Ref. Ares(2026)3358081 - 30/03/2026

Co-funded by the European Union

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: KEHSIA asbl Contributors: All project partners
Development period	December 2025-March 2026
Work Package	WP2
Deliverable	Deliverable D2.2 Engagement Strategy
Dissemination level	Public
Description	A comprehensive set of learning objectives, content, materials, which are the basis to encourage women participation in sport and practicing walking football. Report - ENG

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Introduction & Context

Background and Need

Across Europe and beyond, physical inactivity has become a significant public health concern. Although awareness about healthy lifestyles has increased, many adults still struggle to integrate regular physical activity into their daily routines. Women are particularly affected by this trend, as they tend to participate less frequently in sport and physical activities compared to men. According to the Eurobarometer Survey on Sport and Physical Activity, men report higher levels of regular physical activity than women, with 42% of men practicing sport at least once a week compared to 35% of women (EC, 2022).

The roots of this imbalance often begin early in life. In many school environments and informal recreational spaces, physical activities tend to be dominated by boys, particularly in competitive sports such as football. As a result, girls may gradually feel less encouraged to participate or may disengage from sport activities altogether. Research on gender and sport participation indicates that early experiences in recreational spaces and social expectations can significantly influence long-term engagement with sport and physical activity (EIGE, 2017).

As women grow older, additional structural barriers may further limit their participation in sport. Professional responsibilities, caregiving roles, and household duties often reduce the time available for leisure and physical activity. According to European studies on gender equality, women continue to carry a disproportionate share of unpaid care and household work, which directly affects their opportunities to engage in physical activity (EIGE, 2022). Financial resources can also influence participation, as access to sports facilities, equipment, and organised programmes often requires time, mobility, and economic stability.

Regular physical activity plays a crucial role in preventing non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity, while also supporting mental well-being and stress management. The World Health Organization recommends that adults engage in 150–300 minutes of moderate physical activity per week to maintain good health and reduce the risk of chronic diseases (WHO, 2020). Creating accessible and inclusive opportunities for women to engage in sport is therefore essential to improve both individual well-being and community health.

Understanding these barriers is a necessary first step toward designing initiatives that effectively support women's participation in sport and active lifestyles.

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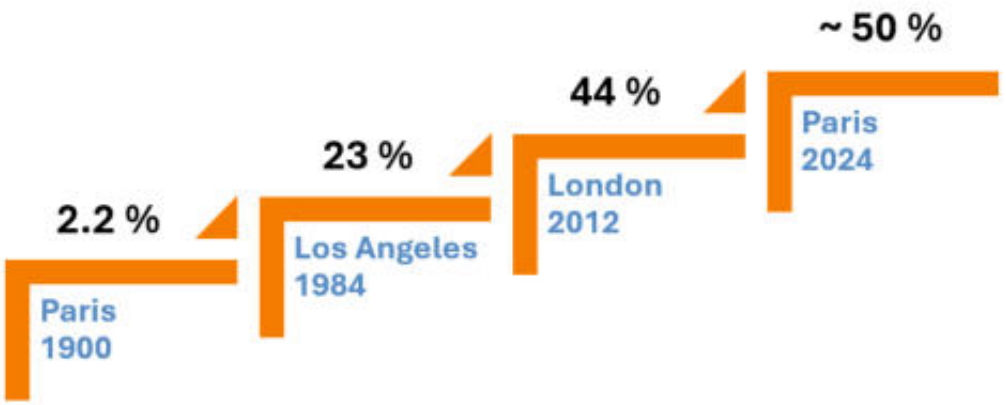
Why Women's Participation in Sport Matters

Participation in sport and physical activity plays a fundamental role in improving both individual well-being and community life. For women, engaging in regular physical activity can contribute significantly to physical health, mental balance, and overall quality of life. Exercise helps improve cardiovascular health, strengthen muscles and endurance, and reduce the risk of non-communicable diseases. At the same time, physical activity supports mental well-being by reducing stress, improving mood, and increasing overall energy levels. Regular physical activity contributes not only to physical health but also to mental well-being, improving mood, self-esteem and overall quality of life (WHO, 2022; Eather et al., 2023)

Beyond physical and mental health, sport can also serve as a powerful tool for building confidence and personal empowerment. Participating in sport encourages women to reconnect with their bodies, recognise their physical capabilities, and develop a stronger sense of self-esteem. This experience can be particularly important for women who may have been distant from sport for many years. Rediscovering physical activity can help break feelings of hesitation or insecurity, allowing women to regain confidence in their abilities and personal goals.

Sport also creates important opportunities for social connection. Participating in group activities allows women to meet others who may share similar experiences, challenges, or life situations. These interactions often lead to the creation of supportive networks where participants can exchange ideas, motivate one another, and develop meaningful friendships. In this way, sport becomes more than a physical activity—it becomes a space where community is built. When women connect through sport, they strengthen social ties, encourage mutual support, and contribute to more active and inclusive communities.

Progress of women's participation in the Olympic Games:



Women's participation in the Olympic Games has increased from 2.2% in 1900 to near parity in 2024 (IOC data).

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Why Focus on Adult Women and Mothers

Although participation in sport can be relatively balanced between boys and girls during early childhood, this balance tends to change significantly during adolescence and adulthood. Studies on sport participation consistently show that girls are more likely to abandon organised sport activities during their teenage years. This gap continues into adulthood, where women participate in sport and physical activity less frequently than men (EC, 2022). As a result, adult women represent one of the groups most at risk of disengaging from regular physical activity.

One of the main reasons for this decline is the growing number of responsibilities that women often face as they move into adulthood. Professional obligations, family responsibilities, and caregiving roles can significantly reduce the time available for leisure and physical activity. Women are still more likely to take on a larger share of household and childcare duties, which limits opportunities to engage in sport on a regular basis. This situation is particularly evident among mothers, whose schedules are often structured around family needs. Without flexible and accessible sport opportunities, many women find it difficult to prioritise physical activity in their daily lives.

Cultural perceptions and gender stereotypes also continue to influence participation in sport. In many societies, sport is still associated with traditionally masculine traits such as strength, competitiveness, and physical dominance. These perceptions can discourage women from engaging in certain sports, particularly team sports such as football. Evidence from several European contexts illustrates how these barriers persist. For example, data from Italy shows that only a small percentage of women meet recommended levels of physical activity compared to the European average. In Serbia, women represent a minority of registered athletes and an even smaller proportion of coaches and sports officials. Similar challenges can be observed in Moldova and Bulgaria, where structural inequalities and limited access to sports infrastructure further affect women's participation. Even in countries with higher participation levels, such as Luxembourg, gender stereotypes and unequal representation in sport leadership positions remain important challenges.

For these reasons, focusing on adult women—particularly mothers and women who have been distant from sport for several years—is essential to reduce participation gaps and create more inclusive opportunities for physical activity.

What Walking Football Is

Walking Football is an adapted version of traditional football designed to make the sport accessible to a wider range of participants. The main difference from conventional football is simple: players are not allowed to run. By removing the pressure to run or perform at high intensity, the game focuses on movement, participation, and enjoyment rather than speed or

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competition. This adaptation allows people of different ages, fitness levels, and sporting backgrounds to take part in the game.

