



Exploring Motivations, Benefits and Barriers for Women with Disabilities in Sport Practices

Authors' contribution:

- A) conception and design of the study
- B) acquisition of data
- C) analysis and interpretation of data
- D) manuscript preparation
- E) obtaining funding

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Received: 29.01.2025

Accepted: 08.04.2025

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to discover the physical and sporting reality of women with disabilities in the Basque Country (Spain), focusing on the benefits, barriers and motivations for practising sport. Although there are around 61,000 women with disabilities in the region, data about their participation in sport are scarce and lack disaggregated analysis, which hinders the development of inclusive policies.

Through in-depth interviews with 10 women, we investigated their experiences in sport, their motivations, benefits and the barriers they face. The main motivations for engaging in sport included pleasure, socialisation, self-improvement and escape from stress. In terms of benefits, participants cited physical improvements, increased self-esteem and the strengthening of support networks.

However, a number of barriers were also identified, including the masculinisation of sport, lack of accessible resources and personal limitations, such as low self-esteem. The study emphasises the importance of creating accessible environments and adapted programmes, as well as providing personalised attention to encourage the participation of women with disabilities.

In conclusion, the full inclusion of this group in sport requires a transformation of the range of activities on offer and an approach that recognises and addresses their specific needs, thus promoting their empowerment and well-being in society.

Keywords: women; disability; physical exercise; motivations; barriers

Introduction

The social inclusion of people with disabilities has been a central issue in the field of human rights, an approach or paradigm that seeks to ensure that all people, regardless of their abilities, can participate fully in community life and enjoy the same rights and opportunities (UN, 2006; WHO & World Bank, 2011). In this framework, physical-sport practice emerges not only as a means to improve health and physical well-being,

but also as a powerful tool for social integration and the promotion of equality (Asis Roig, 2017). Gender and disability are related in such a way that women with some kind of disability are placed in an unequal position with respect to men and people in general without disabilities (Ramírez-Morera, 2016). This inequality is also evident in the field of sport (Vaquero-Cristóbal et al., 2024), as women tend to have an even lower rate of sporting activity than men with disabilities, mainly due to the barriers they encounter that limit their access to and participation in

sporting activities (Olasagasti et al., 2023). It is therefore urgent and necessary to address this phenomenon through studies that make their reality visible.

Current statistics indicate that there are approximately 61,000 women with disabilities in the Basque Country (Spain). However, official reports on the physical activity of the population do not break down this figure according to disability and gender, which hides the true extent of inequality in terms of participation levels. For example, the EUSTAT Living Conditions Survey (2015) revealed that while there is an increase in the number of women who are physically active, there is a lack of data showing the situation of women with disabilities; the same applies to the Report on equality between women and men (EUSTAT, 2019) and the Health Survey (Osakidetza, 2023). This lack of complete and disaggregated data hinders the development of inclusive policies and the implementation of effective strategies to promote the participation of these women in society in general (Lazcano & Madariaga, 2024) and in sport in particular (UNESCO, 2024).

The practice of physical and sporting activities has many benefits that go beyond the physical sphere. Active participation in sports contributes to improved self-esteem, confidence and social skills. Regular physical activity is related to the reduction of symptoms of anxiety and depression, offering opportunities for socialisation and empowerment (Sauleda et al., 2021). Through sport, women can build networks of support and companionship, which is fundamental to their emotional well-being (Agustín-Sierra & Aparicio-García, 2023). However, for these activities to be effective in promoting health and social inclusion, it is necessary to develop accessible environments and programmes specifically designed to meet the needs of this group.

One of the keys to promoting and encouraging participation in physical-sports activities is the need to generate and maintain motivation on the part of the participant, so that they develop a long-term commitment to the practice (Azid et al., 2023). It is easier to foster such commitment if the person is intrinsically motivated (Englert & Taylor, 2021). However, women are less likely to participate in physical activities as they encounter a greater number of barriers without being able to achieve the minimum recommendations for practising sport (Varela-Mato et al., 2012).

Given this scarcity of studies and data on women with disabilities in physical and sporting matters and taking into account the benefits of sport, the importance of motivation for its practice and the number of barriers they encounter, this study aims to discover the sporting reality of women with disabilities in the Basque Country (Spain). By incorporating the perspective of gender in this analysis, the aim is to make the experiences of these women visible and to contribute to the design of effective strategies that promote their inclusion in the sporting sphere and, therefore, in society in general.

Method

For the present study, a qualitative methodology was used, consisting of in-depth interviews with women with disabilities who practise physical sports in the Basque Country (Spain).

