

Report

# Sports participation and perceived barriers by Syrians in the Netherlands

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**The Mulier Institute conducts sports research for policy and society. For governments, social organizations, educational institutions, sports organizations and companies, we research all kinds of themes in the field of sports and sports-related exercise: from the sports participation of (groups of) Dutch citizens to the motor skills of children, and from diversity and inclusion in sports to the economic impact of sports events.**

The Mulier Institute is an independent non-profit foundation.

Our goal is to contribute to well-supported policies aimed at promoting sport, athletic exercise and strengthening the sports sector. We do this in several ways:

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We collect data and monitor the Dutch sports sector and policy programs.

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We develop knowledge and research methods through exploratory and in-depth studies.

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We interpret research findings and translate them into policy practice.

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We justify policy decisions with expertise and advice.

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We offer solicited and unsolicited interpretation and reflection in the role of 'critical friend' of the sports sector.

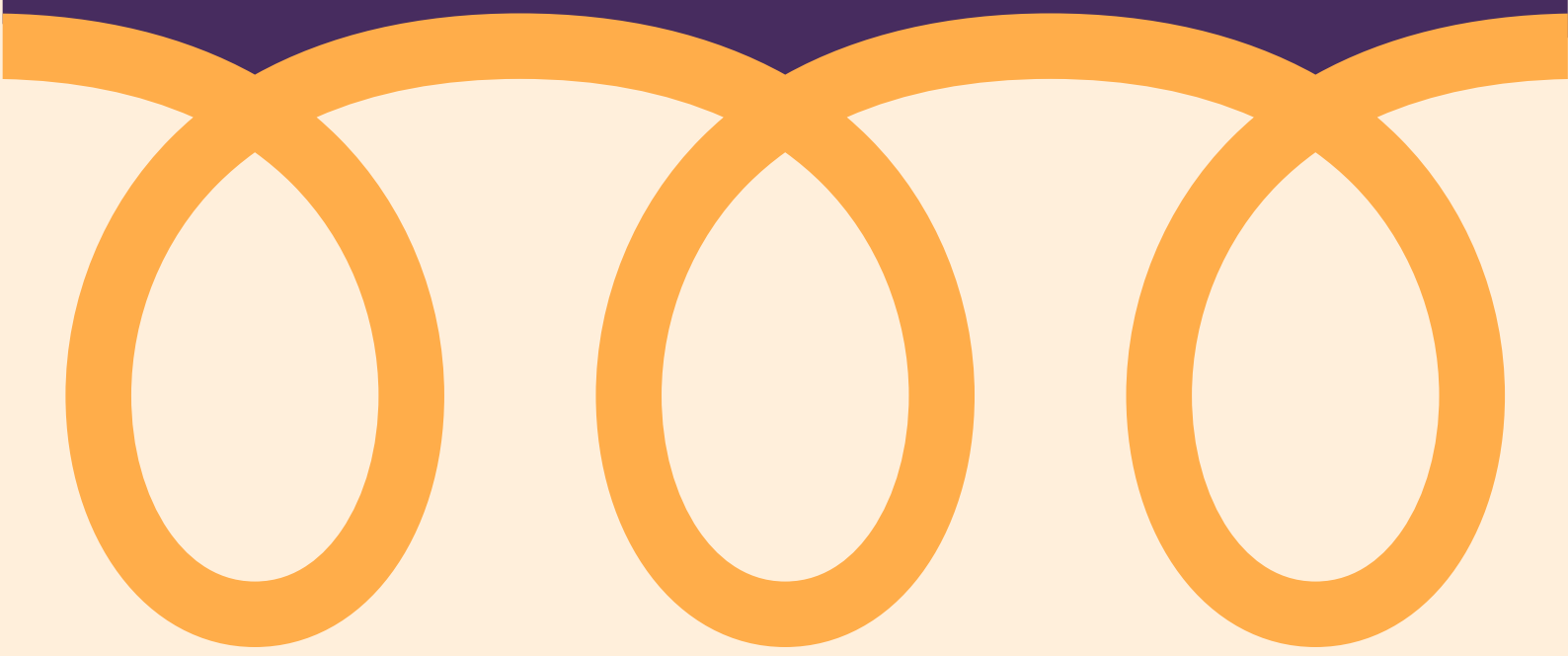
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We are committed to the advancement of sports science.