The sport is particularly suitable for individuals who may be returning to physical activity after a long break or who have never previously participated in organised sport. Walking Football does not require previous football experience, advanced technical skills, or a high level of physical conditioning. The primary objective is to keep the body active while creating a safe and enjoyable environment for participants. Because the pace of the game is slower and physical contact is limited, it significantly reduces the risk of injuries compared to traditional football.

Walking Football maintains many of the elements that make football enjoyable, including teamwork, strategy, and social interaction, while adapting the rules to prioritise safety and accessibility. Typically played with smaller teams and simplified rules, the game encourages participants to move, cooperate, and stay active together. As recognised by initiatives promoted by European football organisations and health institutions, walking football has become an effective way to encourage physical activity and social participation among adults who might otherwise feel excluded from traditional sports environments (UEFA, 2024).

Traditional Football	Walking Football
Running allowed	No running
Higher intensity	Moderate intensity
Physical contact possible	Minimal contact
Competitive focus	Participation & wellbeing

Walking Football adapts the traditional game to prioritise accessibility, safety, and participation for people of all ages and fitness levels.

Purpose of the Strategy

The purpose of this engagement strategy is to provide sports clubs, community organisations, and local stakeholders with practical guidance to encourage adult women to participate in physical activity through Walking Football. While the benefits of sport are widely recognised, many women still face barriers that prevent them from engaging in regular physical activity. This booklet aims to address these challenges by presenting accessible solutions and concrete actions that organisations can implement within their communities.

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The strategy also seeks to raise awareness of Walking Football as an inclusive and adaptable sport that can support women in returning to physical activity or starting sport for the first time. By presenting the health, social, and community benefits of this practice, the booklet encourages clubs and local initiatives to adopt new approaches that prioritise accessibility, enjoyment, and long-term participation rather than performance or competition.

Finally, the booklet functions as a practical roadmap for action. It offers sports clubs and community actors a step-by-step approach to introducing Walking Football activities, engaging women in sport, and sustaining participation over time. By sharing practical examples, recommendations, and simple strategies, the aim is to gradually foster a culture in which physical activity becomes a natural and sustainable part of women's everyday lives.

About This Booklet

This booklet has been developed within the framework of the **Women, We Walk!** project, an initiative aimed at encouraging young girls and adult women to participate more actively in sport and physical activity. The project promotes Walking Football as an accessible and inclusive practice that allows women to engage in sport regardless of age, previous experience, or fitness level. By reducing barriers to participation, the initiative seeks to support healthier lifestyles while fostering social connection and empowerment among women.

While the project primarily targets women and girls who may be inactive or distanced from sport, this booklet is designed for a broader audience. It is intended for sports clubs, community organisations, local institutions, coaches, and other stakeholders who play a role in promoting physical activity at the local level. These actors are essential in creating environments where women feel welcome, safe, and motivated to participate in sport.

The booklet provides practical guidance on how Walking Football can be introduced and developed within communities. It is structured around three thematic sections that explore the barriers women face in accessing sport, the inclusive potential of Walking Football, and the role of sports communities in empowering women. Throughout the document, readers will find practical recommendations, examples, and actionable ideas that can help organisations support women's participation in sport in a sustainable way.

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Overview of the booklet structure and thematic sections.

Section 1

Barriers Women Face in Sport Participation

Across Europe and globally, women continue to participate in sport and physical activity less frequently than men. While the benefits of physical activity are widely recognized, many women face structural, social, and personal barriers that make it more difficult for them to engage in regular sport participation. These barriers are rarely isolated; rather, they tend to accumulate throughout life, shaping women's relationship with physical activity from childhood to adulthood. Understanding these obstacles is essential in order to design initiatives that genuinely support women in returning to sport or discovering it for the first time.

One of the most commonly reported barriers is the **lack of time**. Across European countries, women consistently indicate that balancing professional responsibilities, family duties, and household tasks leaves limited space for sport and leisure activities. According to the European Commission's Eurobarometer survey on sport and physical activity, lack of time remains one of the main reasons people do not engage in regular physical activity, and this constraint is particularly significant for women (EC, 2020). In many households, women continue to carry a larger share of domestic responsibilities, including childcare, elder care, and household management. As a result, sport is often perceived as a non-essential activity that can easily be postponed or abandoned when daily obligations accumulate.

Closely connected to time constraints are **family and caregiving responsibilities**, which can significantly shape women's ability to participate in sport. Adult women, especially mothers of young children, often prioritize family needs before personal wellbeing. This dynamic can lead

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to a progressive withdrawal from sport during adulthood, even among women who were previously active. In many cases, returning to physical activity becomes increasingly difficult after long periods of inactivity, particularly when opportunities for accessible and flexible sport programs are limited. Without supportive environments that consider these life circumstances, many women simply do not find realistic opportunities to remain active.

Another major barrier relates to **persistent cultural stereotypes about gender and sport**. Despite progress in gender equality, sport is still often associated with traditionally masculine traits such as competitiveness, strength, and physical performance. These perceptions can discourage girls and women from seeing sport as a space where they belong. Research highlights that gender stereotypes continue to influence participation patterns in sport, affecting both access to opportunities and perceptions of women's athletic abilities (Council of Europe, 2019). From an early age, girls may receive subtle messages that encourage them to pursue more passive or aesthetic activities rather than competitive or physical sports. Over time, these cultural expectations can shape long-term habits and self-perceptions, contributing to lower participation rates among adult women.

In addition to cultural barriers, **limited access to suitable and inclusive sport opportunities** also plays a role. Many sport programs are designed around competitive performance or structured training schedules that may not correspond to the needs of adult beginners or individuals returning to physical activity after a long break. Women who do not identify as athletes or who feel they lack the required skills may perceive sport clubs as intimidating environments. According to the Council of Europe's "ALL IN" analytical report on gender equality in sport, improving access to facilities, programs, and inclusive sport structures remains one of the key challenges for increasing female participation in sport (Council of Europe, 2019) Accessible programs that prioritize participation, health, and enjoyment rather than competition are therefore essential in encouraging women to engage in sport activities.

Concerns about **safety and social comfort** can also influence women's participation in physical activity. Feeling safe and welcome in sport environments is a fundamental condition for engagement, yet many women report discomfort or insecurity in certain sport contexts. Issues such as harassment, judgment, or lack of representation can create environments where women feel observed or excluded rather than encouraged. International organisations, including UNESCO, emphasize the importance of creating safe and inclusive sport environments that protect participants from discrimination, harassment, and gender-based violence. When women feel supported and respected within sport communities, their likelihood of participating and remaining active increases significantly.

These barriers illustrate that women's participation in sport is not only a question of individual motivation, but also of **social structures, opportunities, and environments**. Time constraints, cultural expectations, program accessibility, and safety concerns collectively shape women's experiences with physical activity. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts

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from communities, sports organisations, and local institutions to create more welcoming and flexible sport opportunities.



Multiple structural and social factors influence women's participation in sport.

Recognizing these barriers is the first step toward designing initiatives that respond to women's real needs and daily realities. By understanding the obstacles women face, sports clubs and communities can develop more inclusive approaches that make participation easier, more accessible, and more appealing. The following sections explore how sport participation can benefit both women and communities, and how local actors can play an active role in supporting these positive changes.