Sample

Ten women participated in the study with an average age of 36.2 years, their disability is mainly intellectual (40%) and 70% have had a disability since birth. In terms of sporting practice, 50% of the participants practised sport both individually (crossfit, zumba, rowing, surfing and swimming) and collectively (basketball, football, goalball). Regarding the duration of practice, 60% of the women participants have been practising for less than 5 years. The following table shows the characteristics of the sample:

Table 1. Sample description

		f	%
Type of disability	Intellectual	4	40
	Physical	3	30
	Sensorial	1	10
	Other	2	20
Disability origin	Born	7	70
	Acquired	3	30
Sport practice	Individual	5	50
	Collective	5	50
Years of practice	Less than 5 years old	6	60
	Between 5 and 10 years	2	20
	More than 10 years	2	20

Procedure

An email was sent to different entities related to disability explaining the purpose of the study and inviting them to participate: associations that work with women and have a section related to physical activity, and sports clubs with an adapted section and/or a specific programme (i.e. Genuine League). The entities themselves selected the woman with a disability on the basis of the established inclusion criteria: she had been doing some kind of physical activity for at least two years and she was of legal age. The entire procedure was approved by the Ethics Committee (CEISH) of the UPV/EHU (M10_2023_379). The interviews lasted an average of 20 minutes.

Interview Guide

The interviews were conducted on the basis of a script that included the following sections:

- Welcome/thank you
- Presentation
- Objective of the interview
- Specific questions about the person: origins, habits, disability
- Questions about the physical-sport activity: sport habits, motivations, benefits, barriers, desire for other sport practices and limitations.
- Questions about the family: influence and family accompaniment.
- Questions about the association/entity/sports club: relationships, company and entity influence.

Data Analysis

Rapid Qualitative Research has been used in this work to obtain useful and specific qualitative data in a shorter time frame than traditional qualitative methods. Furthermore, it follows accepted scientific practices, is rigorous and facilitates easy-to-apply qualitative data collection (Taylor, et al., 2018). From this analysis, a deductive approach was conducted, driven by the interview script structure, with which the interview videos and audios were analysed. All data were coded deductively across the constructs addressed in the interview. Two researchers (primary and secondary coder) met and reviewed all the notes taken, as well as the videos and audios obtained. Rigour and validity were established by independently coding and assigning these data into the interview script structure. The results were then discussed by the entire research team to identify relevant information.

Results

The results obtained from the motivations and barriers of the women interviewed are detailed below. For a better identification and understanding of the results described, a detailed description of each participating woman is shown below:

Table 2. Description of each participant

	Age	Sport Practice
W1	36	Crossfit
W2	34	Basketball
W3	24	Football
W4	48	Rowing
W5	19	Swimming
W6	18	Basketball
W7	53	Football
W8	41	Zumba
W9	44	Goalball
W10	45	Surf

Motivation

Concerning the ultimate purpose of doing certain sporting activities, very different motives were observed. With regard to these intrinsic motives, the most common was the emotion and pleasure they derive from the practice: ‘I already liked crossfit before, I like it a lot’ (W1); ‘I’ve always liked basketball, ever since I was a little girl’ (W2); ‘I’ve always liked dancing, that’s why I started zumba. You work your body and I really like it’ (W8). This last comment includes physical improvement, an extrinsic issue, which was also mentioned by other women: ‘Physically, it is also noticeable’ (W7). Other repeated motives were that of self-improvement: ‘I am used to always going forwards and not asking for help. In goalball I had to ask for help because I got disoriented, and that was a good thing’ (W9); ‘I have never been competitive, but this is a challenge for me, something I had never done before, and now was the time’ (W4). The issue of relaxation or escape from reality was also mentioned: ‘When I swim, I don’t think about anything else. It’s my moment of peace’ (W5); ‘With football I escape from everything, I don’t think about anything’ (W3); well-being: ‘I trust myself more, I feel better (W3); and the issue of socialisation and social relations: ‘Apart from the issue of socialisation, which I think is very important, I was training one day and I said to myself, “I’m coming back”’ (W9); ‘It motivates me that it is a team sport, I feel more confident, we are like a family’ (W6).

It is worth highlighting the fact that sometimes sport was not an end in itself. In several cases, despite not having externalised it as their main motivation, they saw this as an option and signed up because they had nothing else. The lack of an alternative is a theme that has come up several times. For example, in the case of W6, she used to play badminton, but she felt uncomfortable, she felt excluded. When she was told that there was an option to play basketball with disabled and non-disabled people, she did not hesitate. Another example is that of W9, who has tried different sports throughout her life, but did not feel that she fit in. With goalball, she experienced a different reality.

