

Inclusion of Transgenders in Sport: Interface of Identity, Justice, and Moving Forward

Sports are not games, but a platform for victory, a vehicle for communication, and a window into the world of values of today's society. Moreover, sports, through the ages, have become a site of social justice and inclusivity, raising the topic of racism, women's inequality and discrimination, etc, to the general opinion. The presence of a transgender athlete in sport is one of the most debated and controversial in the 21st century.

Basically, this discussion brings the issue of equality, identity, and human rights on a fundamental level. How could it be that there is possible creation of equipoise playing fields in order to give respect to citizens' dignity and rights? For the balancing between competing ideals between the game of inclusion and competition minus convicting the sport that is how.

It shall answer these questions by looking into the science, policy, and human stories that have driven this debate itself in a very urgent way as well as being very personal.

- Understanding Transgender Athletes: Identity and Transition

Before heading into the debate, it will be important to understand what it means to be transgendered.

A transgender person is one whose gender identity is at variance with the sex assigned to them at birth. Transgender athletes can be broadly split into two types:

Transgender women (male-to-female): Individuals assigned male at birth but identify and live as women.

Transgender men (female-to-male): Individuals assigned female at birth but identify and live as men.

For most transgender athletes, sports are not about competition but about belonging, identity, and participation as their authentic selves. Transition, being a very personal process, oftentimes involves hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and other medical or social interventional changes. It is a process that not only reflects on the physical but also has deep psychological consequences.

The Role of Hormones in Athletic Performance

The use of hormones, especially testosterone, in sports is a key argument that surfaces in the debate over transgender inclusion. Testosterone is a hormone that influences muscle mass, bone density, and haemoglobin concentration. These physiological differences resulting from testosterone are at the root of controversy over assessing fairness in sport.

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) and Its Effects

If a transgender woman undertakes HRT: Testosterone levels are dramatically decreased. Muscle mass and strength are derailed as well as decline over the first year of treatment with an average 5-15% decline at one year; bone density equals a lower, baseline level and is, accordingly, equivalent to that of her cisgender female counterpart. In males who are being transitioned with testosterone replacement the muscle mass is often increased while fitness improves making them more congruent with men in competition with them.

But whereas HRT reduces the performance gap, residual advantages from male puberty—such as larger heart and lung capacity or higher bone density—may remain in transgender women, potentially giving them an edge in certain sports.

Fairness and the "Level Playing Field"

Games are based on the concept of equality, so participants must be playing on a level playing field. However, this principle is inherently complex.

- Sports Have Never Been Fully Fair. Biological Diversity: Michael Phelps has some unique anatomical features, such as double-jointed ankles, longer wingspans, and fewer lactic acid productions, which give him an edge.
- Socioeconomic Factor: The differences in elite coaching, nutrition, and training facilities create variations among athletes.

- Gender-Segregated Categories: Even within the same gender, there are differences like height, muscle composition, etc.

The inequalities caused are generally known as they are regarded as human diversity. The question is whether transgender athletes provide an unfair competitive advantage or whether they are just another form of natural variation.

Breaking Down the Debate

The Case for Inclusion

Human Rights and Dignity: Transgender people have a right to compete in sports that conform to their gender identity. Exclusion based on identity can perpetuate stigma and discrimination.

Social Integration: Sports are more than competition. They integrate one into society, teamwork, and self-esteem. By excluding transgender athletes, it usually takes away the benefits associated with sports.

Inclusive Communities

Education and Empathy: Encourage workshops and training programs that help demystify and create more general understanding in athletes as well as coaches.

Safe Spaces: Establish a safe space for the transgender athlete, embraced and supported, on all levels of sport.

Case Study 1: The Inclusion of Caster Semenya in Women's Sports

Background: Caster Semenya, the South African long-distance runner, often comes into debates about transgender athletes due to her biologically elevated testosterone. Semenya is not a trans-gender person, but her case raises questions concerning equitability, the effect of testosterone, and the nuances of gender in sport. Semenya's success in the 800 m (gold in 2008 and 2012 Olympic Games) prompted more intense investigation into her biological advantages, which led to the implementation of regulations on the level of testosterone for female athletes.

Issues and Controversy: In 2018, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) adopted a rule that requires female athletes with differences in sex development (DSD), such as Semenya, to lower their testosterone levels through medical intervention if they are to compete in women's events. According to the IAAF, testosterone levels give these athletes an unfair advantage in certain events, especially those like the 400m, 800m, and 1500m, where endurance and power are key.

How to balance fairness with the rights of those whose biological features are not necessarily tied to gender transition.

Impact: The Caster Semenya case brought regulation of testosterone in women's sports to international attention. It opened up a global discussion about the terms of sex, gender, and equity in sport. The CAS decision in favor of the IAAF was strongly criticized by many human rights organizations as biased against the state of nature, yet it was argued for by those who felt fairness to female athletes required a level playing field.

It raised broader policy issues over whether female athletes should be permitted to have natural high levels of testosterone, but it also established a policy precedent for how sports organizations approach the issue of gender, biological advantage, and women's inclusion. The fact that Semenya refused to take medication for her condition complicated the case in finding a balance between fairness and personal autonomy/human rights for individuals in the competitive sport context.

Case Study 2: Fallon Fox in Mixed Martial Arts (MMA)

Background: Fallon Fox, a transgender woman and MMA fighter, was the first openly transgender athlete to compete in MMA. She made history in 2012 by publicly transitioning from male to female and entering the female divisions of competition, which generated much controversy in the MMA arena. This brought the issue of fairness in allowing transgender women to compete in female divisions into question, especially since Fox transitioned later in life and had experienced male puberty.

Issues and Controversy: Fox's case was controversial primarily because of its concerns about her physical advantage. Several critics, above all other belligerent ones, still used to be in doubt of whether she possessed still an inegalitarian mechanical advantage due to male puberty such as

higher muscle mass due to male puberty, higher bone density due to male puberty, and higher heart and vascular fitness due to male puberty; if so, she could confront a huge disadvantage in comparison to men. Fox argued that her testosterone levels had been within the range required for over a year since her hormone replacement therapy, and that her advantage had been minimized as much as possible.

The California State Athletic Commission cleared Fox to fight despite the scandal, because there was no strong evidence to show that she had an unfair advantage over her female counterparts. Still, controversy lingered over the issue of whether transgender women should compete with cisgender women in contact sports. As a matter of fact, not all organizations, such as the UFC, had well-defined policies regarding transgender athletes competing in the women's divisions.

Impact: Fallon Fox's case brought to the MMA community difficult questions and thoughts about what is fair, about gender, and the character of combat sport. The case brought up the lack of uniform policies for transgendered athletes in the combat sports, and the fact that it brings up questions concerning the continued presence of male puberty on an athlete's performance.

A significant number of opponents of Fox, including those who had fought with her, said that there were mixed reactions. Several of them stated that she was allowed to run as a female because of other past disadvantages placed on others, making it not equal competition for them. Fox's matter not only progressed to emphasize her name as a transgender athlete but also highlighted the reality that transgender inclusions in various organizations should have certain consistent policies.

Fox is also a strong advocate for the rights of trans people and for the inclusion of trans people in sport, where she uses her voice to resist the stereotypes and policies that prevent transgender athletes from enjoying their right to play sport.

Conclusion

The language of transgender inclusion in sports is characterized by a dualism of legal, ethical, and scientific dimensions. Ongoing best practices in the decision-making process, based on empirical evidence, and always keeping in mind issues of equality and human dignity, are indispensable to navigating this issue wisely and with sensitivity. Dialogue between policymakers, sports organizations, athletes, and communities is essential in this process.

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