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Gender Exclusion in Sports and its Influence on Health

The norms and behaviors regarding gender have progressed in modern American culture. With this said, there are still prominent inequities present in the world regarding gender and physical activity. Our country consists of a range of gender diversity, but there are still barriers between gender-identity and sport that make it less accessible for groups of people to participate in exercise. This concept of gender exclusion applies to a number of nations besides the United States, and it begins at ages as young as middle school and high school. The combination of unfair treatment and barriers in sport effect different genders' physical activity, and in result their overall health. The barriers presented to these different genders can be based on a number of reasons including discrimination, as well as the threat of competition. The simplest form of discrimination and exclusion towards genders began between men and women, and since then has become more complex between transgender and cisgender individuals. Regardless of the affected gender, exclusion from sports is unethical and can have negative effect on the excluded gender's health. Major sports corporations and fitness facilities have the power to diminish exclusion and make the world of sports and fitness more open to different genders.

Exercise Experience

Exercise has an overall positive effect on the quality of life for both men and women. Although this remains the case, there are still negative associations with exercise when

distinguishing between men and women's participation. Recent studies have made it clear that women commonly consider working out as more of an obligation rather than an enjoyable activity.¹ Additionally, women report exercising for appearance reasons such as weight loss while men reported exercising for social and competitive reasons. Baine Craft and other researchers founded that although exercise was a good predictor for quality of life for men, reasons for exercise serve as a better indicator for the quality of life for women.¹ Women more commonly find exercise as more of a management task for their body image, rather than a fun way to be social and do something good for their bodies. These considerations may indicate why it is more common to see a group of men working out in the gym rather than women.

One of the underlying causes for women feeling less comfortable in an exercise setting is the sex-based stereotypes made in sports. Stereotype research indicates that even the most valued and competent women in "masculine" sports are still concerned by the stereotypes in sports.² From an early age, girls and boys are separated in both sports and physical education. One may argue that this separation is logical based off of the variance between men and women in physical abilities. This argument is not invalid, considering it has been documented that there is a physical ability difference of 5% between men and women.² Disappointingly, it is hard to distinguish between the abilities of girls and boys once they are separated because their performances are assessed based on different grading scales. The scales used in physical education classes tend to consider performance, investment, and improvement. Teachers evaluate boys and girls differently, but boys have been found to obtain better grades than girls.² It is safe to say that these types of occurrences are what have led men to dominate exercise and sport. With better scores, a male's confidence is boosted, and it encourages them to continue with sports and exercise. From early on

in childhood there is a clear division between men and women in exercise, and this social inequality can lead to detriments health.²

If women across the world are stuck in the headspace that men dominate the exercise realm of the world, it is guaranteed that this mindset will influence the decisions they make about exercise. Overall, more males reach the adequate levels of daily physical activity compared to females.² The lack of physical activity completed by women compared to men could lead to sex inequalities in health. With this said, it is critical to diminish the factors leading to the inequalities experienced by women. This would require a number of changes in the field of sports and exercise. For instance, girls and boys should both be integrated into more sports and activates in physical education classes. The separations between genders in gym class should be down when the variance in physical abilities has a substantial impact. Additionally, teachers should be more cautious about how they “grade” children and adolescents in gym classes. These types of changes may diminish the gap between adult men and women in regard to exercise and sports.

Gender Representation in Sport

Although advancements have been made for females in sports, there is a clear lack of representation of women in sport. It is a general consensus that sports are a male dominated domain, but why? It has been argued that activities requiring strength and speed are masculine because males are stronger and faster than females.² Although it has been proven through research that men have more physical abilities compared to women, this does not mean that women cannot be successful in sports. Today, females make up 40% of the participants in professional sport, but only receive 4% of coverage in media.³ Media in the United States has reported that there is not a large interest for female sports, but this would make sense considering female sports have yet to be emphasized on television and social media over an extended period

