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# EXCHANGE REPORT



**Desirability of women only provisions –  
Insights from the exchanges among the SWUP  
project community**

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## WHAT IS THE REPORT ABOUT?

This report is a synthesis of the issues regarding the desirability of creating women only provisions (activities or spaces) that have been exchanged in the framework of SWUP project. SWUP (Sport for Women in Urban Places)<sup>1</sup> is a project funded by the Erasmus+ fund of the European Union to enhance women participation in outdoor physical activities. The project's activities are meant to shed light on why and how to design women friendly urban environments for outdoor physical activity.

Other five topics, besides the one addressed in this report, have been identified and discussed by the project's partners: the role of municipality, the role of women in executive sport positions, child-friendly approach, local impact generated by outdoor sport activities and activities and infrastructures for disabled women.

Information was collected through ad hoc oral exchanges that the partners had during the SWUP project and through the contributions that the project partners and other interested actors exchanged in the online forum<sup>2</sup> hosted in the project website.

This report is organized in 3 sections. The first section will present the topic. The second section will gather and analyze the contributions that the partners and other interested stakeholders exchanged on the topic during the project. Finally, the last section is an expanded bibliography that reports suggested readings and links on the topic.

## 1. DESIRABILITY OF WOMEN ONLY PROVISIONS: A LITTLE INTRODUCTION ON THE TOPIC

Sports and public spaces are both societal domains, traditionally constructed for and dominated by men. Despite large developments in women's participation in (outdoors) sports and recreational physical activities, women experience more and different (gender specific) barriers compared to men.<sup>3</sup> In general, compared to men, women are less socialized in (outdoor) sports, experience more time constraints due to higher child care responsibilities and higher unsafety in public (green) spaces.<sup>4</sup>

Sport in general and specifically competitive (team) sports are still mainly gender segregated practices. This is only partly due to biological sex differences (eg. speed and strength) that are relevant for creating level playing fields in most sports. Apart from such relevant discriminating gender structures in competitive sports to enhance fair play on the field, sport activities and places are also gendered due to mainly socio-cultural inequalities. For example, until 1971, women were not allowed to play football by the European football federations and its national federations in Europe. And even though women's football is a very popular sport nowadays in many countries in Europe and around the globe, many people still regard football as a primarily

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.swup-project.eu/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.swup-project.eu/forum-swup/>

<sup>3</sup> See for example: Aitchison (2003), Beebeejaun (2017), Hargreaves & Anderson (2018), Fenster (2005), Scraton & Watson, 1998; <https://urbact.eu/gender-sensitive-public-space-placemaking-and-spatial-justice-through-perspective-gender>.

<sup>4</sup> See also Davadaki (2016), Dellas & Elling (2018).

masculine activity. For many other forms of sport and physical activities, similar gendered attitudes still exist, resulting in a much stronger (outdoor) sport socialization for boys and girls, disregarding the mistakably emancipatory progress that has taken place as well in many, many western, countries in Europe and worldwide. Moreover, an explicit 'male gaze' and possible annoying and violent behavior may discourage many girls and women from being active in outdoor public spaces, including recreational and less traditionally gendered activities like cycling, running, walking and swimming. Such gendered socialization and socio-spatial fragmentation processes may be enlarged for specific groups of women, like girls and women from lower socio-economic strata, ethnic minority girls and women, young and elderly women.

Achieving more gender equality by increasing women's opportunities in outdoor sport/physical activity participation can be realized by different strategies. Better incorporation of gender specific needs in general city planning and in the development of outdoor sport facilities and/or activities is important to enhance gender equality. However, such mainstreaming measures alone may not be enough to realize change and specific treatment may be required as well for creating gender equity, meaning the provision of fairness and justice in the distribution of benefits and responsibilities between women and men, according to their respective needs.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas 'direct sex discrimination', or the unfavorable treatment on grounds of sex is prohibited in all European countries, simultaneously, positive action measures that provide advantages for disadvantaged groups are often allowed and sometime regarded necessary to counteract historically grown gender inequalities.<sup>6</sup> With respect to sport and physical activity this would suggest that apart from promoting more inclusive public sport and physical activity spaces for both genders, simultaneously women-only groups or public spaces (e.g. swimming areas) could be created or facilitated/supported to further enhance the participation and experienced safety of all girls and women in outdoor sport/physical activities.

We asked the project partners to provide possible examples of public or private women-only outdoor sport/physical activity spaces or activities (in their cities) and to provide arguments pro /contra women-only outdoor sport spaces or activities

## 2. MAIN HIGHLIGHTS ON THE TOPIC FROM THE PROJECT'S EXCHANGES

Although many girls and women may not need women-only provisions to become or remain active, we argue that for many others, more gender sensitive mixed gender facilities may not be enough to encourage participation. For many girls and women - including more privileged groups like white, higher educated women - (temporarily) women-only spaces and activities may be helping to overcome experienced barriers or even a necessity to become active. This may be especially the case for specific, often less privileged, groups of women (e.g. pregnant women, migrant women, elderly women). We are also aware that although specific measures may sometime be more effective to enhance women's outdoor sport participation, women's only spaces/groups are also more likely to face resistance, both by men and women. Such resistance may be stronger when facilitating women-only groups or spaces is paid with public money and directed to include religious minorities, like Muslim women.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.caaws.ca/gender-equity-101/what-is-gender-equity/>

<sup>6</sup> See for example United Nations (1999).

