

Data will level the playing field for trans athletes

BY BRI NEWLAND

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In the debate over transgender athlete policy and legislation, those for and against equality for trans athletes have the same scientific data to choose from — which is to say, almost none.

We know that the rights of (mostly) trans women/girl athletes are under attack by national anti-LGBTQ groups and exclusionary legislators at an unprecedented rate. According to the Human Rights Campaign, at least 69 active bills would deny sport participation consistent with gender identity of trans youth and college athletes. Lobbying to keep trans (women/girl) athletes out of sport is based on ignorance and bigotry — not facts or logic. The bills related to sport participation are mostly aimed at trans women due to trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) ideology asserting that they should be excluded from cisgender womanhood and cis-women-only spaces.

The overriding TERF argument for barring trans-women/girls from competing is that it creates a competitive disadvantage to cis women/girls, due to biological benefits trans-women/girls receive having been (or currently) biologically male. The bills not only directly oppose policy set by national and international sport governing bodies that allow trans athletes to participate, but they are also rooted in unfounded, dangerous assumptions.

We must challenge where these assumptions originate, why they exist, and how education can overcome politicized fiction that contextualizes this topic. Rather than engaging in a culture war, rigorous scientific research should inform far-ranging policy choices — and gathering the data should be our priority for progress.

Physiological data would address the assumption that physical differences give trans women/girls an advantage over cis women/girl athletes.

Physical differences give athletes advantages across sport — no matter how they

identify. Michael Phelps' exceptionally long torso and arm expanse give him a unique advantage in the pool. Trying to parcel out one variable — testosterone — as a sole determinant of biological advantage is shortsighted and naive. Testosterone has been defined by sport authorities as the hormone that gives men some advantage over women in sport. It's been determined that men have about a relative 10% athletic advantage over women. Higher testosterone levels, however, are associated with better performance only in a very small number of athletic disciplines: 400m, 800m, hammer throw, and pole vault. Further, testosterone doesn't fully explain the 10% advantage. To focus on one variable does not contextualize its use in determining whether a trans woman would have an advantage over a cis woman.

Assumptions that trans women “dominate” women's sport lack logic. Trans women are not “winning everything,” as TERF communities assert. For example: Two recent Olympic trans athletes — New Zealand weightlifter Laurel Hubbard and U.S. BMX rider Chelsea Wolfe — competed admirably but did not dominate their respective competitions. When trans women perform well, the TERF communities argue that these wins are detrimental to women's sport without acknowledging the nuances of how each sport can differ or providing detail on athletes' past performances. Plus, when trans women don't yield victories, those outcomes are ignored by critics.

Performance data would address assumptions that biological differences cannot be overcome despite hormone therapy. Recent research of 46 trans women containing data prior to and after their transitions demonstrated that hormonal therapy does influence performance. For trans women, time on estrogen therapy showed body weight and fat mass gain and a decline in performance. Early into therapy, trans women did perform better than cis women, but differences disappeared after two years on estrogen — results supported by a review of 26 studies examining hormone transition effects.

While these studies are helpful, longitudinal research on trans athletes is sparse and greatly needed. Current studies are helpful, but many don't focus on athletes — let alone elite athletes — and many have small sample sizes. Much more data can clarify the effect of hormonal transition therapy on performance long term.

Policy effectiveness data would give context to biased anti-trans legislation and policy implemented to keep sports fair by preventing trans women from “stealing” awards and scholarships from cis women.

The assumption that trans women are stealing opportunities from cis women is ignorant and lacks of empathy for transgender individuals. Sport policy differs vastly by sport and/or governing body. However, most require athletes to have publicly declared their gender within a specific time frame prior to competition. Others require athletes to have transitioned fully to their identified gender, while still others require certain testosterone levels. The International Olympic Committee recently released a new framework for inclusion, fairness, and non-discrimination that removes testosterone requirements and requires that any restrictions to participation eligibility must be based on robust, peer-reviewed research that clearly delineates how there is a competitive advantage to the athlete.

If sport were ever “fair” for women, we would invest equally in women’s sport, via equal pay; equitable sponsorship; impartial access to coaching, leadership, and management opportunities; and effective policies against of sexual harassment and abuse.

If policy and laws are to be created under the guise of fairness, then they should at least be based in science. To fully understand the impact of trans athletes in sport, invest in and develop peer reviewed research. The current state-sponsored bills are intentionally focused on trans minors, who will experience further exclusion, mental health challenges, and marginalization by being denied sport participation. Sport, especially for youth, is intended to provide opportunities to play — not remove them. Trans athletes deserve to be heard, seen, and included. Data can help.

Bri Newland is clinical associate professor and academic director of undergraduate programs at NYU. This piece is crafted in partnership with The Collective Think Tank, a global consortium of academic minds and industry leaders focused on gender parity and improving diversity. The collaboration is led by The Collective, Wasserman’s women-focused division.

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