funding and financial support and access to qualified female coaches and mentors.

The ALL IN PLUS report demonstrates that gender inequalities remain visible in the allocation of resources, investment, and decision-making positions within sports organizations throughout Europe.

Family and Care Responsibilities

Across all contexts, women continue to bear a disproportionate share of domestic and caregiving responsibilities. These duties significantly reduce the time available for leisure activities, including sport and physical exercise.

The Italian Istat data and several Balkan studies show that women, particularly those aged 30 and above, frequently report lack of time due to work-life balance pressures, childcare, eldercare, and household responsibilities. As a result, many women either reduce participation levels or abandon sporting activities entirely.

Indeed, several documents underline the importance of representation. Women remain underrepresented in coaching, refereeing, sports governance, and media coverage. A wide range of studies focused on football and sports officials emphasize that the absence of visible female leaders reinforces the perception that sport leadership is primarily a male space. Without accessible role models, many women and girls struggle to envision themselves pursuing sporting activities, leadership roles, or long-term involvement in sport.

This disruptive culture leads to severe consequences, as many women continue to experience explicit or subtle forms of discrimination in sporting environments. These may include, gender-based stereotypes and prejudices, unequal treatment compared to male participants, lack of respect for female officials, coaches, or athletes, sexual harassment and inappropriate behavior, exclusion from decision-making processes. Research highlights that women in football and sports governance frequently face resistance when entering positions traditionally occupied by men.

Also, although women's sport has experienced significant growth, reports such as "Women's Sport Is Winning – But the Fight Isn't Over" indicate that media coverage, sponsorship opportunities, and public recognition remain substantially lower than those afforded to men's sport. This lack of visibility affects participation by reducing awareness, limiting role-model effects, and contributing to lower investment in women's sporting programmes.

Economic Barriers and lack of inclusive sport environments

Financial constraints continue to disproportionately affect women's participation. Costs related to membership fees, equipment, transportation, and childcare can create significant barriers, particularly for women from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. The Moldova Gender Equality Programme and regional studies identify economic vulnerability as a factor that limits access to recreational and organized sports opportunities. Many women report feeling uncomfortable or unwelcome in sporting settings that are not designed with their needs in mind. Common issues include male-dominated club cultures, found in all countries and search analyzed, as well as strong bias related to fear of judgement regarding age, fitness level, or body image, as well as limited opportunities for recreational participation outside competitive structures.

For adult women, especially those returning to physical activity after long periods of inactivity, inclusive and non-competitive formats are essential for sustained participation.

Psychological and Confidence-Related Barriers

The Balkan wellbeing intervention study demonstrates that self-confidence, self-esteem, and perceptions of physical competence strongly influence participation levels. Women who have experienced exclusion, negative stereotypes, or lack of sporting opportunities earlier in life are more likely to report anxiety, fear of failure, and reduced motivation to engage in sport. These barriers are often reinforced by social expectations and the absence of supportive peer networks.

The reviewed documents consistently show that women remain significantly underrepresented in positions of authority within sport, including, sports federations, club management, coaching staff,

where they represent on average less than 10% of the representatives. This lack of representation limits the integration of women's perspectives into policy development and programme design, perpetuating structural inequalities.

Conclusion

The evidence collected across the reviewed studies and policy documents demonstrates that the gender gap in sport participation remains a structural issue throughout Europe. While levels of female participation have increased in recent years, women continue to engage in sport and physical activity at lower rates than men, particularly during adulthood and later life stages. This gap cannot be explained solely by individual preferences; rather, it reflects the cumulative impact of social norms, institutional practices, economic constraints, and unequal access to opportunities.

The literature consistently highlights several recurring barriers. Women are more likely to face time constraints linked to caregiving and household responsibilities, have less access to leadership and decision-making positions within sports organizations, and encounter sporting environments that have historically been designed around male participation patterns. Research from Bulgaria and Serbia further demonstrates that women involved in football, coaching, refereeing, and sports governance continue to experience gender bias and challenges to their legitimacy and authority. At the same time, European reports underline the persistence of inequalities in funding, representation, media visibility, and access to resources across the sport sector.