From the discussion among SWUP partners became clear that the issue of women-only activities or spaces indeed created debate with both advocates and opponents. Overall, the project partners did not give many examples of women only sport activities or spaces from their own cities or countries. Nevertheless, from the discussion and (Internet) search, we conclude that creating women-only activities or spaces certainly is not only something of past (second wave) feminist movement, but a phenomenon of current times in many western societies, maybe partly enhanced by a worldwide revival of feminism and calls for gender equity, including the #Me Too movement.

### **Examples of public or private women-only outdoor sport/physical activity spaces**

Examples of women only activities may be national or local governmental initiatives (e.g. Sport England); municipalities ('Sports au Feminine' in Strasbourg), initiatives of NGO's (e.g. many walking initiatives like Be-InterActive) or private commercial initiatives (e.g. fitness centres like Curves, surfing school).<sup>7</sup>

\* Women-only swimming spaces/hours may be the longest existing and most widespread (temporarily) created women only physical activity spaces around the world. Traditionally such sex separated spaces were created since boys/men and girls/women were not allowed to be swimming together, as is still the case in several mainly Islamic countries in the Middle East. But women-only swimming spaces/hours have continued to exist in many western countries, including Switzerland (Frauenbad Stadthausquai in Zurich) and have revitalized in modern times, partly due to immigration, but also as specific stimulation program for all girls and women (see for example the programme *This girl can swim* by Sport England).

\* Women-only gyms have started to appear in many large cities over the world, including many western European cities. For example, Curves has 4000 locations, including in England, France, Germany, Portugal and Spain.

\* Walking/cycling initiatives for (specific groups) of women, like pregnant women, immigrant women or older women. Examples are community-based walking or cycling initiatives for (migrant) women like *Be-InterActive* in the Netherlands, *Herring Cycles* in Denmark and *This Mum Runs* in the United Kingdom.

\* Pink Parkour, a French association that organizes only-for women-classes of Parkour, a method of physical training that develops one's ability to overcome obstacles (both physical and mental) in the urban environment.

### **Arguments pro/contra women-only outdoor sport spaces or activities**

Current arguments propagating women only activities and/or spaces still reflect those given by feminist sport professionals and sociologists in the nineteen nineties:

*'Separatism provides particular benefits to women in practical ways as well. The provision of closed space for women in the form of women only sport sessions is increasingly popular. The opportunity to be in an*

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<sup>7</sup> See also Intellectual Output 5 - SW-UP Good practices catalogue: [http://www.swup-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/2-SWUP\\_Goof\\_Practices\\_07-2018.pdf](http://www.swup-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/2-SWUP_Goof_Practices_07-2018.pdf)

*area with other members of their own sex is a 'luxury' which many women seldom enjoy. It provides important opportunities for female bonding, frees women from the discrimination and sexism which they experience on a day to day basis and provides them with a sense of control and autonomy which they otherwise lack [...]. For many women closed space removed the fear of harassment, ridicule and inhibition which they would experience in mixed groups and provided the only setting to gain confidence and enjoyment in their sporting bodies. And it is the only condition under which some women will participate in physical activities, for religious or cultural reasons.'* (Hargreaves, 1994, p.32).

In the live/online discussion several partners mentioned similar arguments in favor of women-only sport spaces/activities:

- *'pro women arguments derive by the benefits that women would gain in terms of physical, mental and social health by removing the barriers that prevent them from having an active lifestyle' [which is associated with many potential advantages relating to health and a positive psychosocial development...] outdoor only-for-women places would also provide women and girls with an alternative avenue for participation in the social and cultural life of their communities and promote enjoyment of freedom of expression, interpersonal networks, new opportunities and increased self-esteem [...]*

*more specifically, only-for-women sport places help addressing the needs of specific categories of the population. They help to address the traditions of Islamic modesty in dress and the requirements for women's sport to take place in a single-sex environment. They provide a double benefit to women with disabilities by providing affirmations of self-empowerment at both personal and collective levels. Designing spread sports places and short courses also help to address the short time that women can devote to themselves because of the time-consuming role they often play in the management of the family[...]*

*only for women sport spaces also promote concentration and a distressed atmosphere of the sport activity [with less focus on] competition and rules created by women rather than passively received by man-oriented infrastructures [...]*

*women's increased involvement can promote positive evolution in sport by providing alternative norms, values, attitudes, knowledge, capabilities and experiences.'*

- *'Women-only outdoor sport spaces/activities provide the comfort feeling (which they may not feel in situations of sport practice with men around);*