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# Syrians playing sports in the Netherlands

**In the Netherlands, there is a focus on improving the accessibility of sports for migrants. But this does not always include specific attention to newcomers besides the large groups from 'traditional' countries of origin, such as Suriname and Morocco. Syrians are a large 'new' migrant group in the Netherlands who have been understudied in sports research. Building on a 2020 report by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research, we want to gain more insight into sports experiences of Syrians in the Netherlands and their perceived barriers to engage in sports.**

## 1.1 Background

In the Netherlands, there is a focus on improving access to sports for migrants. Countering inequality and encouraging inclusion based on origin has been explicitly stated in the national sports policy called the 'Nationaal Sportakkoord' (Ministerie van VWS, 2018).

For example, in 2022, half of the municipalities deployed their community sports coaches to work with refugees (Gómez Berns & Van Stam, 2023). This is a large increase from previous years (2021: 37%; 2020: 34%; 2019: 34%). This was largely due to the influx of refugees from Ukraine (52%), but also to municipal policy goals (40%). In addition, in 2020, several ministries together with the Dutch Football Association (KNVB) launched an action plan against racism and discrimination in football.

There is, however, not always a focus on different groups of migrants, such as refugees and other newcomers, and their specific backgrounds and barriers. Because of possible trauma, insecurities and tension that reflect in physical and mental strains (Pharos, 2022; UNHCR, 2023), this is a group that may benefit from specific programs or personal help.

Previous research shows that for refugees, sports and exercise can have several benefits, such as for their physical and mental health, which are (and have been) under considerable pressure (Spaaij et al., 2019). Because of these benefits, it would be beneficial if asylum centers, where some refugees spend up to a couple of years, already start with activating their residents.

Research shows that at the moment, less than half of the asylum centers organize weekly sports for adults and a bit more than half for children (Dellas et al., 2022). People working at the centers did mention that sports and exercise can help to distract disturbed minds and ease some of the negative feelings.

In some cases, participating in sports can also be important for safety reasons, for example when it comes to swimming lessons. Research amongst refugees shows that parents want their children to learn how to swim, because there is a lot of water in the Netherlands (Van der Meijde et al., 2022). Parents are concerned about their children's safety when they're around water.

But parents also perceive barriers to teaching children to swim. For example, swimming lessons may not be a priority for everyone, due to for example an unstable living situation or financial problems. Searching for and arranging swimming lessons can also be difficult for parents because of a language barrier, a lack of understanding of the Dutch context, or a high administrative burden.

In addition, there is limited attention for diversity within the group of migrants, including different groups of refugees. There is, for example, little knowledge about preferences for and experiences with sports participation of Syrians living in the Netherlands.

Syrians are a large immigrant group in the Netherlands. On January 1, 2022, there were 126.260 Syrians living in the Netherlands (VluchtenlingenWerk Nederland, 2022).<sup>1</sup> This is largely due to the civil war in Syria, which caused many people to flee the country. Since 2011, this applies to more than 6 million people, over 1 million of whom have applied for asylum in Europe (Pharos, 2022; UNHCR, 2023).

In the Netherlands, there were 5.566 asylum applications made by Syrians in 2020, 14.904 in 2021 (VluchtenlingenWerk Nederland, 2022) and 12.280 in the first eight months of 2022 (Pharos, 2022). Of Syrians in the Netherlands, about two-thirds are male. It is a relatively young group: only 6 percent are older than 45 years.

Research shows that in 2019, two thirds (66%) of Syrians played sports one or more times per week (Uiters & Wijga, 2020). Men (68%) participate in weekly sports a bit more often than women (60%).

This is considerably higher than figures from 2016-2020 in the Netherlands among adults without a migration background (54%), people born in another country in Europe (46%), in a traditional migration country (39%; i.e. Morocco, Surinam, Turkey, former Dutch Antilles, Indonesia) or in another country outside Europe (45%) (Elling & Van den Dool, 2023). The high sports participation percentages that were found among Syrians can probably be explained by the relatively large presence of young men, while the data of Elling & Van den Dool are weighted for age.