National data also reveal that participation declines significantly among adult women due to competing work and family commitments, a lack of flexible and inclusive sport offers, and the absence of programmes specifically tailored to their needs. These factors are often compounded by lower self-confidence, limited exposure to female role models, and concerns about entering traditionally male-dominated sporting spaces.

Taken together, these findings indicate that increasing women's participation in sport requires more than awareness campaigns alone. Sustainable change depends on creating accessible, welcoming, and community-based opportunities that address the practical realities women face in their daily lives. Sports clubs and local organizations have a crucial role to play in this process, not only by offering suitable activities but also by fostering inclusive cultures, supporting female leadership, and actively engaging women who have traditionally been underrepresented in sport.

In this context, walking football represents a particularly relevant response. Its non-contact, recreational, and socially oriented nature reduces many of the barriers commonly identified in the literature, including concerns related to physical fitness, age, previous sporting experience, and competitiveness. By providing a flexible and supportive environment, walking football can serve as an effective tool to re-engage adult women in regular physical activity, strengthen social connections, and contribute to broader objectives of gender equality, health promotion, and community inclusion.

3) Survey Report: Barriers and Motivations for Women's Participation in Sport and Physical Activity

This survey was conducted to better understand the experiences, barriers, and motivations influencing women's participation in sport and physical activity, particularly among adult women aged 30 years and older. The questionnaire explored respondents' demographic characteristics, previous engagement in sport, reasons for discontinuing participation, perceptions of accessibility, and factors that could

encourage future involvement. The questionnaire was delivered by Noroc team and answered by all partners, covering the period between April and June 2026. A total of 50 responses were collected and analyzed among partners countries.

Respondent Profile

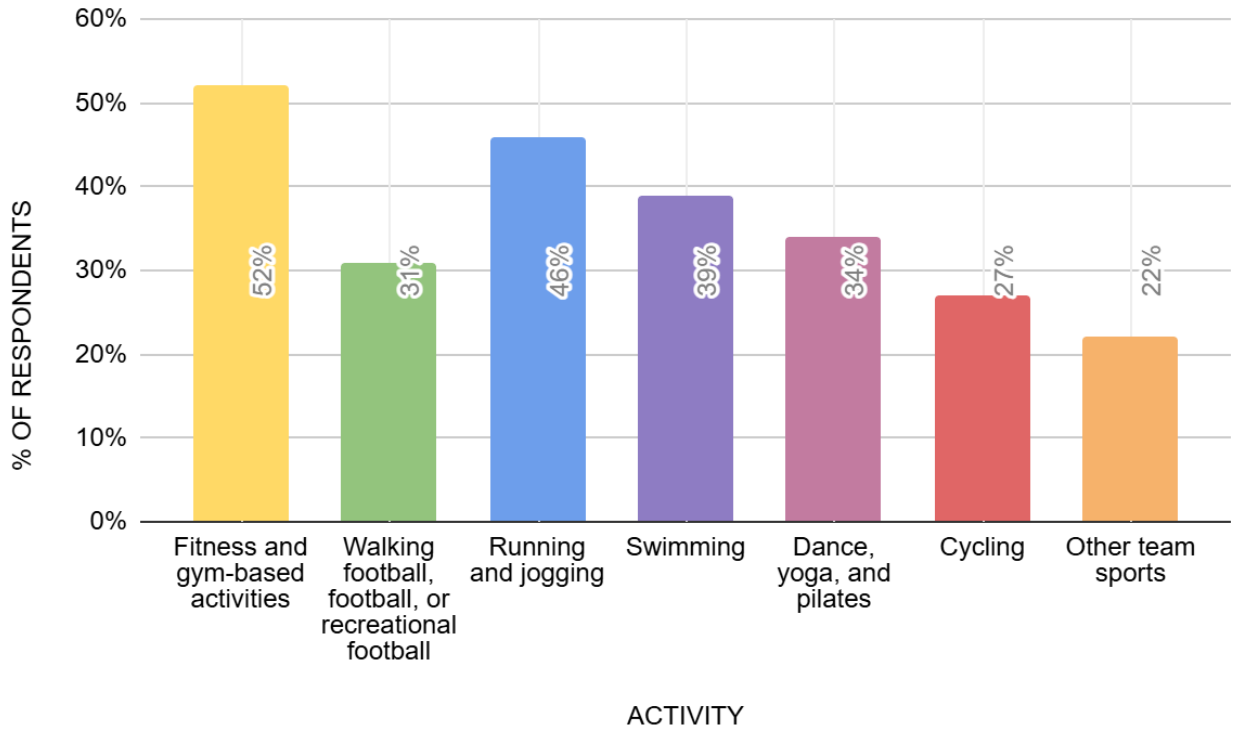
The majority of respondents belonged to the 30–40 age group, representing 56% of the sample (28 respondents). Women aged 40–50 accounted for 24%, while those aged 50–60 represented 13%. Respondents aged 60–65 and over 65 collectively represented 7% of the sample.
The survey primarily reached women who had discontinued regular sport participation. Specifically, 68% of respondents identified themselves as women who had stopped practicing sport regularly, while an additional 18% reported not practicing sport regularly despite having some previous experience. Mothers and parents represented 61% of the total sample, highlighting the relevance of family responsibilities when examining participation barriers.
Educational attainment was relatively high. Nearly half of respondents (48%) held a university degree, while a further 17% possessed postgraduate qualifications. This indicates that lack of awareness or educational background is unlikely to be a major factor influencing inactivity.
In terms of employment status, 57% of participants were employed full-time, 14% worked part-time, 11% were self-employed, 9% identified as homemakers or stay-at-home parents, 5% were retired, and 4% were unemployed. These findings suggest that balancing work and personal responsibilities is a significant consideration for many women.
Regarding family composition, 39% reported having two children, 28% had one child, 17% had three or more children, and only 16% had no children.

