

Gender and Sports

Many athletic competitions are divided into men's and women's competitions. One justification for this division is that men have a competitive advantage over women in many sports due to increased testosterone levels and muscle distribution. This is not to say that all men have a competitive advantage over all women – far from it. Still, many people think that the difference between men and women is significant enough to justify gendered categories, since this approach allows more people to participate and have a fair shot at winning.

However, many people are now questioning this binary division between men's and women's competitions. First, we now know that gender is more complicated than this distinction suggests. For example, nonbinary people are neither men nor women, so they do not fit into either category. Transgender men and women (i.e. men who were assigned female at birth and women who were assigned male at birth, respectively) raise questions for these categories as well. If we sort these individuals based on their gender identity, then, some people worry, we risk giving trans women a competitive advantage over cis women (i.e. women who were assigned female at birth). Yet if we sort these individuals based on their assigned sex at birth, then we are erasing their gender identity, which raises further moral questions.²²

We also face questions about what criteria to use to sort people into these categories (even for people who do belong in them). In the past, sports organizations used genital check and chromosome analysis.²³ However, these tests are both invasive and inadequate, since not all men have sex organs or chromosomes traditionally defined as male, not all women have sex organs or chromosomes traditionally defined as female, and many people, including many intersex people (whose “reproductive or sexual anatomy [do not] seem fit the typical definitions of male or female”), have neither.²⁴ There are also moral questions involved with requiring people to have surgery or hormonal treatment in order to compete in the appropriate category, since we do not generally require healthy people to do such things, and since some people might not have the opportunity to take these steps even if they wanted to.²⁵

If these problems prove too difficult to solve, we might also consider moving away from gendered categories altogether. One model is that we place everyone in the same category. After all, there are all kinds of natural advantages people can have in sports, ranging from height to weight to testosterone levels. So maybe we should chalk it all up to luck and let the most athletic person win. But then the fact remains that men would likely have a competitive advantage over women in general. Another model is that we replace gendered categories with, say, testosterone level categories and sort people that way. But then, that might not track everything that traditionally gave men a competitive advantage over women in general, and it would also require a radical reimagining of many sports.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Is the binary distinction between men's and women's sports justified if not everybody is a man or woman?
2. If the value of respecting a person's gender identity seems to conflict with the value of maintaining an equal playing field in sports, how should we weigh these values?
3. Why, if at all, is it okay for athletic competitions to sort athletes based on some features, such as testosterone levels, that create a competitive advantage but not based on other features, such as height, that do so as well?

²² <https://theconversation.com/do-transgender-athletes-have-an-unfair-advantage-54289>

²³ https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/03/magazine/the-humiliating-practice-of-sex-testing-female-athletes.html?_r=0

²⁴ http://www.isna.org/faq/what_is_intersex

²⁵ <http://www.outsports.com/2016/1/21/10812404/transgender-ioc-policy-new-olympics>

