

Introduction

This brief report provides a summary of a consultation exercise with refugee women. The purpose of the consultation was threefold:

- To undertake preliminary work to understand, from the perspective of refugee women, whether they would be willing to participate in physical activity opportunities and under which conditions they would feel at ease and comfortable participating.
- To use the collected data to inform the development of funding applications centred on physical activity interventions for refugee women.
- To ensure that future funding applications adhere to the principles of co-production and place women at the forefront of the intervention design, enhancing its relevance, efficacy and potential for success.

Participants

In total, 16 refugee women participated in the consultation exercise. All participants had asylum seeker status.

Key findings

Experiences of physical activity

All participants have had positive experiences with physical activity. However, not all were active at the time of the consultation. Participants reported enjoying various physical activities, such as running, walking, dancing, practising yoga, badminton and going to the gym. These activities made them feel calmer and provided opportunities for socialisation.

Changes to the participants' physical activity levels upon their arrival in the UK

Multiple personal and environmental factors have affected women's participation in physical activity upon their arrival in the UK. These include:

- Access to exercise facilities due to factors associated with their asylum seeker status, e.g. lack of money
- Poor (rainy) weather
- Lack of transportation to leisure centres/gyms
- Lack of time, often due to caring responsibilities
- The unpredictability of their living situation
- Lack of activewear, e.g. sports bras, sports hijabs, modest swimming costumes, running shoes
- Inadequate distribution of information about locally available physical activity opportunities
- Physical health problems, e.g. issues with feet

Willingness to participate in community-based physical activity programmes

All participants stated that they would like to participate in physical activity programmes. Moreover, all participants expressed a willingness to engage in community-based physical activity opportunities. Motivators for participation in such opportunities included sharing experiences, having a good time, connecting with local communities, learning English (if English-speaking participants would also attend classes) and realising the physical health benefits of activity, such as weight management and stress reduction.

What constitutes a perfect physical activity programme?

A perfect physical activity programme, as perceived by the participants, would need to **accommodate their needs and responsibilities** (e.g., childcare, housework, mealtimes – especially if participants live in temporary accommodation for asylum seekers).

Some participants stated that they would like to bring their children to classes, while others felt that physical activity opportunities should be for women only.

When asked about the preferred **timings of sessions**, there was a clear preference for morning or early afternoon sessions (e.g., when children are at school).

In terms of **locations for physical activity** sessions, ratings were highest for being active at a **local leisure centre** and for **online classes** that could be attended at home. Online classes were preferred as a mode of delivery on cold and/or rainy days.

The weekly provision of group sessions was deemed sufficient by some.

Given the uncertainty about women's life situations, flexibility was considered an important attribute of the provision of physical activity.

Importantly, not being able to speak English was not perceived as a barrier to participation in mainstream, community-based physical activity programmes. Instead, the participants seemed excited about camaraderie and sociability.

However, **women-only classes** were considered essential for participants from Muslim backgrounds.

What would make participants feel at ease and comfortable participating in such programmes? What barriers would need to be overcome?

- Financial support was deemed essential to cover the costs of transport, classes, gym fees and the purchase of the right clothing and equipment.
- To help with anxiety linked to class attendance, some women felt that having an exercise buddy – a friend to attend classes with – would be helpful.
- The participants also stated that they would like to learn to swim.

Social opportunities linked to physical activity programmes

The participants welcomed the idea of taking part in social opportunities, such as meeting for coffee and cake after physical activity sessions.

Social media for boosting social connections

Similarly, the ability to communicate with physical activity group participants outside of the group setting, for example, via WhatsApp, was very appealing to the participants.

Things to take into account when organising future consultations

- The participants welcomed the hybrid mode of the consultation, as it facilitated attendance for those who otherwise might not have been able to attend due to, for instance, caring responsibilities.
- Interpreters may be required to ensure the inclusion of participants who do not speak English.

Summary

All participants stated that they would like to participate in physical activity programmes. Similarly, all participants expressed a willingness to engage in community-based physical activity opportunities. Motivators for participation in such opportunities included sharing experiences, having a good time, connecting with local communities, learning English and realising the physical health benefits of activity.

An ideal physical activity programme must accommodate participants' needs and responsibilities, offering flexibility (both online and in-person provision). It should be free of charge and locally available. Necessary exercise clothing, such as sports bras, modest swimming costumes and running shoes, should be provided. Ideas for opportunities to socialise outside of the physical activity group settings, such as meeting for coffee and cake or communicating via social platforms like WhatsApp, were especially appreciated.