

## **Sport, Refugees and Forced Migration: why it is important to look beyond the headlines**

Amid repeated claims around [“illegal migrants” invasion](#) and increasingly [hostile policies](#) towards people seeking asylum and refugees [across the Global North](#), the domain of sport has generally maintained its image as a safe-haven of welcome and integration for refugees and people seeking asylum. Generally speaking, a refugee is someone who has been recognised rights and protection in a host country having escaped war/conflict and persecution related [to “race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion”](#). A person seeking asylum is someone [who has submitted a claim to be recognised as a refugee](#) and is waiting for a response to such claim.

National and international actors ranging from the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\)](#), the [European Union](#), and several [governments](#) have acknowledged the positive role that sport and leisure can assume in refugees’ lives. Moreover, media accounts addressing the [months-long escape to the UK of the Afghan women’s football junior team](#), or the [IOC refugee Olympic athletes](#) have generally reinforced understandings of sport as a force-for-good enabling refugees to move from [“helplessness to hope”](#).

Yet, beside the simultaneously heart-breaking and heart-warming media accounts relating to refugees and sport, there remains the need to understand more this relationship beyond what transpires from the headlines. This requires also contextualising sport amid political processes and public perceptions that are often far less hopeful and welcoming for people seeking asylum than the narratives focused on the “power of sport” to integrate refugees seem to consider.

The research that I conducted with [several colleagues](#) in the UK and [internationally](#) is focusing on these issues. Here are three main points to consider when trying to take seriously, **but not for granted**, how sport can be a relevant domain in contexts of forced migration:

### **1. Binary narratives and stereotypical approaches**

[As research has shown](#), public media and political representations tend to describe people seeking asylum in binary terms, as either, [a threat to the nation](#) or [traumatised victims](#). These stereotypical assumptions often [inform narrow understandings](#) about how sport can be “useful” for refugees. Furthermore, these understandings have often [gendered and racialised connotations](#) especially when related to refugees from the Global South.

For refugee women who are often seen through the lenses of [victimhood and vulnerability](#), sport-for-refugees initiatives tends to be disproportionately understood as a form of [“liberation” from an inherent cultural oppression](#), or [“healing” from trauma](#). For refugee men, who are generally perceived with suspicion and as a risk, the same initiatives are deemed to [transmit “Western values”, and positively “channel” potentially disruptive energies](#). These general perceptions understand and deploy sport as a tool to educate refugees to “fit in” in the host country without much recognition to their diverse needs, experiences, perspectives, and capacities. In these cases, established ways of framing sport, refugees and integration can reinforce the idea that people seeking asylum and refugees [are a “problem to be solved”](#), and risks reiterating problematic assumptions, distinctions, and “solutions” towards the issue.

## **2. Inclusive narrative and pervasive barriers**

While sport is seen as a universal language of exchange and socialisation, organizational arrangements in sport clubs and organizations often deny people seeking asylum and refugees the right to play beyond *ad-hoc* sport-for-refugees schemes. Registration in local or mainstream clubs, [deemed by some scholars as a key pathway for inclusion](#), occurs through national sport federations that follow international regulations. Yet, these regulations often imply burdensome registration processes and requirements shown to constitute [major obstacles to participation](#) for people seeking asylum and refugees. Overcoming barriers to “mainstream” sport access requires time and resources that refugee-supporting charities focused on [meeting basic needs with stretched resources](#) often cannot provide. Worse of, sport organizations or federations seem to [have no interest or incentives to](#) address these hurdles. Barriers to sport participation thus compound on [forms of exclusion](#) that often [take a huge toll](#) on people seeking asylum and refugees, [especially for young people](#).

## **3. From “burden” and “threat” to rights, needs and capabilities**

Despite these important challenges, our research engaged with innovative initiatives that provided much-needed possibilities for people seeking asylum, refugees, and local communities to play sport. These programmes are often enacted by grassroots organizations and are, in many cases, guided by [anti-racist](#) and [LGBTIQ+ rights](#) activism. A shared premise of many of these initiatives is an acknowledgement that hostile political and public environments exacerbate the issues (isolation, destitution, poor health, vulnerability to exploitation) that many people seeking asylum face in receiving countries. These premises complicate established understandings of “refugee issues” as related to trauma experienced before or during their journeys to sanctuary, “culture shock”, or cultural oppression, and highlight different standpoints to appreciate the relevance of sport with refugees.

A distinctive element of such initiatives is that they co-create sport and leisure spaces with refugees and people seeking asylum that displace the distinction between “beneficiaries” and “providers”, “guests” and “hosts”, but are based on the recognition that [“everyone is from somewhere”](#).

These initiatives also showed that addressing the issue of forced migration through sport and leisure is vital not just for people seeking asylum but for “host” populations as well. Contrary to ideas of refugees as a burden or a threat to cohesion, co-creating with refugees spaces ranging from a [weekly football space](#) to a [table-tennis club](#) have shown to address needs that span across “newcomers” and “natives”, especially amid long-running [cuts to funding for public spaces and community resources](#). By creating opportunities where the need for social justice and the [shared pleasure of movement](#) meet, these initiatives have shown the relevance of sporting initiatives beyond widespread understanding of sport [as a solution](#) for refugees’ integration. While these initiatives remain relatively rare and small-scale, there is potential for sport and community organizations to learn from them to create opportunities to shape sporting [spaces of belonging](#) built on rights, needs and [capabilities](#). Paying attention and learning from these approaches can help us see what has been missing in flashy reports on the unifying power of sport and gloomy accounts of “migrants’ invasion”.