Previous Participation in Sport

One of the strongest findings from the survey is that inactivity does not stem from a lack of previous exposure to sport.

A substantial 74% of respondents reported that they had previously practiced sport or physical activity regularly, at least once per week. A further 16% participated occasionally, while only 10% reported never having engaged in sport on a regular basis.
This demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of women surveyed had already experienced sport participation at some point in their lives.
The most frequently practiced activities included:

Activity	% of Respondents
Fitness and gym-based activities	52%
Walking football, football, or recreational football	31%
Running and jogging	46%
Swimming	39%
Dance, yoga, and pilates	34%
Cycling	27%
Other team sports	22%



These results indicate broad previous engagement across both individual and team-based activities.

Duration of Inactivity

Among women who had stopped participating regularly in sport, inactivity was often long-term. Only 8% had been inactive for less than six months. The largest group (37%) reported being inactive for more than five years, while 24% had been inactive between three and five years. Another 21% had not practiced sport regularly for one to three years.
These findings suggest that once women disengage from sport, returning becomes increasingly difficult over time.

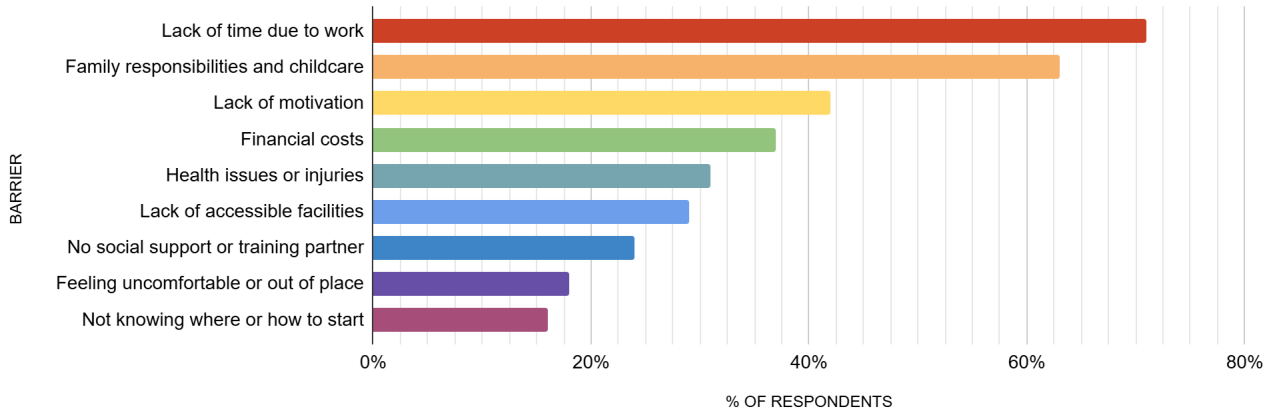
Age at Which Women Stop Participating

The survey identified a clear concentration of sport withdrawal during adulthood. Only 11% reported stopping before age 20, while 18% stopped between 20 and 25 years. The largest category, representing 41% of respondents, stopped participating between the ages of 31 and 40 years. A further 22% stopped after the age of 40.