Motivations and Benefits of Sport Participation

Participating in sport offers a wide range of benefits that go far beyond physical fitness. For many women, engaging in regular physical activity can represent an opportunity to reconnect with their bodies, improve their wellbeing, and introduce moments of movement and enjoyment into everyday life. Regular sport participation contributes to improved cardiovascular health, stronger physical condition, and a reduced risk of chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. According to the World Health Organization, physical activity plays a key role in maintaining overall health and preventing noncommunicable diseases (WHO, 2024). These health benefits make sport an important tool for promoting healthier lifestyles across all stages of life.

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Beyond its physical effects, sport also has a strong impact on mental wellbeing. Physical activity has been shown to reduce stress, improve mood, and support emotional balance. For many women, sport creates a space to temporarily disconnect from daily pressures and responsibilities. Moments dedicated to physical activity can provide a sense of enjoyment and personal freedom, allowing individuals to step away from routines often dominated by work, family duties, and other commitments. This experience of movement and enjoyment can contribute to greater self-confidence and encourage women to take new opportunities or explore new interests.

Sport participation can also strengthen self-esteem and personal empowerment. As women gradually experience improvements in strength, endurance, and coordination, they often develop a greater sense of achievement and motivation. These positive experiences can reinforce confidence in one's abilities and encourage individuals to maintain an active lifestyle. When sport is approached as an inclusive and accessible activity rather than a competitive performance, it becomes easier for women to see physical activity as a sustainable part of their everyday lives.

The benefits of sport participation extend beyond individuals and also contribute to the wellbeing of communities. Sports activities create opportunities for people to meet, interact, and develop relationships with others who may share similar experiences or challenges. For many participants, sport is not only about exercise but also about social connection and belonging. Through regular activities, women can build networks of support, friendship, and solidarity that extend beyond environment itself.

These networks can play an important role in strengthening communities. When women come together through sport, they often create spaces where ideas, experiences, and encouragement can be shared. Participants may motivate one another to continue practicing physical activity, support each other during difficult moments, or exchange advice related to family life, work, or wellbeing. In this way, sport activities can become platforms for social inclusion and community engagement.

By encouraging women's participation in sport, communities can foster more inclusive environments where individuals feel welcomed and valued. Accessible sport initiatives help bring together people from different backgrounds, age groups, and life situations. In doing so, they contribute to creating stronger social connections and promoting healthier, more active lifestyles for the wider community

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Key benefits of Women's participation in sport:



Sport participation contributes to physical health, mental wellbeing, and stronger social connections.

Role of Sports Clubs and Communities

Sports clubs and local communities play a central role in encouraging women's participation in sport. While many of the barriers discussed previously are structural or cultural, clubs and community organisations are often the first point of contact where women can rediscover sport in a welcoming and supportive environment. By adapting their programs, communication, and organisational practices, sports clubs can create opportunities that make participation easier and more appealing for women who may have been inactive for long periods of time or who have never previously engaged in organised sport.

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One of the most important aspects to consider is **accessibility**. Many sport activities are traditionally structured around competitive performance or regular training schedules that may not correspond to the realities of adult women's daily lives. Clubs that wish to attract more women can benefit from offering beginner-friendly activities and non-competitive sport formats. Activities designed for enjoyment, movement, and wellbeing rather than performance can make participation feel more accessible, particularly for women who may feel intimidated by competitive sport environments. When programs emphasise participation, fun, and gradual progression, they allow participants to engage at their own pace and build confidence over time.

Creating **welcoming and supportive environments** is equally important. The atmosphere of a sport activity often depends on the behaviour of trainers, coaches, and organisers. Individuals responsible for leading activities should be aware of how communication, language, and attitudes influence participants' experiences. Encouraging language, inclusive communication, and respectful interaction can make a significant difference in helping participants feel comfortable and motivated. Visual communication also plays an important role: promotional materials that feature diverse participants and realistic representations of women in sport can help create a sense of belonging and reduce the perception that sport is only for highly trained athletes.

Flexibility is another key element in supporting women's participation. Many women must navigate complex schedules that include work responsibilities, family care, and household duties. Sport programs that allow flexible participation can therefore be particularly effective. For example, offering different training times, creating drop-in sessions, or providing opportunities to join activities without long-term commitments can make sport more accessible. Flexible approaches help ensure that participants do not feel discouraged if they occasionally miss sessions due to personal responsibilities.

Affordability is also an important consideration. Participation costs, equipment requirements, or membership fees can represent barriers for many individuals. Clubs that provide affordable programs, low-cost participation options, or minimal equipment requirements can help remove these obstacles. **Accessible pricing** structures and community-based initiatives can make sport participation more inclusive and open to a wider range of participants.

Finally, sports clubs and communities can contribute to building **positive and supportive social environments** around sport activities. When programs encourage interaction, cooperation, and mutual encouragement among participants, they help create spaces where women feel comfortable returning regularly. These environments often become places where participants share experiences, support one another, and build relationships beyond the sport activity itself.

By adopting inclusive practices, accessible programs, and supportive environments, sports clubs and communities can play a decisive role in reducing barriers and encouraging more

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women to engage in sport. When these initiatives focus on wellbeing, enjoyment, and participation rather than performance or competition, they create opportunities for women to experience sport as a positive and sustainable part of their everyday lives.

Key elements sports clubs can implement to support women's participation in sport:



Practical approaches sports clubs can adopt to create more inclusive and accessible sport opportunities for women.

Practical Engagement Tips

Sports clubs and community organisations can adopt a variety of simple and practical approaches to make sport participation more accessible and appealing for women. These actions do not necessarily require large investments or complex organisational changes. Often, small adjustments in scheduling, communication, and program design can significantly improve participation and help women feel more comfortable joining and maintaining sport activities.

One effective strategy is to **adapt training schedules to women's daily routines**. Many women balance professional responsibilities, family care, and household tasks, which means that traditional training hours may not always be suitable. Offering sessions at flexible times—such as early in the morning, during school hours after children have been dropped off, or in the evening after family routines have settled—can help women integrate sport more easily into their schedules. When training opportunities are designed with these daily realities in mind, participation becomes more realistic and sustainable.

Providing **family-friendly solutions**, such as childcare options during sessions, can also make a significant difference. For mothers of young children, arranging babysitters or travelling to separate childcare facilities can become an additional barrier that discourages participation.

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When clubs are able to provide simple childcare support or create child-friendly spaces near training areas, women can participate in sport activities without the added stress of coordinating multiple arrangements.

Ensuring that activities are **beginner-friendly and respectful of different skill levels** is equally important. Many women who return to sport after years of inactivity may feel insecure about their physical condition or abilities. Clubs can address this by creating sessions specifically designed for beginners and by maintaining supportive environments where participants progress at their own pace. Trainers should reinforce a culture of encouragement and respect, ensuring that activities focus on enjoyment, participation, and personal wellbeing rather than competition or performance.

Communication and visual representation also play a key role in attracting participants. Promotional materials should reflect the diversity of women who may be interested in joining sport activities. Instead of only showing highly trained athletes, communication can include images of women at different life stages—women balancing family responsibilities, professionals seeking wellbeing through physical activity, or individuals returning to sport after a period of inactivity. When potential participants see relatable examples, it becomes easier for them to imagine themselves taking part.