Of Syrians in the Netherlands who participate in sports on a weekly basis, 62 percent play sports alone. Among women this is 71 percent (Uiters & Wijga, 2020). A minority play sports as members of an association or sports club (24%) or

<sup>1</sup> Of the classic migration countries, on January 1, 2022, the Netherlands had the largest number of migrants who were born in Turkey (205.000) Suriname (178.000) and Morocco (173.000) (CBS, 2023).

at a fitness center or other commercial provider (10%). From existing figures, the researchers conclude that the costs may be a reason for the low number of memberships and subscriptions.

Migrant groups in general – of whom many have lived in the Netherlands for a long time – are more likely to exercise at a commercial provider (54% of migrants born in a traditional migration country and 41% born in another country outside Europe) (Elling & Van den Dool, 2023).

## 1.2 Aim

In this study, we build on previous research by gathering more information about reasons why Syrians do or do not play sports in the Netherlands. For this purpose, we administered a questionnaire to Syrians living in the Netherlands.

## 1.3 Main question

What are the sports preferences of Syrians in the Netherlands and what barriers do they experience to playing sports?



### Reading guide

In this report, chapter 2 explains the research methodology. Chapter 3 discusses the results based on various sub-themes. In chapter 4, we draw conclusions and make recommendations for policy and practice.



# Methods

**For this study, we administered a questionnaire to Syrians in the Netherlands. This chapter discusses how we designed, administered and analyzed this questionnaire.**

## **Questionnaire**

Researchers at the Mulier Institute developed the questionnaire in English and then discussed it with Yadan Al Drayj, a Syrian journalist with humanitarian background and status holder living in the Netherlands who was involved in this research. This mostly changed a number of response options, such as the types of sports people participated in.

Yadan translated the questionnaire from English into Arabic. We programmed the questionnaire in English and Arabic so that the researchers could work with the English codebook. Yadan tested the Arabic questionnaire with the programmer and researcher present, so that adjustments could be made immediately.

## **Data collection and participants**

We initially distributed the questionnaire through online networks of Syrians and then further through contacts at VluchtelingenWerk Nederland in Amsterdam and Zeeland.

## **Analysis**

The researchers analyzed the closed questions in SPSS. Yadan translated the open-ended responses into English. Together we interpreted the results to reach appropriate conclusions.

# Results

This chapter presents the results of the questionnaire in six paragraphs:

- demographic data;
- sports participation;
- sports location;
- reasons for exercising;
- sports experiences;
- reasons for not exercising.

## 3.1 Demographic data

125 respondents completed the questionnaire. More men than women filled out the questionnaire: 30 percent of the respondents are women. 53 percent are between 16-29 years old, 46 percent between 30-55 years old. Most respondents do not have a partner (59%) or children (73%).

Two thirds (66%) have lived in the Netherlands for more than two years. Almost half (43%) of the respondents speak Dutch (very) well and half (51%) speak English (very) well. 6 percent do not speak Dutch or English. Most respondents mentioned secondary school (31%) or university (39%) as their highest completed form of education.

## 3.2 Sports participation

Figure 3.1 contains the sports participation of respondents in Syria (S) and in the Netherlands (NL). Just over half of the respondents participated in sports in Syria and do so in the Netherlands too. Almost a quarter did participate in sports in Syria, but no longer or not yet do so in the Netherlands. A small group did not participate in sports in Syria, but does so in the Netherlands. One in six respondents (17%) did not play sports in Syria or in the Netherlands.

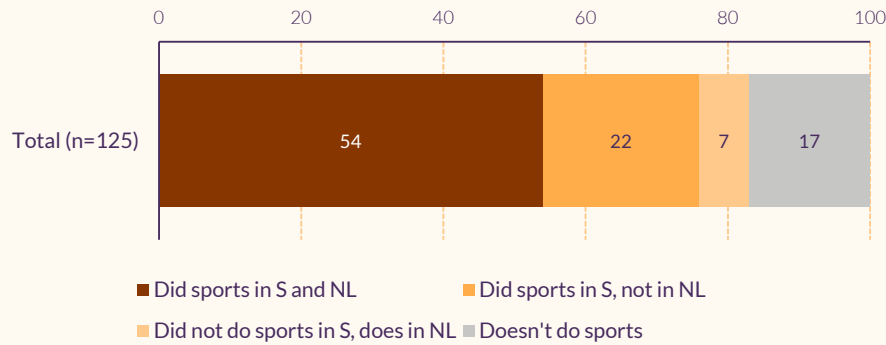
Overall, three quarters of respondents played sports in Syria (76%) and a slightly smaller group (61%) plays sports in the Netherlands. Of those who play sports in the Netherlands (n=71), three quarters play sports weekly (76%).