This pattern coincides with periods typically associated with career development, family formation, and increasing caregiving responsibilities.

Main Barriers to Participation

Respondents were allowed to select multiple reasons explaining why they had stopped practicing sport or why they were currently inactive.
The most frequently reported barriers were:

Barrier	% of Respondents
Lack of time due to work	71%
Family responsibilities and childcare	63%
Lack of motivation	42%
Financial costs	37%
Health issues or injuries	31%
Lack of accessible facilities	29%
No social support or training partner	24%
Feeling uncomfortable or out of place	18%
Not knowing where or how to start	16%

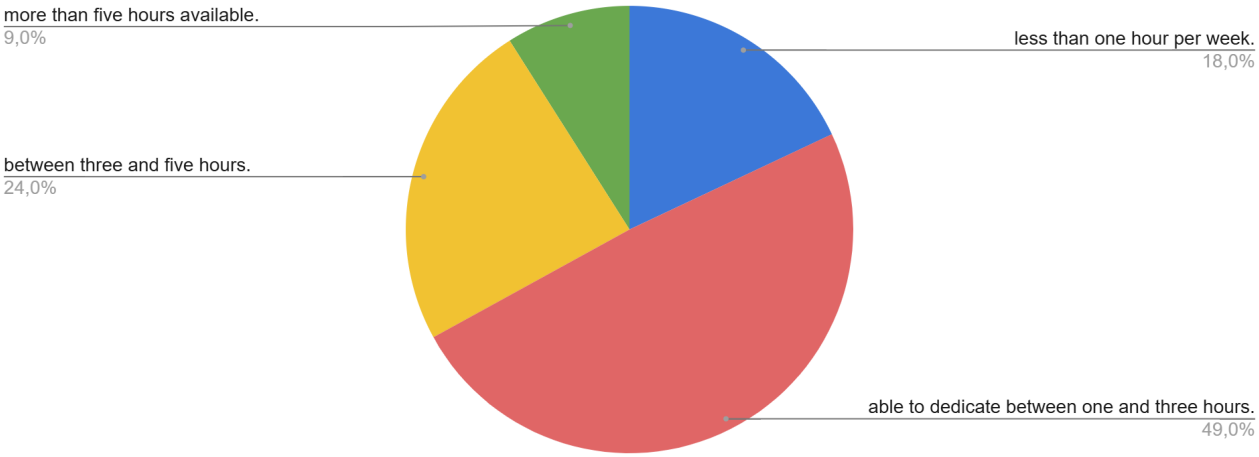


The data clearly show that structural and practical barriers outweigh psychological barriers. Women generally want to remain active but struggle to fit physical activity into demanding personal and professional schedules. Among mothers with two or more children, family responsibilities were selected by 76% of respondents, making it the single most significant obstacle within this subgroup.

Available Time for Physical Activity

When asked how much time they could realistically dedicate to physical activity each week, respondents expressed willingness to engage if opportunities were manageable.

Available Time	% of respondents
less than one hour per week.	18%
able to dedicate between one and three hours.	49%
between three and five hours.	24%
more than five hours available.	9%



This suggests that complete lack of time is not necessarily the issue; rather, women need programmes that fit within limited and fragmented schedules.