Practical engagement strategies sports clubs can implement to encourage women's participation.

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Finally, clubs can strengthen participation by **building connections with the local community**. Organising open sessions, neighbourhood events, or introductory activities can help raise awareness about new programs and encourage women to try sport in a relaxed and welcoming setting. Community events also create opportunities for participants to meet others in their area, strengthening social connections and increasing the likelihood that they will continue engaging in sport activities over time.

By implementing these practical strategies, sports clubs can gradually create environments where women feel welcomed, supported, and motivated to participate. Small changes in organisation, communication, and program design can make a meaningful difference in helping women rediscover sport as a positive and accessible part of their everyday lives.

Section 2

Understanding Walking Football and Its Inclusive Nature

Walking Football is a modified version of traditional football designed to make the game accessible to a wider range of participants. The sport was originally developed in the United Kingdom in the early 2010s as a way to encourage older adults to remain physically active while continuing to enjoy the social aspects of football. Since then, the concept has spread across many countries and communities, becoming an increasingly popular recreational activity that promotes health, social interaction, and inclusive participation.

The main idea behind Walking Football is simple: players walk instead of running. By removing running from the game, the pace becomes slower and the physical intensity more manageable, allowing participants of different ages and fitness levels to take part comfortably. The game maintains the essential elements of football—passing, teamwork, and goal scoring—while reducing the physical demands that often make traditional football inaccessible for many individuals.

This simple adaptation has made Walking Football an **inclusive and flexible sport format**. Because running is not allowed and physical contact is limited, the risk of injury is significantly lower compared to traditional football. This allows participants to engage in physical activity in a safe and supportive environment. For many individuals, concerns about injury can be a major obstacle to returning to sport, especially when they have professional responsibilities, family obligations, or health considerations. Walking Football helps reduce these concerns by offering a sport that prioritises safety, moderate physical activity, and enjoyment.

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Walking Football adapts traditional football rules to make the game safer and more accessible.

Another important aspect of Walking Football is its **adaptability**. The sport can be easily adjusted to different contexts, spaces, and participant needs. Sessions can take place in sports halls, outdoor fields, or community centres, and the rules can be slightly adapted depending on the group's abilities or experience. This flexibility allows clubs and communities to create inclusive sport environments where participants feel comfortable regardless of their previous experience or physical condition.

Walking Football is particularly well suited for individuals who may feel excluded from traditional sport activities. Older adults, people with reduced mobility, individuals recovering from injuries, or those who have been inactive for long periods often find it difficult to return to sport through conventional activities. Walking Football offers a welcoming entry point by focusing on participation and social engagement rather than physical performance.

The sport is also **accessible to beginners**. Participants do not need prior football experience or advanced technical skills to join a session. The basic rules are easy to understand, and the slower pace allows players to gradually become familiar with the game. This makes Walking Football an ideal activity for people who may have never practiced organised sport before or who feel uncertain about their abilities.

For many women, Walking Football can represent an opportunity to **return to sport in a supportive and non-competitive environment**. Women who have taken breaks from physical activity due to pregnancy, family responsibilities, health issues, or professional commitments

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may find it difficult to re-enter traditional sport environments. Walking Football provides a space where they can reconnect with physical activity without feeling pressure to perform or compete at a high level.

Equally important is the **social dimension of the activity**. Walking Football sessions often prioritise interaction, teamwork, and shared enjoyment rather than competition. Participants have the opportunity to meet new people, build friendships, and develop a sense of belonging within their local community. For individuals who may feel isolated or disconnected from organised sport, this social aspect can be just as valuable as the physical activity itself.

By combining moderate physical activity with social interaction and inclusive rules, Walking Football creates a sport environment where people of different ages, abilities, and backgrounds can participate together. Its accessible nature makes it a particularly valuable tool for communities seeking to encourage broader participation in sport and promote healthier, more active lifestyles.

At last, Walking Football demonstrates that sport can be adapted to meet the needs of participants rather than expecting participants to adapt to the demands of the sport. By focusing on accessibility, safety, and enjoyment, it provides a practical and inclusive approach to physical activity that can benefit individuals and communities alike.

Health, Social and Accessibility Benefits of Walking Football

Walking Football provides a form of physical activity that allows adults to engage in sport while maintaining a moderate and manageable level of intensity. Because the game is played at walking pace, participants remain active throughout the session without experiencing the high physical strain often associated with traditional competitive sports. Studies examining Walking Football programs have shown that the activity can reach levels of moderate physical exertion that are beneficial for cardiovascular health and overall wellbeing (Reddy et al., 2017). This makes it particularly suitable for adults who may not feel comfortable participating in more physically demanding sports.

Regular participation in Walking Football can contribute to improvements in cardiovascular health, mobility, and balance. Even though running is not allowed, players are continuously moving, adjusting their position on the field, and coordinating their movements with teammates. These repeated movements encourage gentle physical conditioning, helping participants maintain muscle strength and joint mobility. Because the activity is perceived as enjoyable rather than demanding exercise, individuals often remain active for longer periods without focusing on the effort itself. Research on recreational football adaptations has also shown that small-sided games played at moderate intensity can support improvements in physical fitness and functional capacity in adults (Reddy et al., 2017).

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Walking Football can also contribute to mental wellbeing and emotional health. Physical activity is widely associated with reduced stress levels and improved mood. The social and playful nature of Walking Football sessions can reinforce these positive effects. Studies examining recreational sport participation among adults indicate that group-based activities can improve psychological wellbeing, increase motivation to remain active, and strengthen self-confidence (Eime et al., 2013). Because Walking Football prioritises participation and enjoyment rather than competition, the environment often feels relaxed and supportive, allowing participants to engage in physical activity without performance pressure.



Walking Football combines physical activity with social engagement in an accessible sport format.

The social dimension of Walking Football is equally important. Unlike many individual forms of exercise, the activity requires teamwork, communication, and interaction between participants. Players regularly pass the ball, coordinate movements, and support each other during the game. These interactions naturally create opportunities for conversation, cooperation, and social bonding. For many participants, the social aspect of the activity becomes one of the main motivations for returning regularly to sessions.

For women in particular, Walking Football can create valuable opportunities for building social connections. Women who balance professional responsibilities, family care, or household tasks may have limited time to participate in social activities outside their immediate routines. Community sport initiatives such as Walking Football can therefore provide spaces where participants meet others in similar situations, share experiences, and develop supportive

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networks. These connections can strengthen a sense of belonging and help sustain long-term engagement in physical activity.

Another important advantage of Walking Football is its accessibility. Because the rules limit running and physical contact, the sport can be practiced by individuals with different levels of physical ability. Participants do not need prior experience in football or sport in general to join a session. The simplicity of the rules and the slower pace of the game make it easier for newcomers to integrate into the activity without feeling overwhelmed or excluded. This accessible structure allows people who may have previously felt distant from sport to rediscover physical activity in a welcoming and supportive environment.

By combining moderate physical movement, social interaction, and adaptable rules, Walking Football offers a practical way to promote healthier lifestyles and stronger community connections. Its accessible format allows participants to experience the benefits of physical activity while enjoying a supportive and inclusive sport environment.