of time.³ Two pivotal moments in female sports in the United States over the past few years was the success of the USA women's soccer team in the 2015 and 2019 Women's World Cup. Throughout the weeks following these events, female soccer athletes were highly recognized in the media. Although winning a world cup increased media recognition for the USA Women's team, it did not change the gap in pay between them and the USA Men's team. After the Men and Women World Cups, the winning U.S. women's soccer team received only \$2 million dollars from International Association of Federation Football (FIFA) while the winning men received \$35 million dollars from FIFA.³ Additionally, the salaries for the professional USA men and women teams are vastly different. Women earn a minimum of \$6842, while men earn a minimum of \$50,000.³ The difference is astounding. Disappointingly, most professional sports in the United States do not have equal pay. With the increase in prevalence of women in sports, one would think that the barriers between men and women would decrease. Obtaining equality is still a goal for women in sports.

Transgender Inclusion in Sport

Women are not the only group of athletes who struggle for equality in sports, transgender athletes face a whole other beast of discrimination. To emphasize this, it wasn't until 2004 that the International Olympic Committee allowed transsexual athletes to compete.⁴ Prior to this, women in sport were required to go through "testing" before competing to confirm that they were "truly" a woman.⁴ Needless to say, just because the Olympics have allowed transgender athletes to compete does not mean that this community of people haven't received an overwhelming amount of resistance to participating in their sport. There are a number of reasons why certain groups of people are opposed to transgender inclusion in professional sports and the resistance is more so geared toward male to female athletes who transitioned after puberty.⁴ The United Kingdom

Women's Sports Foundation claims that male to female athletes have an unfair advantage due to their previous muscular development, higher testosterone levels, greater muscle to fat ratios, and greater lung and heart capacity.⁴ To debunk these advantage assumptions, Michelle Dumaresq, a male to female Canadian cyclist reported her body's response to female hormone therapy. Dumaresq lost 20 pounds and has a blood testosterone level of two nanomoles per liter, which is well below the normal limit or the average woman.⁴ In conclusion, whatever "advantages" that are criticized are not due to body composition or hormonal levels. Instead, it is possible that transgender athletes are noticed due to their engagement in an intense amount of training that makes them out-do their opponents. Karkazis et al. elaborates on this concept in the following excerpt, "The current scientific evidence, however, does not support the notion that endogenous testosterone confer athletic advantage in any straightforward or predictable way. Even if naturally occurring variation in testosterone conferred advantage, is that advantage unfair? It bears nothing that athletes never begin on a fair playing field; if they were not exceptional in one regard or another, they would not have made it to a prestigious international stage."⁴ In simpler terms, Karkazis says that regardless of being male, female, cisgender, or transgender, elite athletes will make it to the professional level based off of true talent and dedication, and not based on elevated testosterone levels.

Although Michelle Dumaresq made it clear that her transition served her with no advantage in sport, many individuals in sport and sports organizations remained skeptical. The skepticism is focused more so on the possibility for unfair advantages instead of the concern for injury. For instance, the International Olympic Committee felt compelled to design a Consensus Statement in 2015 that allows female to male trans-athletes to compete directly after their transition, but sketched out guidelines over testosterone levels in those who transition to

women.⁵ This allows a recently transitioned male to compete with other males who may have significant physical advantages. Essentially, the Olympic Committee felt it was okay for cisgender individuals to have an advantage physically over transsexual individuals, but never the other way around. The Olympic Committee did not consider that absolutely no recently transitioned individual should compete directly after surgery, as it could be detrimental to their transitional recovery. Even committees like the Gay Games, known for their efforts to include the entire LGBTQ+ community in a variety of sports, adopted policies across the world that made it harder for transgenders to participate. In 2002, the Sydney Gay Games adopted a policy requiring trans athletes to have legal documentation of their self-identified gender.⁴ If an athlete could not provide this, they then needed to provide evidence of their hormonal treatments lasting at least two years.⁴ Two years is a significant amount of time for any athlete to be out of competition, but the heads of these organizations hadn't considered this and essentially grouped transsexual athletes as a whole different category of athletes apart from cisgender athletes.