Benefits

From the literature, several main types of benefits have been observed in the work of different authors: physical, psychological, and social or behavioural (Campos et al., 2003; Cátedra Ocio y discapacidad, 2019). Thus, in terms of physical benefits, aspects such as improved mobility were observed: ‘Now he can climb on a bench and lie down and get up faster’ (mother of W1), and physical capacity: ‘He has improved his physical abilities; now he is able to do things he didn’t do before’ (mother of W1).

In addition to those psychological benefits that are explicitly considered psychological: ‘Psychologically, it

helps me a lot' (W10), these benefits have appeared from different perspectives, such as increased self-esteem and self-confidence: 'When I play, people are surprised because being a girl and small, people think I am not that good' (W3); 'I am privileged' (W5); and relaxation and escape: 'I escape from everything, I don't think about anything but enjoying myself. I enjoy it a lot, and then at home I'm listening to music all the time' (W8); 'It helps me to escape; when I play, I forget all my problems' (W3); 'Now it's a work of commitment that compensates me. Before it was more of a sense of peace, but now that I am at the top level, I still feel that peace' (W5).

In terms of social benefits, aspects related to building relationships and social support have been identified: 'I have a great time with my friends' (W2); 'I feel good with my teammates' (W6); 'They keep me like this because I am the only girl in the team' (W7); and with the promotion of inclusion and equality: 'Opaque glasses are used so that all people participate on equal terms' (W9); 'It seems to me that the injuries or impairments that each person has make the differences that may exist between men and women fade into the background' (W4).

In addition to the benefits explored, fun is observed as a transversal element in many of the comments, one of the main reasons for carrying out certain leisure activities (Carratalá et al., 2006).

Special mention should be made of the strong connection and sense of freedom that the practice produces in the women participants: 'Football takes me away from everything, it is my strength to go on, my connection' (W3); 'I am making my hobby my profession. I can travel, I can do my degree in more time. I have decided that I want to dedicate myself to this' (W5).

Barriers

Although barriers are an issue that has been widely studied in the group of people with disabilities, on the one hand, and in the practice of physical-sports activities on the other, in this study women have also identified barriers of various kinds. For a better understanding, they will be analysed on the basis of the most widely shared classifications among the scientific community, such as extrinsic and intrinsic barriers (i.e. Niñerola, et al., 2006) or external and internal barriers (i.e. Badia et al., 2011).

In terms of extrinsic or external barriers, barriers of different kinds were found. Several participants referred to social or attitudinal barriers: 'It is a sport that, despite the passage of time, is a masculine sport. And I don't know why because there are many women, but it is mostly masculinised. It's the same with surf skateboarding' (W10); 'It's very difficult to create a women's team. There used to be mixed teams, but not anymore. At the end of the day, sport is mainly designed for men, and in this case, when they throw balls at you, it's not the same if

it's a man or a woman' (W9); 'There are fewer girls, but they look after me very well' (W4). All of them allude to the masculinisation of sport that still exists today. Also mentioned are aspects related to relationships: 'It is a sport that, usually, your environment does not practice that sport' (W10); 'I feel sorry for missing out on things with my friends. I can't go for a drink on a Friday afternoon because I have training on Saturday' (W5); or age: 'It's hard to find people your age who do this sport, although I have found them. And finding women your age is even more difficult' (W10). With regard to environmental or contextual barriers, opinions related mainly to the lack of opportunities have been observed: 'I can only see out of one eye or I can't see the three dimensions. We played handball and I couldn't see the ball, I hit my hand, I hit the flies, to see if I could hit one, basketball, nothing, badminton, more of the same (...) there were no means. I remember that I spent a whole term, there were apparatus, and the teacher would see me and say 'not even a chance' and he would put me on a mat to do somersaults all the time' (W9); 'I have had many struggles to be able to play goalball. I felt I couldn't participate in either sighted or blind sport' (W9). In addition, a series of economic barriers of various kinds were also observed: 'The issue that you have to pay for it' (W3); 'I am aware that in order to practise adapted sport, institutions have to help you financially' (W10); 'The biggest barrier is the economic one, the material. I do these things because they have left me the material' (W4).

As for the intrinsic or internal barriers, all of them are related to the negative attributions that women give them, either because of their abilities or self-esteem: 'Now, for example, I can no longer do cross-country skiing – in a chair yes, but not conventional skiing. It has been very difficult for me to do adapted sports' (W4); in this sense, the question of disability appears, of admitting this limiting situation. Many issues related to women's competences have also been identified: 'It is difficult to lift weights' (W1); 'Some movements, for example, balance. There are exercises that I have to do more slowly than other people' (W3); 'Sometimes I feel very tired. I can't do two activities on the same day, and one day I said that in the end I don't go because I'm tired' (W10); 'I get very tired and sometimes I need to take a pill' (W7); 'Sometimes I find barriers, like not being able to do something' (W6). Finally, there were also issues related to confidence: 'Before I needed to be accompanied or I needed to make a phone call. Now I feel so good that I can go alone' (W3); 'Sometimes when I play, I get blocked and I don't know what to do' (W6); 'I'm too scared to fight with big guys. Boys have more strength' (W3).