Examples of Implementation

Walking Football is not a new concept created only for experimental programs. Over the past decade, it has developed into a recognised recreational sport practiced in many countries and community settings. What began as a local initiative in the United Kingdom has gradually expanded into a structured activity supported by sports organisations, clubs, and community initiatives across Europe and beyond.

The United Kingdom remains one of the leading examples of Walking Football implementation. The sport was originally developed by **Chesterfield FC Community Trust** in 2011 as a program designed to help older adults remain physically active while maintaining social connections through football. Since then, Walking Football has expanded rapidly across the country, with hundreds of clubs organising weekly sessions and local leagues. Organisations such as the **Walking Football Association (WFA)** support the development of the sport, provide guidance for clubs, and organise national competitions and community initiatives.

Walking Football has also gained recognition from major football organisations. **UEFA** and several national football federations acknowledge the value of adapted football formats for promoting lifelong participation in sport and supporting inclusive sport environments. Across Europe, football associations and community sport organisations increasingly encourage clubs to introduce recreational formats that allow adults and beginners to engage in football in a safe and accessible way.

The growth of Walking Football has also led to the creation of international competitions. In recent years, global tournaments such as the **Walking Football World Cup**, organised by

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international walking football associations, have brought together teams from multiple countries. These events demonstrate the rapid international development of the sport and highlight its ability to unite participants of different backgrounds through an accessible and inclusive form of football.

Across Europe, many clubs and community sport programs have begun introducing Walking Football sessions alongside their traditional activities. Community centres, municipal sport programs, and amateur football clubs organise weekly sessions aimed at adults who wish to remain active but may no longer feel comfortable participating in competitive football. These initiatives demonstrate how existing sport infrastructure can be adapted to create more inclusive opportunities for participation.

Across Europe, the growing interest in Walking Football is reflected in initiatives led by football associations, community organisations, and local sport clubs. In **Italy**, organisations such as Walking Football Italia promote the practice and support the creation of local sessions and recreational leagues. In **Luxembourg**, community sport initiatives and local clubs have begun experimenting with "walking-foot" activities designed to encourage inclusive participation. In **Bulgaria**, projects such as the FAITH Walking Football initiative have organised tournaments and training activities aimed at promoting active lifestyles through adapted football formats. In **Moldova**, the national football federation has included a Walking Football pilot programme in its strategic development plans for the coming years. Meanwhile, discussions around grassroots football development in **Serbia** increasingly explore how adapted sport formats can contribute to broader participation and community engagement. These developments illustrate how different countries are beginning to integrate Walking Football within their community sport structures, either through established programmes or emerging initiatives.

In practice, Walking Football sessions are usually organised in simple and accessible ways. Clubs often offer weekly sessions that include a short warm-up, basic ball exercises, and a friendly match played on a reduced-size field. Coaches or facilitators guide the session while ensuring that the key rules—such as walking instead of running and avoiding physical contact—are respected. The emphasis remains on participation, enjoyment, and teamwork rather than competition or technical performance.

One of the most significant outcomes of Walking Football initiatives is their **community impact**. Regular sessions encourage participants to build relationships, share experiences, and create supportive social networks. For many participants, the activity becomes not only a form of exercise but also a regular social meeting point. In this way, Walking Football contributes to strengthening community connections while promoting healthier and more active lifestyles.

As more clubs and organisations adopt Walking Football programs, the sport continues to demonstrate how traditional games can be adapted to meet the needs of diverse participants.

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The growing number of initiatives across Europe and worldwide illustrates that inclusive sport formats can successfully expand participation and bring new groups of people closer to sport.



Walking Football is now practiced worldwide through community programmes, national organisations and international tournaments.

Organising a Walking Football Session

Introducing Walking Football in a sports club or community setting does not require complex infrastructure or specialised equipment. What matters most is creating a well-organised session that is welcoming, safe, and enjoyable for participants. A typical Walking Football session can be adapted to different groups, but it usually follows a simple structure that helps participants feel comfortable and engaged.

1. Scheduling and Frequency

Sessions should be scheduled at times that are accessible to participants. For many adult women, especially those balancing work or family responsibilities, flexible timing can make a significant difference. Morning sessions after school drop-off, midday activities, or early evening sessions may allow more women to participate. Clubs may choose to organise one or two sessions per week, creating regular opportunities for participants to stay active while maintaining flexibility.

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2. Preparing the Session

Before the session begins, organisers should ensure that the space and equipment are ready and that participants understand the basic principles of Walking Football. The activity can take place on a reduced-size football pitch, indoor sports hall, or any safe open space suitable for light physical activity. Cones can be used to mark the playing area, and small goals are typically sufficient.

Equipment requirements are minimal and may include:

- ☑ footballs suitable for recreational play
- ☑ cones or markers to define the pitch
- ☑ small goals or portable goal frames
- ☑ bibs to distinguish teams
- ☑ water access for hydration

3. Warm-up and Introduction

Each session should begin with a short warm-up designed to prepare the body for physical activity. Light mobility exercises, stretching, and simple ball exercises help participants gradually activate muscles and joints. Warm-ups are particularly important when working with women who may not regularly practice sport or who may have different physical abilities.

During this introduction, the facilitator or coach should briefly remind participants of the main principles of Walking Football:

- ➔ players must walk at all times
- ➔ running is not allowed
- ➔ physical contact should be avoided
- ➔ the focus is on participation, safety, and enjoyment

These rules help ensure that the activity remains accessible and safe for everyone involved.

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4. The Role of the Coach or Facilitator

The role of the coach in Walking Football differs from traditional competitive coaching. Rather than focusing on performance or tactics, the facilitator should prioritise encouragement, inclusion, and safety. The coach guides participants through exercises, explains the rules clearly, and ensures that the atmosphere remains respectful and supportive.

Facilitators should also remain attentive to the needs of the group. Participants may have different levels of fitness, mobility, or experience with football. Adjusting the pace of the activity, allowing breaks when needed, and encouraging cooperation among players helps create a positive and inclusive experience.

5. Adapting to Participants' Abilities

Walking Football sessions should remain flexible so that they can adapt to the abilities and needs of the participants present that day. Some groups may include beginners who have never played football before, while others may include participants returning to sport after injuries, pregnancy, or long periods of inactivity.

To ensure accessibility, organisers can:

- ➔ adjust the size of the playing area
- ➔ reduce the length of game periods
- ➔ introduce simple passing exercises before the match
- ➔ allow additional rest breaks when necessary

The objective is not competition but **shared participation and enjoyment**.