Accessibility of Sport Facilities

Perceptions of accessibility were mixed. Only 14% considered local facilities and programmes very accessible for adult women. The largest group (46%) considered them somewhat accessible, while 27% felt they were not very accessible and 9% considered them completely inaccessible. These findings suggest that availability alone does not guarantee effective access.

Social and Cultural Pressures

Respondents were asked to evaluate the impact of social and cultural pressures on women's participation in sport.
Using a scale from 1 (no impact) to 5 (very high impact):

Selection	% of respondents
1 - no impact	6%
2	11%
3	28%
4	34%
5 - very high impact	21%

Overall, 55% perceived social and cultural pressures as significant or very high, indicating that societal expectations continue to influence women's sporting behaviour.

Desire to Return to Sport

Interest in re-engagement was remarkably high. Only 8% stated they were not interested in returning to sport. Meanwhile we observe that 43% responded "Yes, definitely", 39% responded "Yes, if the right conditions were available" and 10% were unsure.
This means that more than four out of five respondents expressed a positive attitude toward future participation.

Motivators for Re-Engagement

Participants identified several factors that could help them return to physical activity.
The most frequently selected motivators were:

Motivator	% of respondents
Flexible scheduling options	69%
Activities specifically designed for women of their age	58%
Inclusive and welcoming environments	53%
Lower-cost or free programmes	47%
Greater awareness of health benefits	44%
Having a friend or family member participate with them	41%
Better childcare support	38%
Online or home-based options	34%
Encouragement from healthcare professionals	29%

The findings indicate that programme design and accessibility are likely to be more influential than awareness campaigns alone.

Preferred Time for Participation

Evening sessions emerged as the preferred option, with 38% of answered, followed by weekends by 24%. These are followed by morning (08:00–12:00): 16%, afternoon (12:00–17:00), 11%, early morning, 8%, and night with 3%. This reflects the need to accommodate work and family commitments.

Community Support and Women's Programmes

When asked whether enough sport programmes existed specifically for women aged 30+, responses highlighted a perceived gap in provision.

Number of sports programmes for women 30+	% of respondents
some, but not enough	49%
very few	27%
none at all	11%

more than enough	6%
unsure	7%

These findings indicate a substantial unmet demand for age-appropriate opportunities tailored to adult women.