Below is a summary table of the findings and the number of times they were mentioned by the women participating in the study:

Table 3. Summary of findings

	Findings	Number of times mentioned
Motivation	Emotion & pleasure	3
	Physical improvement	1
	Overcoming	2
	Relaxation or escape from reality	2
	Well-being	1
	Social relationships	2
	Scarcity of other options	2
Benefits	Improvement of mobility	2
	Increase in self-esteem and confidence	2
	Relaxation and escape	3
	Relationships and social support	3
	Promotion of inclusion and equality	2
	Sense of freedom	2
	Masculinization of sport	3
Barriers	Relationships	2
	Age	1
	Lack of opportunities	2
	Economic factors	3
	Abilities	1
	Competence	5
	Confidence	3

Discussion

The aim of this study was to discover the physical and sporting reality of women with disabilities in the Basque Country (Spain). The current scarcity of data and studies on the subject highlighted the need for research in this area. Through exhaustive analysis of the experiences and data, the results have provided a clearer understanding of the reality and challenges faced by women with disabilities in their participation in sporting activities, as well as the opportunities and obstacles they face in their trajectory (Lagos et al., 2022).

In this sense, the article not only summarises the results of the study, but also offers recommendations and perspectives for future research and actions aimed at improving the physical-sports experience of this group, thus promoting greater equity and inclusion (Álvarez Ramírez, 2023) in sport for all women, regardless of their abilities.

In the day-to-day life of the women participating in the study, there was a big difference between those who are members and those who are not, as those who are members have an organised and scheduled routine, including hours devoted to physical activity. Associations and other entities in the sector play a crucial role in the well-being of these women (Mansfield et al., 2020), providing them with support, resources and opportunities that facilitate their access to physical activity and promote their development (Barquinero et al., 2021).

On the other hand, the practices analysed cover both individual and collective activities and are linked to both regulated and unregulated spheres. Thus, we find very different realities that include recreational, therapeutic and professional sport. This range of realities has meant that the results have been richer in content and information, helping us to gain a more in-depth knowledge of the physical and sporting reality of women with disabilities in the Basque Country. However, the sample obtained is more representative of practices of a more competitive and structured nature, as it has been very difficult to find women who carry out any non-regulated sporting practice over a long period of time. This gap highlights the importance of promoting and providing support in this non-regulated field and that women with disabilities have more options for practising sport if they wish to do so.

On the other hand, as explained at the beginning of this study, one of the keys to promoting and encouraging social participation (Lazcano and Madariaga, 2024) and participation in physical-sporting activities is the need to generate and maintain motivation on the part of individuals, in order to develop commitment to the practice (Azid et al., 2023). The motivations found in this study for the development of the sport trajectories carried out have been mainly intrinsic, including the pleasure and enjoyment of doing them, as also reiterated in their studies by Ntoumanis (2001), and Standage and Treasure (2002) when talking about personal satisfaction (Tian, Qiu, Lin, Zhou, & Fan, 2020). Socialisation has also been a motivation present in the opinions of the women interviewed, and as Gutiérrez-Sanmartín (2006) makes clear, people with disabilities value the possibility of creating new friendships and social relationships more than non-disabled sportspeople. This idea is also evidenced by Cegarra, Martínez-Márquez and Ruiz, (2023). Finally, continuing with the motivation that the women have had to carry out the sport they do, in several cases it has been outside the women themselves, appearing in several cases to be the lack of other sporting opportunities.

The benefits obtained by the women interviewed were of various kinds. Thus, in terms of physical benefits, although studies show such benefits as improved cardiovascular capacity, reduction of sedentary lifestyles, prevention of injuries (Garber et al., 2011), reduction of

obesity and other types of illnesses (UNESCO 2015), in this study only improved mobility was identified as a physical benefit. However, the psychological benefits were much more abundant, with the women interviewed considering that practising sport increases their self-esteem and confidence, relaxation and escape, connection with oneself and a sense of freedom, as studied with other populations by De-Juanas, Bernal and Goig (2020). These benefits coincide, to a large extent, with those cited in the *International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport* written by UNESCO (2015).