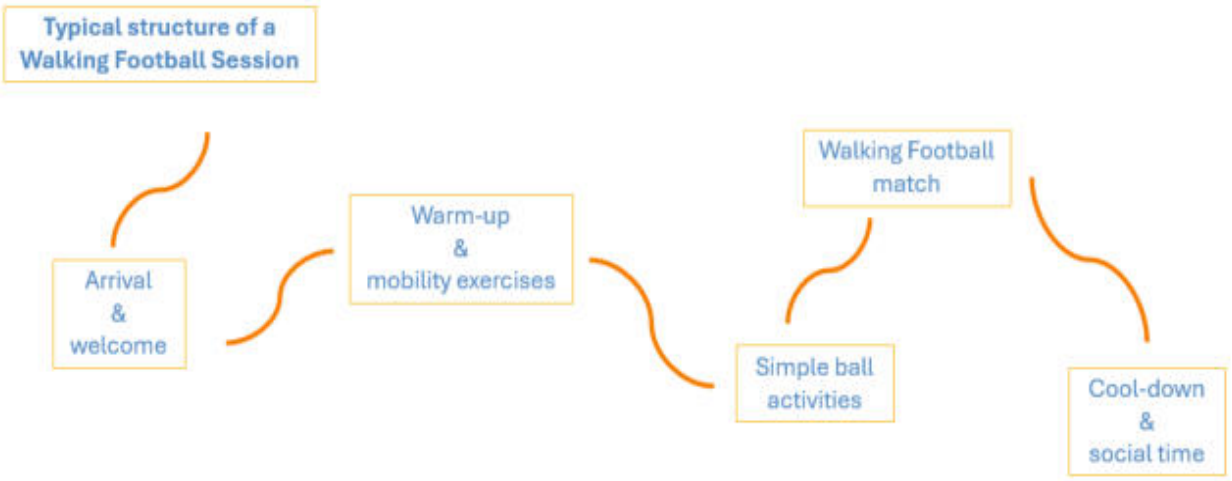
6. Recruiting Participants

Participant recruitment plays an important role in establishing Walking Football sessions within a community. Sports clubs can promote sessions through local communication channels such as community newsletters through the commune, social media, or municipal sport networks. Clear messaging should emphasise that the activity is beginner-friendly, inclusive, and open to women with different levels of experience.

Inviting participants to bring friends, neighbours, or colleagues can also help build a welcoming group dynamic and encourage long-term participation.

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By focusing on accessibility, flexibility, and supportive facilitation, Walking Football sessions can become a sustainable and enjoyable activity within local sports communities.



Walking Football sessions follow a simple structure that prioritises safety, participation, and enjoyment.

Section 3

Empowering Women Through Sports Communities

For many women, the decision to participate in sport is strongly influenced by the environment in which the activity takes place. While access to facilities and programs is important, the **social atmosphere and emotional safety of the space** often determine whether women feel comfortable joining and continuing to participate.

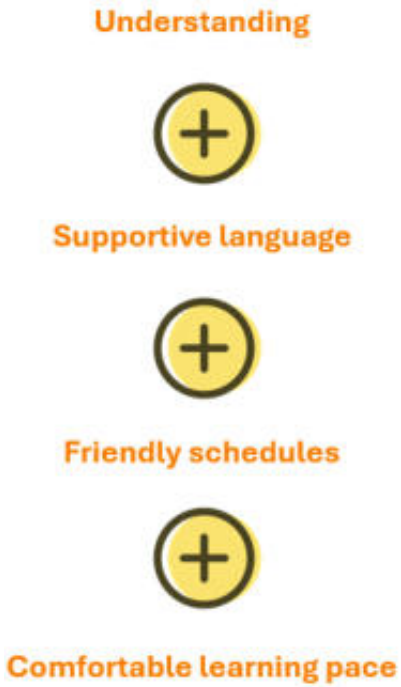
A welcoming sport environment is one where participants feel respected, included, and free from judgment. Women arrive at sport activities with diverse life situations: some may be returning to physical activity after many years, others may be balancing work and family responsibilities, and some may simply be exploring sport for the first time. In such contexts, it is essential that sport environments do not create additional pressure or unrealistic expectations. Instead, they should encourage participation at an individual pace, allowing women to feel comfortable with their level of experience and physical condition.

Creating a supportive environment also requires **a conscious effort from sports clubs and facilitators**. Coaches and organisers play an important role in shaping the tone of the activity. Communication that emphasises encouragement rather than performance helps participants feel confident and motivated. When mistakes are treated as part of learning and when progress is

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celebrated regardless of skill level, women are more likely to develop a sense of belonging within the group.

What makes a sport environment feel safe and supportive?



Creating welcoming and respectful environments helps women feel confident to participate and remain engaged in sport activities.

Another important aspect is the **organisation of activities in ways that respect women's daily routines and responsibilities**. Flexible schedules, adaptable participation formats, and understanding towards occasional absences can make a significant difference for women who are balancing multiple roles in their personal and professional lives. When participation is designed to fit within real-life circumstances rather than requiring strict commitment, sport becomes more accessible and less intimidating.

Psychological safety is equally important. Women should feel that the sport space is a place where they can express themselves, interact with others, and enjoy physical activity without fear of criticism or exclusion. Respectful behaviour among participants, inclusive language, and a positive group atmosphere contribute to building trust within the community. Over time, these elements transform sport sessions into spaces where women not only exercise but also connect, share experiences, and support one another.

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By prioritising respect, inclusion, and flexibility, sports communities can create environments where women feel welcomed and valued. Such spaces become more than places for physical activity; they become **community settings where confidence, wellbeing, and social connection can grow together**.

Building Community Connections Through Sport

Sport activities can create opportunities for connection that go far beyond physical exercise. When women participate in regular group activities such as Walking Football sessions, they often begin to develop relationships with others who share similar interests, experiences, and life situations. These connections can gradually evolve into friendships and supportive social relationships within the community.

For many participants, sport becomes a regular meeting point where women can interact, talk, and spend time together in a relaxed and informal setting. Over time, these interactions help strengthen local community ties. Participants may start recognising familiar faces, sharing conversations before or after sessions, and developing a sense of belonging to a group. This sense of connection can make participation more meaningful and encourage women to return regularly.

Shared experiences during sport activities can also create opportunities for exchange and mutual support. Women may discuss everyday topics such as family life, work challenges, personal projects, or interests outside sport. These informal conversations help create a supportive environment where participants feel comfortable sharing experiences and learning from one another.



Regular sport activities can become meeting points where social relationships and support networks develop.

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Such interactions often develop into informal support networks that extend beyond the sport activity itself. Participants may encourage one another to continue attending sessions, exchange practical advice, or simply provide emotional support through everyday conversations. In many cases, sport activities become spaces where women can reconnect with their communities and build new social relationships that contribute positively to their wellbeing.

In this way, Walking Football sessions and similar community sport activities can help strengthen local social networks while creating opportunities for women to connect, collaborate, and participate more actively in community life. As relationships develop within the group, women may also feel more motivated to participate in other local events, initiatives, or activities organised within their communities.

Role Models and Peer Support

Seeing people like oneself participating in sport can play a powerful role in reducing barriers to participation. For many women, the biggest obstacle to trying a new physical activity is not necessarily the activity itself, but the feeling that sport spaces are designed for others—people who are younger, more experienced, or more physically confident. When women see participants who share similar life situations, ages, or levels of experience, the activity immediately feels more accessible and less intimidating.

Representation therefore becomes an important element in encouraging participation. Visual communication, promotional materials, and community activities should reflect the diversity of women who may wish to join. Images and stories that portray everyday participants—rather than highly competitive athletes—help convey the message that sport can be inclusive and adaptable to different levels of ability.

Peer support within the group also plays a key role in building confidence. When women encourage each other during sessions, celebrate small achievements, or simply share positive feedback, they contribute to creating a supportive environment where everyone feels comfortable learning and progressing at their own pace. These interactions help participants develop trust in the group and reduce the fear of making mistakes or feeling out of place.