Respondents who have lived in the Netherlands for more than two years participate in sports more often (69%) than those who have lived in the Netherlands for less than two years (50%).

**Figure 3.1**

**Sports participation of respondents in Syria (S) and in the Netherlands (NL)**

(in percentages, n=117)



Source: Mulier Institute, questionnaire 'Sports experiences of Syrians in the Netherlands', 2023.

### 3.3 Sports location

The most popular sports in Syria were bodybuilding (31%), football (28%), swimming (27%) and fitness (21%). Among women, fitness and fast walking were the most popular; among men, soccer, bodybuilding and swimming. In the Netherlands, the most popular sports among both men and women are bodybuilding and fitness.

Most respondents who participate in sports do so at a gym (49%), outside by themselves (38%), at a sports club (25%) or at home (26%). Women most often exercise outside, at home by themselves or at a sports club. Men most often exercise at a gym or outside by themselves. Sports facilities or free spaces that allow for safe exercising (for example, parks, organized streets that guarantee safe spaces for walking or running) are much more available in the Netherlands than in Syria.

### 3.4 Reasons for exercising

The top three reasons for participating in sports in Syria and the Netherlands were for physical health, because it is fun and to get fit (see figure 3.2). Respondents mention physical health more often as an important reason in the Netherlands than in Syria (86% vs. 65%). The same is true for mental health (54% vs. 35%).

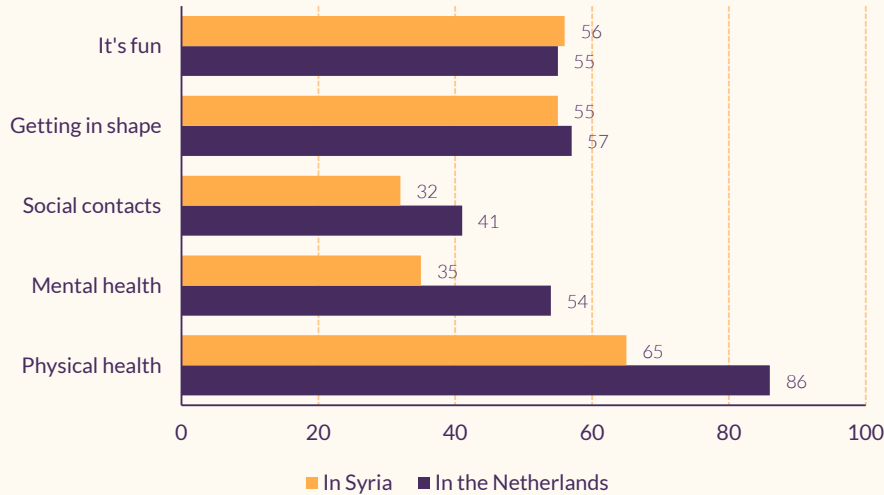
A possible reason for the increase in exercising for physical and mental health is that a healthy life, whether physical or psychological, is an important part of the Dutch culture, more than in Syria. The relatively young respondent group could be more receptive to this Dutch culture, or to adopting it, also through access to the internet and social media.

Other possible reasons for the more frequent mention of sports for mental health are that many refugees have experienced traumatic experiences, are still living in uncertainty regarding paid work and permanent residence, or are experiencing concerns about family members and friends still living in Syria (Pharos, 2022; UNHCR, 2023).

**Figure 3.2**

**Reasons for doing sports in the Netherlands and in Syria**

(in percentages, n=69 for answers that relate to the Netherlands, n=84 for answers that relate to Syria, multiple answers possible)



Source: Mulier Institute, questionnaire 'Sports experiences of Syrians in the Netherlands', 2023.

### 3.5 Sports experiences

Figure 3.3 shows experiences of respondents who play sports in the Netherlands (n=63). A number of things stand out. For example, few respondents want to play sports to get in touch with Dutch people. Also, most respondents would not join a sports club where they would have to pay money as well as do volunteer work. This is as true for respondents who have been here less than two years as it is for those who have been here longer. It is more true for respondents who speak little or no Dutch (72%) than for those who speak it (very) well (47%).