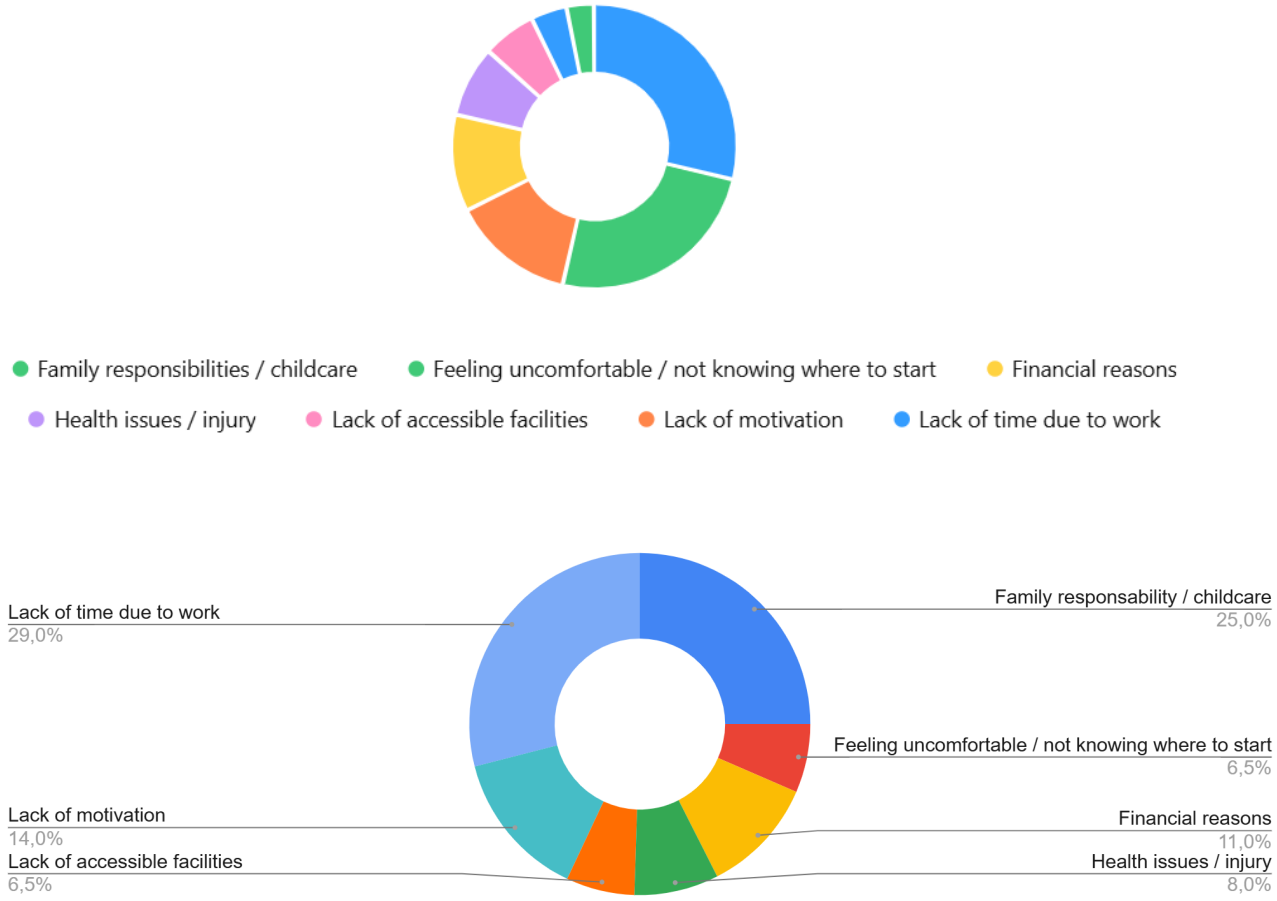
Conclusion

The survey demonstrates that the principal challenge is not convincing women of the value of sport; rather, it is creating conditions that enable participation.
Most respondents are women aged 30–40 who previously engaged in sport regularly but became inactive as professional and family responsibilities increased. The majority remain interested in returning to physical activity and recognize its health benefits.

The strongest barriers are lack of time, childcare responsibilities, and work commitments, while the strongest motivators are flexible scheduling, women-focused activities, affordable programmes, and supportive environments.
Overall, the results suggest a significant opportunity to increase participation among adult women by developing accessible, inclusive, and flexible sport programmes specifically designed around the realities of women's daily lives.

Main Reasons for Sport Inactivity Among Respondents

Distribution of the primary barriers reported by women who do not currently participate in sport regularly.