A particularly powerful dynamic emerges when beginners motivate other beginners. Participants who have recently started the activity often become the most convincing ambassadors for new members, because their experiences are relatable and authentic. By sharing their personal journeys—how they decided to try the activity and how they gradually became more comfortable—they demonstrate that participation is possible for anyone.

In this way, the idea of **“beginners inspiring beginners”** becomes a simple but meaningful principle. Instead of relying solely on professional coaches or external role models, the group

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itself becomes a source of inspiration. Each participant contributes to building a culture of encouragement, where women support each other in discovering the enjoyment and confidence that sport can bring.



Peer encouragement can transform participants into ambassadors who motivate others to join.

Keeping Women Engaged

Encouraging women to participate in sport is an important first step, but maintaining long-term engagement requires thoughtful and flexible approaches. Participation in community sport activities should be designed in ways that adapt to the realities of women's daily lives, where responsibilities related to work, family, and personal commitments may influence availability.

One important strategy is to allow **flexible attendance**. Not all participants will be able to attend every session regularly, and this should not be perceived as a failure or lack of commitment. Creating an environment where women feel welcome to return even after missing sessions helps reduce pressure and prevents feelings of discouragement. Participation should remain open and accessible, allowing women to engage at their own pace.

Communication also plays an essential role in maintaining engagement. Simple actions such as sharing updates about upcoming sessions, celebrating group achievements, or checking in with participants can help maintain a sense of connection within the group. When women feel that they remain part of the community even during periods of absence, they are more likely to return and continue participating.

Recognising progress, even in small steps, can also strengthen motivation. Improvements in confidence, coordination, or participation are meaningful achievements that deserve to be

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acknowledged. Celebrating these moments helps reinforce the positive experience of participation and encourages women to continue engaging with the activity.



Positive experiences and flexible participation encourage women to remain engaged in sport activities.

Finally, listening to participants' feedback is fundamental for sustaining participation over time. Regularly inviting women to share their perspectives on the organisation of sessions, schedules, or activities helps ensure that the program remains responsive to their needs. When participants feel that their voices are heard and valued, they become more invested in the activity and in the community surrounding it.

By prioritising flexibility, communication, recognition, and openness to feedback, sports clubs can create environments where women feel comfortable returning regularly and maintaining their engagement in physical activity over time.

Partnerships that Strengthen Community Sport

Sports clubs play a central role in promoting participation in physical activity, but creating inclusive and sustainable sport initiatives often requires collaboration with a broader network of community actors. Partnerships can help clubs reach new participants, share resources, and develop activities that respond more effectively to local needs.

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Local municipalities and public institutions are important partners in supporting community sport initiatives. Municipalities may provide access to public sports facilities, parks, or community spaces that allow activities such as Walking Football to take place. They can also promote sport initiatives through local communication channels, helping inform residents about opportunities to participate in physical activity.

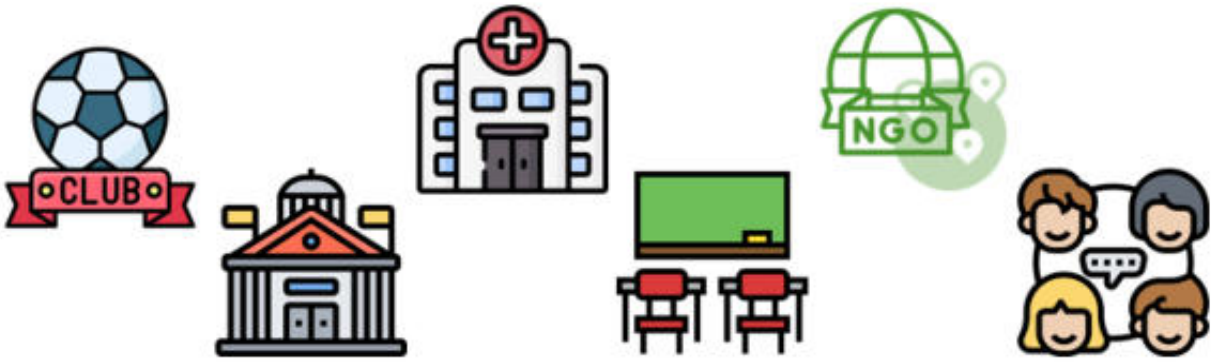
Health organisations and community health professionals can also contribute to strengthening sport programs. Promoting physical activity as part of healthy lifestyle initiatives can encourage women to view sport not only as recreation but also as an important element of wellbeing. In some cases, health professionals may even recommend accessible activities such as walking-based sport formats for individuals seeking safe ways to stay active.

Collaboration with schools and educational institutions can also help connect sport initiatives with families and local communities. Schools often serve as important community hubs and can share information about local sport opportunities with parents and caregivers. This connection can help expand participation and encourage intergenerational engagement in sport activities.

Non-governmental organisations and community groups may also support the development of inclusive sport environments. Many organisations work with women, families, or socially vulnerable groups and can help promote sport activities among communities that may otherwise face barriers to participation.

Through these partnerships, sports clubs can become part of a broader community ecosystem that promotes wellbeing, social connection, and active lifestyles. Collaboration allows different actors to contribute their expertise, networks, and resources, creating stronger and more sustainable opportunities for women to participate in sport.

Local partnerships that strengthen community sport initiatives:



Collaboration between sports clubs, local authorities, health organisations, schools, NGOs and community groups can strengthen inclusive sport opportunities for women.

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Key Recommendations for Clubs and Communities

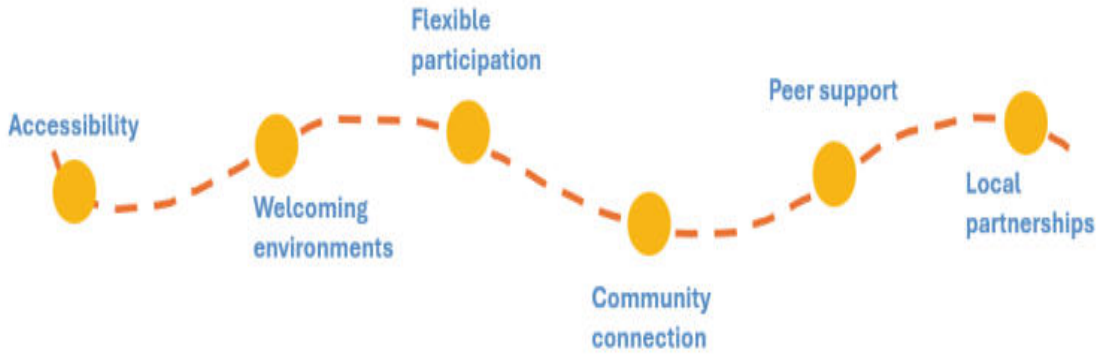
Encouraging women to participate in sport requires more than simply offering activities. It involves creating environments where women feel welcome, respected, and motivated to engage in physical activity as part of their everyday lives. Sports clubs and community organisations play a key role in shaping these environments and in making sport more accessible to a wider range of participants.

One important recommendation is to develop **beginner-friendly sport opportunities** that welcome women with different levels of experience. Activities such as Walking Football can provide an accessible entry point into physical activity because they focus on participation rather than performance. When activities are designed to be inclusive and adaptable, women are more likely to feel confident trying something new.