Finally, in terms of social benefits, aspects related to relationships and social support and the promotion of inclusion and equality have been identified, since, for people with disabilities, in this case women, participating in physical and sporting activities increases socialisation (Crawford et al., 2008) by creating interpersonal relationships that generate a sense of overall well-being (Taylor et al., 2004) and a greater feeling of belonging to the community in which they live (Essomba and Madariaga, 2023). The practice of sport among people with disabilities lasts over time due to the number of physical, social and psychological benefits (Reina, 2014).

Although many reasons and benefits have been found for the sports practice of women with disabilities, barriers are also present in the activities they engage in. Notably, no physical or architectural barriers were identified in the sports practice of the interviewed women, which highlights the need to pay attention to other barriers that exist, such as the ongoing masculinisation of sports, as other studies have found (Culver, et al., 2022). Additionally, relationships, while beneficial, have sometimes been considered a barrier due to the difficulty in finding sports partners within their immediate environment (Klenk et al., 2019) or of similar ages, as well as the inability to maintain a social life appropriate for the life stage they are in. Other identified barriers, both environmental and contextual, include a lack of opportunities and well-studied economic barriers (Olasagasti et al., 2023; Rimmer et al., 2000). In many cases, the logistics involved in performing physical activities for people with disabilities are more costly than conventional options, and programmes for women with disabilities often have very high costs (Rimmer et al., 2000). Moreover, this group usually has lower purchasing power, making economic factors a recurring barrier in all studies on this topic.

In addition to external or extrinsic barriers, several more personal barriers have also been identified, specifically those intrinsic barriers related to the negative attributions made by the women themselves. These labels have alluded to their self-esteem, their disability, their confidence, and their perceived competencies. Indeed, feeling competent is a psychological need that directly influences the perception of barriers to engaging in

physical activities (Samperio et al., 2016). This group of women participates less in physical activities because they encounter a greater number of barriers (Varela-Mato et al., 2012). Therefore, addressing all these barriers is crucial for promoting equitable inclusion and participation in sports for women with disabilities.

Study Limitations

This study utilised a descriptive design and employed a convenience sampling method, recruiting participants from various associations and entities focused on disability and sports. As a result, the final sample may reflect the experiences and perceptions of women who are already engaged in adapted sports. It is possible that a broader sample might have revealed additional barriers, such as architectural obstacles, or provided greater representation of other types of disabilities. Unfortunately, we were unable to secure a wider range of acceptances to participate in the study.

Additionally, while this research gathered insights from women actively participating in physical-sport activities, understanding the perceptions of those who do not engage in such activities could provide valuable context. Future research could investigate whether the barriers and motivations identified in this study are similar or differ among women who do not participate in sports.

Furthermore, a more detailed analysis that considers sociodemographic variables such as age or type of sporting practice could add significant value to future investigations. By examining these factors, researchers may uncover deeper insights into the motivations and barriers experienced by women with disabilities in diverse contexts.

Conclusion

The observed reality has been heterogeneous, showing different circumstances and contexts regarding the situation of women with disabilities in the Basque Country (Spain). Throughout this study, it has been noted that the range on sports available to women with disabilities is predominantly regulated, with scarce mention of non-competitive physical and sporting activities such as Zumba, hiking, or Pilates. This suggests that the availability of such physical activities for women with disabilities is minimal or nonexistent in some municipalities of the Basque Country. It is essential for women with disabilities to have information and support for normalised access to the physical-sporting activities.

To promote participation, it is crucial to consider the individual's context, identify the barriers they face in

physical activity, and the facilitators to overcome those barriers. It is important to take into account the specific barriers of each person, which vary depending on numerous factors, including their disability or illness, as well as their previous experiences in the sports field and the context in which they operate. Personalised attention can be key to understanding each woman's characteristics and profile, and increasing participation levels by creating stimulating and attractive programmes and practice for women with disabilities.

In short, the path to full participation of women with disabilities in the sports sector in the Basque Country requires a transformation that encompasses both the offer of programmes and resources and personalised attention that values the specific needs of each woman to design effective strategies that promote physical activity (Solitario et al., 2021). It is necessary to foster a social and cultural change that ensures their inclusion and allows physical activity to become a tool for their empowerment, well-being and social inclusion (Velázquez, 2020).

Ethics Approval and Informed Consent

This research followed the ethical guidelines set out in the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Ethical Committee of the University of the Basque Country (M10_2023_379).

Competing Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Funding

The project has been funded by the Department of Equality, Justice and Social Policies of the Basque Government and also through the Investigo 2022 programme, within the framework of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan (Funded by the European Union - NextGenerationEU).

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the participants, the disability associations and the sports clubs of the Basque Country (Spain).

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