Two in three respondents who participate in sports, say they do not feel comfortable at a Dutch sports club. Also, more than six in ten respondents have experienced or fear discrimination at a sports club.

About half of the respondents (both men and women) seem to prefer to exercise with people of the same gender. One woman explained that she prefers to exercise at a sports club for women where there are no cameras, because she wears a hijab. Especially men also prefer to play sports with people of the same culture or who speak the same language (44% vs. 27% of women).

These issues might contribute to most respondents not being able to find a sports club or gym where they feel sufficiently comfortable.

Of the respondents who have lived in the Netherlands for more than two years, the majority cannot find a sports club or gym they like (81%). They also experience that they cannot afford the membership to a sports club or gym (35%). The ones who have been in the Netherlands for a shorter time are less likely to experience these barriers. They may have had less experience with sports in the Netherlands.

**Figure 3.3**  
**Experiences of respondents who participate in sports in the Netherlands**  
 (in percentages who 'agree', n=63)



Source: Mulier Institute, questionnaire 'Sports experiences of Syrians in the Netherlands', 2023.

### 3.6 Reasons for not participating in sports

Respondents who do not play sports in the Netherlands (n=39) mentioned that they do not feel comfortable due to language or cultural barriers (37%), have too many things on their minds (35%), do not have the financial resources (33%) and/or do not have people to exercise with (30%).

Hardly anyone does not exercise because they do not like sports, because they are too old, because they do not have transportation, because their partner/family does not allow it, because they have experienced discrimination or are afraid of it, or because they do not want to do volunteer work at the sports club.

Respondents mentioned several options that would help them to participate in sports: financial help (36%), someone to help them join a club (27%), time to arrange things (25%), becoming more comfortable in Dutch (25%), friends who do the same sport (20%) and someone to motivate them to be physically active (18%). Hardly anyone mentioned gender segregated sports or not wanting to participate in sports.

# Conclusions & recommendations

**In this final chapter, we summarize the main findings and make recommendations for practice and policy.**

## Conclusion

### Sports participation and location

Not all respondents who played sports in Syria also play sports in the Netherlands. Helping this group in particular to join sports of their preference, deserves attention.

Individual sports are mainly popular, such as bodybuilding, fitness and fast walking. Women most often do sports outside or at home; men most often in a gym or outside. Because of the well-organized and safe (outdoor) space in the Netherlands to exercise, Syrians (mainly women) may experience more freedom to exercise.

### Reasons for participating in sports

Respondents who play sports mostly do so because they enjoy it. They also play sports for their physical and mental health. They mention these reasons to play sports more often in the Netherlands than in Syria. This may be because in the Netherlands, sports and health are a bigger part of the culture.

It is also possible that due to the traumas experienced and the challenges of building a new life in the Netherlands, there are more mental health problems. Sport and exercise can provide a solution or outlet here (Pharos, 2018). At the same time, it offers an opportunity for Syrians to make new contacts and learn about Dutch (sports) culture (Kenniscentrum Sport, 2017).

### Sports experiences

Syrians in the Netherlands who play sports often do not feel comfortable at a Dutch sports club. This may be because they also must do volunteer work, with which they are less familiar, or because they do not feel at home in the sports environment or even experience discrimination.

Our research shows that most respondents who play sports, have had experiences with discrimination or are afraid of it. Research by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (Dagevos & Miltenburg, 2020) also showed that many Syrian status holders have experiences with discrimination in the Netherlands.