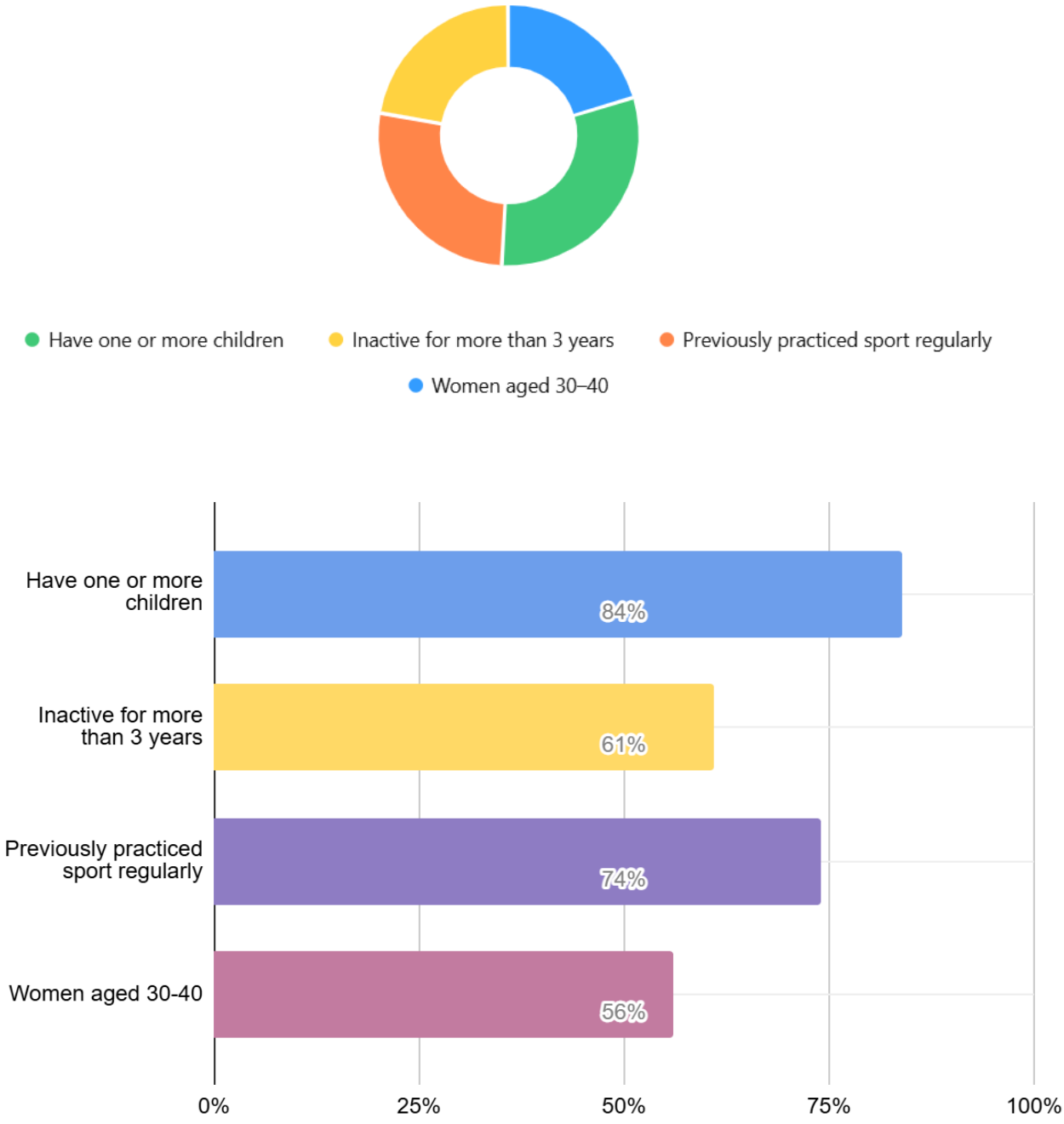
The chart clearly demonstrates that structural barriers are the dominant factors preventing women from participating in sport and physical activity. Lack of time due to work responsibilities represents the largest single barrier (29%), followed closely by family and childcare obligations (25%). Together, these two factors account for 54% of all reported barriers, highlighting the challenge of balancing physical activity with professional and caregiving responsibilities.

Personal factors such as lack of motivation account for a smaller, though still important, proportion of responses (14%), while financial barriers represent 11%. Health-related limitations and injuries account for 8% of reported barriers. Accessibility issues, lack of social support, and feelings of discomfort or uncertainty collectively represent 13% of responses.

Overall, the findings indicate that most women are not disengaged from sport because of a lack of interest. Rather, participation is constrained by practical life circumstances, particularly among women aged 30–40 who are balancing employment and family responsibilities. This suggests that interventions focused on flexibility, affordability, and family-friendly provision are likely to have the greatest impact on increasing participation rates.

Dominant Respondent Profile

Characteristics most frequently observed among survey participants.