Equally important is the creation of **welcoming and supportive environments**. Coaches, facilitators, and organisers should encourage positive communication, respect among participants, and a non-competitive atmosphere. When sport spaces prioritise enjoyment, wellbeing, and social interaction, they become environments where participants feel comfortable returning regularly.

Flexibility is another essential element in supporting participation. Many women balance work, family responsibilities, and other commitments that may limit their availability. Offering flexible schedules and allowing participants to join sessions without pressure or strict attendance expectations can make sport more accessible and less intimidating.

Principles for inclusive sport participation:



Building **strong community connections** can also enhance participation. Sport activities often become social spaces where friendships develop and informal support networks emerge. Encouraging group interaction, peer support, and shared experiences helps strengthen these community ties and increases motivation to remain engaged.

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Finally, collaboration with local partners can significantly expand the reach of sport initiatives. Partnerships with municipalities, health organisations, schools, and community groups allow sports clubs to share resources, promote activities more effectively, and reach women who may otherwise face barriers to participation.

By focusing on accessibility, inclusion, flexibility, and community collaboration, sports clubs and local organisations can play a meaningful role in creating opportunities for women to engage in sport and experience the physical, social, and personal benefits that participation can bring.

Action Checklist for Sports Clubs



The following checklist provides practical actions that sports clubs and community organisations can implement to create inclusive and accessible sport opportunities for women. These steps can help clubs design activities that prioritise participation, wellbeing, and community engagement.

Key actions for inclusive community sport:

Creating a welcoming environment

- ☑ Ensure sport sessions are open to beginners and different ability levels
- ☑ Promote respectful and inclusive communication among participants
- ☑ Encourage a supportive, non-competitive atmosphere

Organising accessible activities

- ☑ Offer flexible participation options that accommodate different schedules
- ☑ Adapt activities to participants' physical abilities and personal pace
- ☑ Ensure facilities are safe, comfortable, and accessible

Supporting participation and engagement

- ☑ Encourage peer support and positive group interaction
- ☑ Celebrate small achievements and participant progress
- ☑ Maintain regular communication with participants

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Strengthening community connections

- ☑ Promote activities through local community channels
- ☑ Collaborate with municipalities, schools, and community organisations
- ☑ Invite participants to share feedback and ideas for improvement

When these actions are followed, sports clubs can gradually develop environments that encourage women to feel comfortable participating in sport activities and remaining engaged over time.

Implementation Roadmap

Introducing inclusive sport initiatives such as Walking Football can be achieved gradually through a structured and manageable process. The following roadmap outlines key phases that sports clubs and community organisations can follow to develop accessible activities that encourage women's participation in sport.



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Phase 1 – Preparation

The first step involves identifying local needs and preparing the basic conditions for the activity. Sports clubs may begin by exploring community interest and identifying potential participants who could benefit from inclusive sport opportunities. During this phase, clubs can also secure an appropriate space for the activity, such as a local football field, sports hall, or community facility.

It is also useful to identify facilitators or coaches who will guide the sessions. Providing them with basic information about inclusive sport practices, communication approaches, and the principles of Walking Football helps ensure that the activity is organised in a welcoming and supportive way.

Phase 2 – Launching Initial Sessions

Once the basic preparation is complete, clubs can begin organising initial sessions. These first sessions should focus on creating a positive and relaxed atmosphere where participants feel comfortable trying the activity. Clear communication about the rules, the inclusive nature of the activity, and the emphasis on enjoyment rather than performance can help participants feel at ease.

Clubs may start with small groups and simple session structures that include warm-up activities, basic ball exercises, and short Walking Football games. These early sessions also provide an opportunity to observe participants' needs and adapt the activity accordingly.

Phase 3 – Developing Regular Activities

As interest grows, clubs can gradually establish a more regular schedule of sessions. At this stage, communication becomes particularly important. Promoting activities through community channels, local organisations, or municipal networks can help attract new participants and strengthen the group dynamic.

Clubs can also begin introducing additional elements that reinforce community engagement, such as informal social moments after sessions, group activities, or opportunities for participants to invite friends and neighbours.

Phase 4 – Long-Term Sustainability

The final phase focuses on ensuring that the activity becomes a sustainable part of the club's community offering. This can involve maintaining partnerships with local actors, gathering feedback from participants, and adapting the programme based on their experiences.

Encouraging participants to take an active role in the organisation of activities—such as helping welcome new members or supporting communication—can also strengthen the sense

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of ownership within the group. Over time, these collective efforts help transform the activity into a stable and valued community initiative.

By following these phases, sports clubs can gradually develop inclusive sport activities that respond to local needs while fostering participation, wellbeing, and community connection.

Sustainability Strategies

For community sport initiatives to remain effective over time, it is important to consider how activities can continue beyond the initial stages of implementation. Sustainable programmes are those that gradually become integrated into the regular life of sports clubs and local communities.

One key element of sustainability is **listening to participants' feedback**. Regularly asking women about their experiences, preferences, and suggestions can help organisers adapt sessions to better respond to participants' needs. When participants feel that their perspectives are valued, they are more likely to remain engaged and contribute to the development of the activity.

Another important strategy is the **training and involvement of additional facilitators**. Encouraging volunteers, coaches, or participants themselves to support the organisation of sessions helps distribute responsibilities and ensures that activities can continue even if the initial organisers are no longer available. Over time, this shared ownership strengthens the stability of the programme.

Key elements for sustainable community sport:



Sustainability can also be supported through **partnerships with local actors**, including municipalities, community organisations, and health institutions. Such collaborations may

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provide access to facilities, communication channels, or additional expertise that helps maintain and expand sport initiatives.

Finally, exploring **local funding opportunities or small community grants** can help cover basic costs related to equipment, facility access, or promotional activities. Even modest financial support can contribute to maintaining regular sessions and ensuring that participation remains accessible to a wide range of women.

When combining participant engagement, shared responsibilities, partnerships, and local support, community sport initiatives can develop into long-term opportunities that continue to encourage women's participation in physical activity.

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About the Initiative

This booklet is part of the **Women We Walk (WWW!) project**, a collaborative initiative involving organisations from six European countries: Italy, Luxembourg, Serbia, Bulgaria, Moldova, and Slovenia. The project brings together partners with experience in sport promotion, community development, and gender equality.

The initiative promotes accessible and inclusive sport opportunities for women by encouraging participation in activities such as Walking Football. This format prioritises safety, accessibility, and enjoyment, making it possible for people of different ages, abilities, and backgrounds to participate in physical activity without the pressure of competitive sport.

Through collaboration between sports organisations, community groups, and local institutions, the project aims to support healthier lifestyles while strengthening social inclusion and gender equality within local communities. Particular attention is given to encouraging participation among women who may have limited opportunities to engage in sport due to social, cultural, or practical barriers.

The Women We Walk project seeks to demonstrate how sport can serve as a powerful platform for community engagement, wellbeing, and empowerment by sharing experiences and practical tools across partner countries and for all European communities.

Acknowledgment

This publication was developed within the framework of the **Women We Walk (WWW!) project**, co-funded by the European Union. Project number: 101241770.

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Online Resources:

- Walking Football Association
  https://thewfa.co.uk/
- FIWFA – Federation of International Walking Football Associations
  https://www.fiwfa.org/
- Chesterfield FC Community Trust – Walking Football Programme
  https://cfcct.org

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