In 2005, the United Kingdom decided to enact a law referred to as the Gender Recognition Act.⁵ This law essentially made it legal for sporting organizations to exclude transgender athletes when they see fit.⁵ The law was summarized by the following, "a sporting organization is permitted to exclude transgender athletes if physical strength, stamina, or physique of average persons of one gender would put them at a disadvantage to average persons of the other gender as competitors in events involving the sport."⁵ Although this law could be interpreted in several ways, its main purpose was to isolate transgenders from competitive sports. Without enacting the same law as the United Kingdom, the United States still made numerous decisions in sports as if the Gender Recognition Act was put in place. In 1976, Renée Richards sued the United States Tennis Association for refusing her entry to compete professionally as a

woman.⁵ The United States argued that Richards had an unfair advantage as a developed male who has undergone a sex change. She famously won her lawsuit and triggered a pivotal moment for transgender's right to compete in professional sports.

After Richard's case, the United States rightfully revised their eligibility policies within the United States Tennis Association, the Women's Tennis Association, and the U.S Open Committee. These changes were done out of force, and a few other association such as the United State Golf Association made policy changes before they were ordered by a court.⁶ The United States still has a way to go with correcting their inclusion policies, but they are one of the few countries being proactive. How is it that in the 21st century nations are still excluding people in sports based off of their gender identification? One would think national sports associations would learn from U.S. cases like Renée Richards. What makes the topic of including transgenders in sport so difficult to understand? For countries like Canada, scholars are trying to address this issue with a transgender sport policy by first considering the fields of sociology, philosophy, law, psychology, gender studies, political science, and biological science.⁶ As of 2017, Canada still hadn't developed a nationwide policy for including transgender athletes in sport.⁶ Canadian sport historian, Don Morrow,⁶ pointed out how the Olympic Games were specifically build upon the notions of hypermasculinity, which contributes to the inclusion of other genders being a challenge.⁶ Women, cisgender or transgender, still to this day deal with negative sexist connotations in professional sports, but the limitations put on the transgender community are more extreme.⁶ It is baffling that some nations have yet to accept that elite athletes exist within both genders. It is comforting that Canada is attempting to make their policies more including, but there are still inconsistencies across their policies that may raise concern. Since 2012, the Canadian Collegiate Athletic Association enforces a policy governing

trans athletes participation; the policy requires these athletes to be diagnosed with gender dysphoria and be on hormones for at least a year before they compete on the gender teams that they identify with.⁶ Contrastingly, Canada's University Sports policy of 2015 states, "Equality means that all persons enjoy the same status regardless of gender, race, language, disability, income or other diversities. It means that all persons have equal conditions for realizing their full right and potential to benefit from the results."⁶ There seems to be no other policies regarding the inclusion of transgender athletes made by Canada U Sports beside the previous general statement of inclusion. This is just one of the examples of the disconnection between sport organizations in Canada, making it difficult for them to represent a clear consensus for their stances on transgender inclusion in sport.

The lack of clear standards in Canada at the collegiate level can be highly influential on a young athlete's psychology. High school and college are the main formative years in a young person's life, and the lack of policies may make athletes questioning their gender feel as though they can't in a safe space.⁷ In the United States, the Nation Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) took major steps in September 2011 by creating a policy for transgender inclusion in collegiate sports. The creation of this policy made it clear to young athletes questioning their gender identity that they have an accepting space to do so. Before the NCAA developed their policy on transgender inclusion in sports, athletes like Kyle Allums suffered an overwhelming amount of confusion throughout his experience of playing basketball for George Washington University.⁷ Allums was born a female but identifies as a male. During his time at George Washington, he played on the women's basketball team. Kyle wanted to finish his basketball career before he revealed his true gender identity, but hiding his true self became too hard. He stated in an interview, "It got too tough. It got too tough not to be me. People would call me a girl and

say, 'she' and refer to me as someone I knew I wasn't." After coming out as transgender, Kyle continued playing and was the first public transgender person to play NCAA Division 1 college basketball.⁷ Kyle was lucky enough to have a supportive team, but not every transgender athlete was as lucky. It's safe to say that the NCAA should continue enforcing their policies that include transgender athletes in collegiate sports. This way, athletes like Kyle won't feel the pressure to pretend to be someone they're not.