The survey reveals a highly consistent respondent profile. The largest proportion of participants (56%) were women aged between 30 and 40 years, confirming that this age group represents the primary target population. Furthermore, 84% of respondents reported having at least one child, highlighting the strong connection between motherhood and reduced opportunities for regular sport participation. Importantly, inactivity cannot be attributed to a lack of sporting experience. Nearly three-quarters of respondents (74%) indicated that they had previously practiced sport regularly, often for several

years. In addition, 61% reported being inactive for more than three years, suggesting that disengagement from sport tends to become long-term once participation is interrupted.
Taken together, these findings suggest that the typical respondent is **a woman aged 30–40, with children, who previously engaged in sport but gradually stopped participating due to competing work and family responsibilities**. This profile should therefore be considered the primary beneficiary of future interventions, programmes, and policy initiatives designed to increase women's participation in sport and physical activity.

4. Final Recommendations

The combination of the two tools, namely a literature review and individual answers on the field, provides a comprehensive picture of the state of the art of the situation concerning women involvement in sports activities. Survey findings provide a clear and consistent picture of the current challenges affecting women's participation in sport and physical activity, while simultaneously highlighting significant opportunities for intervention through community-based sports clubs and walking football programmes.
The results indicate that the majority of respondents are women aged 30–40 years who have previously participated in sport on a regular basis but have since become inactive. Most respondents are also mothers and are balancing employment, family responsibilities, and caregiving duties. Importantly, the data demonstrate that inactivity is rarely the consequence of a lack of interest in sport. On the contrary, a large majority of participants expressed a willingness to return to physical activity if suitable conditions were available.
The primary barriers identified by respondents are lack of time due to work commitments, family and childcare responsibilities, limited flexibility in programme delivery, and the perception that existing sport opportunities are not adequately designed for adult women. Financial constraints and concerns regarding accessibility also play a role, although to a lesser extent. Social and cultural expectations continue to influence participation, with more than half of respondents reporting that such pressures have a significant impact on women's involvement in sport.
These findings are strongly aligned with existing European and international research on women's participation in sport. Numerous studies have shown that women experience a sharper decline in sport participation during adulthood, particularly during the life stages associated with family formation, parenting responsibilities, and career development. Research consistently identifies time constraints, caregiving obligations, lack of tailored opportunities, and limited social support as the most common barriers preventing women from maintaining regular physical activity. Furthermore, evidence demonstrates that women are more likely to engage in sport when activities are offered in supportive, inclusive, non-competitive environments that accommodate their daily responsibilities and personal circumstances.
Within this context, walking football represents a particularly relevant and promising approach. As a low-impact, adaptable, and socially oriented activity, walking football addresses many of the barriers highlighted by respondents. The format can be delivered at flexible times, requires limited previous experience, promotes social interaction, and can be adapted to different fitness levels and age groups. These characteristics make it especially suitable for women who may feel excluded from traditional sport settings or who are returning to physical activity after extended periods of inactivity.
The findings directly support the objectives of Work Package 2. The evidence suggests that sports clubs have a crucial role in reducing participation barriers by creating programmes specifically designed for adult women and by developing more inclusive engagement strategies. To achieve this, clubs need practical tools, training resources, and communication approaches that enable coaches, trainers, and staff to better understand the needs and motivations of women aged 30 years and above.

The survey indicates that successful engagement strategies should prioritise:

- Flexible scheduling, particularly evening and weekend sessions.
- Programmes specifically designed for adult women and mothers.
- Inclusive and welcoming environments that reduce feelings of discomfort or exclusion.
- Opportunities for social connection and peer support.
- Clear communication regarding the health, wellbeing, and social benefits of participation.
- Affordable and accessible delivery models.

Consequently, WP2 should focus not only on promoting walking football as a sporting activity but also on supporting sports clubs in developing organizational cultures that actively encourage female participation. Training coaches, trainers, and club staff to recognize and address the barriers experienced by women will be essential for increasing recruitment, retention, and long-term engagement.

Overall, the survey confirms that there is a substantial untapped demand for sport participation among adult women. By equipping sports clubs with effective engagement strategies and practical tools, and by positioning walking football as an accessible and inclusive pathway back into sport, the project has the potential to make a meaningful contribution to improving women's physical activity levels, wellbeing, social inclusion, and lifelong participation in sport.

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