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genderstudies



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IMPRESSUM

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"Sport is the backbone of who I am" – An interview with Betelihem Brehanu Alemu

Betelihem Brehanu Alemu MSc is a doctoral researcher at the Institute of Sport Science at the University of Bern. She investigates the role of sports in the social integration process of migrant women in Switzerland. Alemu argues for the importance of letting migrants have their own narrative in migration research.

| Pascal Kohler*

What role has sport played in your life?

I grew up in Ethiopia with my two older brothers. They were allowed to play on the streets but I was not. I didn't see any difference between us. I was just as strong as them, maybe even stronger. But sports in general and football in particular were perceived as masculine. Later on, through sports, I could come together with others and just play. I could set any goal in that pitch and my background didn't matter. After I left Ethiopia to pursue education, it also allowed me to access quality education, which I couldn't have afforded. So from little Betty in Ethiopia up until now, sport is the backbone of who I am.

Were there also disempowering aspects to it?

Yes. I grew up in an orphanage, so sports mostly took part in the streets. The quality facilities were just not accessible for us. However, as I have already said, girls were not supposed to be kicking a ball, especially not in public space. Later on, it became more complicated. In Ethiopia, I didn't grow up with a concept of race. Ethnicity and religion were the base of social identity. But in the US, the color of my skin began to matter. I have a few unpleasant memories such as people refusing to shake my hand and calling me the n-word or referees judging me more aggressively than my white teammates. I have witnessed and experienced similar things here. Also, people tell me that I make these things up in my head. Supposedly, racism doesn't exist here. This discourages participation. But at the end of the day, it doesn't change my love for sports.

What exactly are you investigating in your research?

I investigate the role of sports in the social integration process of migrant women in Switzerland. My study tries to understand self-initiated informal sport settings in public playgrounds and facilities. The literature focuses on formal sport settings, in which men are overrepresented, so I asked myself: "Where do women go to do sports?" I wanted to identify the hidden informal networks that have existed for such a long time. And importantly, I wanted my participants to have their own narrative.

What do you mean by letting them have their own narrative?

In my discipline integration is often understood as a

job done by a third party. In that view, migrants and refugees are waiting to be helped. However, every day they create and maintain networks that are good for them and address their problems. They use sports as a way to challenge the societal narrative that renders them as lazy and disobedient. They say: "If we are not given the opportunities we are creating them. In that way, we can stay socially and physically active, and through that, we mobilize networks that help us to find housing, employment, education, and also to integrate into the host community." In other words, they are the active agents of their integration process.

In your recent presentation at our lecture series you mentioned racism as a problem your participants experience. How do these experiences manifest themselves?

Racism shows up in different forms, such as people calling the police when they see a group of Black women jogging. Or they are told: "You are not welcome here." However, it's not limited to sports. From the moment of their arrival, they have constantly been told that they need to integrate, which often carries an assimilationist notion. They are not allowed to maintain things that are important to them, such as their language. They wait years to get a decision on their legal status not knowing what the future holds for them. So how can they feel integrated? The concept is too one-sided. Migrants are expected to do all the work and assimilate.

What needs to be done regarding gender and sport in Switzerland?

We need to include migrants in the planning, designing, and evaluation of sport programs instead of putting them in separate rooms. At Unisport, for instance, refugees are allowed to use some of the facilities, but only among themselves. Such programs are well intended but they are not fully capitalizing on their potential for integration, as refugees and migrants do not get to do sports alongside students. If migrants were part of the planning of such programs, participation would be much more sustainable.

*Pascal Philipp Kohler studies Social Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Bern. He works as a student assistant at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Studies.