*Women may feel more save from harassment or bullying situations;*

*Women-only spaces may give a better response to women's needs;*

*It is easier to overcome socio-cultural barriers that still exist, consequently, increasing the number of women to practice sport on a regular basis.'*

- *'The only positive comment that I encounter when organizing activities for women only is to facilitate the dynamics of the activity. If the objectives of participants are the same, this will facilitate the planning and execution of activities and increase satisfaction of participants. But in no case do I think that it is a question of gender but of common objectives.'*

However, several partners were clear opponents of creating or supporting women only activities or places, since they argued that such initiatives do not fit with 'modern' ideas on stimulating gender equality but rather

are a step 'back in time' reproduce gender inequality. Also, in case of specific groups (especially ethnic minority women) sport as a 'means for integration' may be seen as more important than creating sport opportunities for all people.

- *'The first argument [of opponents] is that promoting only-for-women spaces would represent a step back in gender equality. It would perpetrate the idea of women as vulnerable people that need special treatments.*

*The second relates with the risk of spurring a further division between women that are already empowered enough to actually use those spaces, and those that, because of their religious or cultural norms, will not "dare" to do it. This could in turn lead to a further exclusion and cultural distance of marginalized women.*

*In addition, some highlight that "women's only" is useful for introducing skills, but at a higher-level gender mix is more beneficial. Once women have gained the basic skills, having men in the group is beneficial — it allows for complementary approaches and "it tends to push everyone to a more advanced level".*

- *'Regarding this issue in my opinion the best practice is to have places/activities for all. Social integration is one of the primary factors of sport, the values that are the basis do not fit the divisions that often tend to create. Only with the integration, the realization of activities, the creation of integrated spaces if a real culture of sharing is involved. Whether in sport or in other activities. Division creates problems and tends to be a non-solution in the future.'*
- *'First of all, it says [something] about specific needs for the female gender and when it says about adapting spaces, facilities and even urban planning so that women can practice physical activity ... I only think that this would be a reason to be [separate] in the case of people with special needs and common objectives such as pregnant women, migrant women with very restricted cultures, or groups of people - whether men or women - with a degree of disability. If this is not the case, I don't think there is reason to have to segregate people in order to promote and encourage physical activity and sport in the population.*

*I agree with the comment that promoting spaces solely for women represents a step back in gender equality. In my opinion, we should not promote the idea that the female gender needs special treatment and even less to promote physical and sporting activity, which I think is one of the most powerful resources we have in our society to create great communities, share passions and overcome obstacles!'*

- *'By creating women-only activities or spaces, we are reproducing the sociocultural barriers that still exist and, in many cases, preventing women and men from sharing the same spaces and sports activities;*

*By doing this "segregation", we are assuming a gender gap, which is not justified;*

*By creating exclusive activities for women, we can get the idea that all other sport activities are not for women (or other places), but for men only. Socially there will be a tendency to associate women to certain kind of activities or spaces. Is no sense.*

*An exclusive practice will be contradictory to the concept of inclusive sport that is due in a modern society of the 21st century.'*

From these arguments it becomes clear that several partners consider women-only activities as inconceivable with a gender-inclusive sport. However, we regard women-only activities certainly not as an alternative for other policy initiatives in making 'mainstream' sport and recreational activities more inclusive and creating a

wide variety of outdoor sporting activities and spaces. But we maintain in our argument that even in current modern societies, women-only activities and spaces, form a welcome and sometimes even necessary additional provision in creating accessible, enjoyable and safe sporting opportunities for *all* girls and women. We argue that women-only provisions do fit a feminist vision or agenda to realize gender equity in sport for girls and women of all ages, ethnic/racial backgrounds, religions, educational levels, socio-economic positions, and gender/sexual identities. Such women-only sport provisions may positively contribute to women's health and psychosocial development and contribute to women's emancipation in further realizing their equal right to sport and recreational physical activity, to the city and to everyday life.

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### Others:

Title: For the girls

Author: Better

Abstract: Better is a leading social enterprise in the UK, committed to supporting the Sport England 'This Girl Can' campaign by offering several women only sport activities, like fitness classes and swimming, to support women to be more active and improve their confidence.

<https://www.better.org.uk/leisure-centre/activities/for-the-girls>

<https://www.better.org.uk/thisgirlcanswim>

Title: Empowering women in the outdoors: Why the white-hot interest?

Author: Sarah Barker

Abstract: article that reflects on the new trend of women-only trips, classes, social media campaigns?

<http://www.startribune.com/women-in-the-outdoors-x2009-why-all-the-white-hot-interest/431595953/>



## Exchange report

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Title: Gender sensitive public space? Placemaking and spatial justice through the perspective of gender

Author: Sally Kneeshaw

Abstract: Report of first URBACT Gender Equal Cities workshop in Stockholm in 2018

<https://urbact.eu/gender-sensitive-public-space-placemaking-and-spatial-justice-through-perspective-gender>

Title: London women only surf club

Author: Kylie Griffiths

<https://www.londongirlsurfclub.com/>