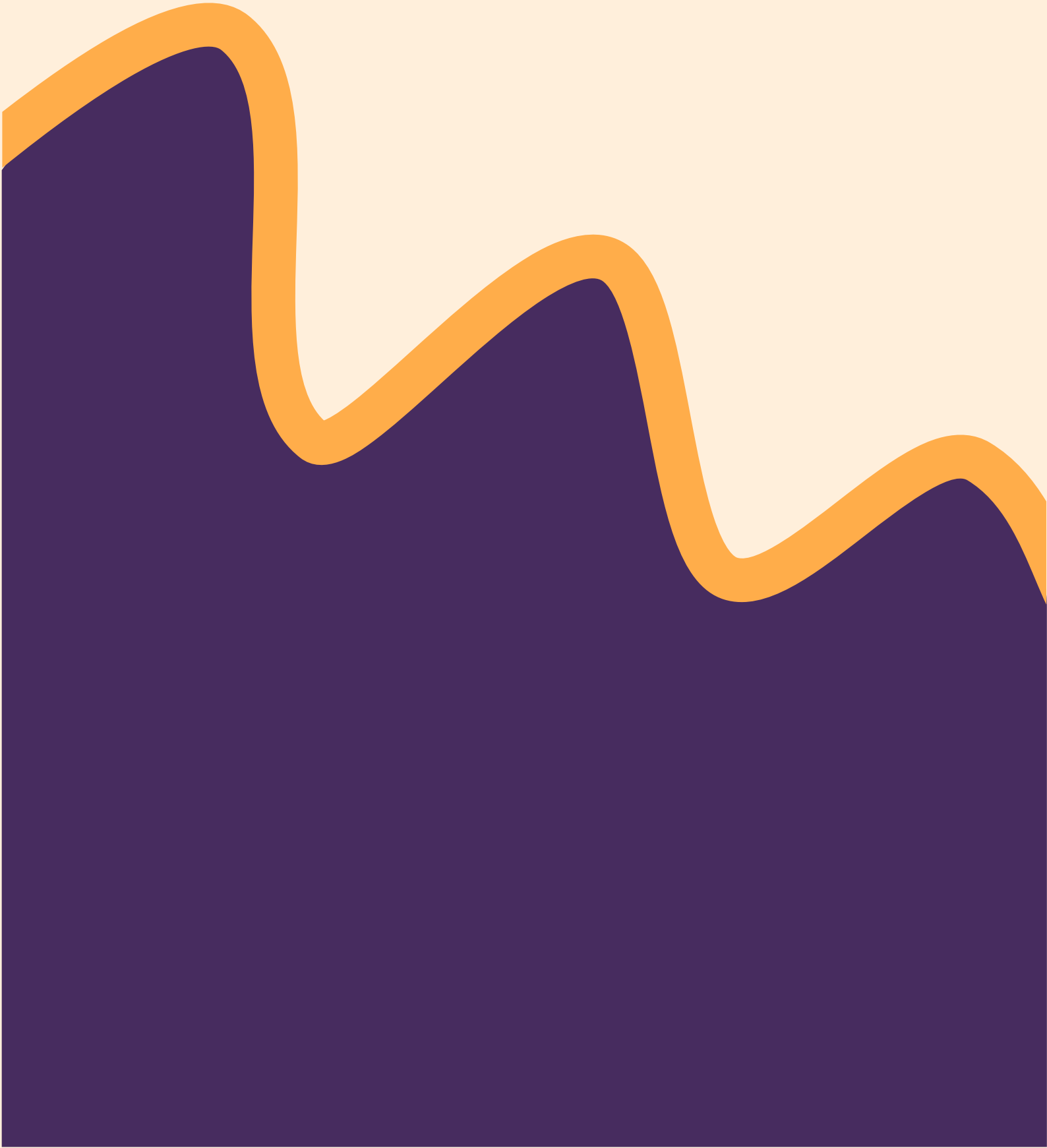
### **Reasons for not participating in sports**

Syrians in the Netherlands who do not play sports, experience a lack of confidence and sense of belonging at sports associations. They also lack the time, resources or social network to participate in sports or exercise activities.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, we make the following recommendations to (local) policy makers and sports and exercise professionals:

- Put more effort in sports and exercise promotion among Syrian and other refugee groups. Facilitate and support exercise and sports in outdoor spaces, with commercial sports providers and through self-organization, in addition to sports at sports clubs.
- Create welcoming and safe sports environments for refugees, and more broadly for people with migration backgrounds. Actively pursue anti-discrimination policies at sports venues and sports associations.
- Ensure that Syrians, and refugees in general, are better informed and supported to make use of existing financial schemes and personal support (e.g. exercise coach, community sports coaches). This requires more and better local collaboration between sport, care and welfare work, which relates to local sport and prevention agreements.
- Recognize that Syrians in the Netherlands may not yet be ready to discover the Dutch sports context. For example, because they have too many other things on their minds or do not yet have the required social network.





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