Intersecting Barriers in Health

With the barrier put in front of transgender people to exclude them from participating in sports, it is no surprise that the transgender individuals feel a lack of comfort from the health and wellness community. It has been well documented that transgender people feel minority stress due to homophobia, exclusion, and other forms of discrimination.⁸ There's a number of places associated with health and wellness where transgender people feel unwelcomed, including the gym, changing rooms, doctor's offices, and more. Changing rooms are especially difficult overcome for transgender athletes, as they provoke anxiety about being misgendered. Taylor, a 25-year-old trans-woman, recalled how it felt to use the changing room and bathrooms at a gym she used to attend, "When I have to go through a space that is inherently unsafe for me, to do it. Because I'm technically, whatever that means 'man'. So, I'd be using the male change room, which is not safe. I have security called on me at least once a week, every week, for at least six years if I try to and use the washroom in public,".⁸ Taylor avoids most gyms due to her experiences with discrimination, which is common for many transgender individuals. A possible solution for this issue would be a requirement for gender neutral changing stalls at gyms, as well as gender neutral bathrooms. This way, transgender people won't feel discouraged before they

even begin their workouts. The concept of creating a “safe space”, whether it is within a gym or its own individual gym, would increase the participation for transgenders in physical fitness.

Transgender people also tend to delay health care services due to the fear of discrimination.⁹ Considering how much transgender people rely on successful health procedure for their transitions, it’s disturbing that they can’t trust the healthcare system. Previous studies have found that healthcare was the most common setting in which transgender individuals experienced discrimination compared to other settings such as housing and employment.⁹ When transgender people do find proper medical attention, they find themselves constantly having to correct doctors and medical staff for using the incorrect pronouns.⁹ Overall, going to the doctor has become known as unenjoyable experience for the transgender community. The negative connotation associated with healthcare and the avoidance of healthcare services has begun to affect the transgender community’s long-term health. Researchers have begun to suggest that, compared with heterosexual adults, transgender adults have higher rates of chronic diseases and health concerns, such as diabetes, hypertension, and limited mobility later in life.⁸ Without the use of routine checkups, it is safe to assume that most health complications found in transgenders are found when they’ve begun experiencing symptoms. These complications could be significantly reduced if transgender individuals felt more comfortable to seek out health care. Possible ways to correct this include training doctors and medical staffs in proper gender-addressing and having doctor’s offices advertise that they treat all types of patients.

An additional contribution to transgender individuals’ overall health and wellness are the type of socializing they take part in as well as habits they pick up from this socializing. New York City, known for its inclusion of a wide array of people, is an appropriate area to focus on for these considerations. Unfortunately, research has shown that clubs and bars in NYC are

considered a “safe haven” for the transgender community.¹⁰ This is unfortunate because a “safe haven” for this community should be a place where healthy decisions are encouraged. Bars and clubs in NYC are full of smoking, alcohol, and other forms of drugs. Although the socializing aspect of going out is a great way to connect to people, the consistency of the drinking and drugs associated with this activity can be detrimental to one’s health. To make things even harder, tobacco companies specifically target the transgender community in advertisement tactics. Some of these tactics include hosting special events at LGBTQ+ bars, free giveaway items with tobacco logos, and sponsoring charities that interest the transgender community.¹⁰ All of these forms of exposure have led transgender individuals to include smoking in their socializing habits. Additionally, transgender individuals usually begin smoking around a stressful time of their life, whether it be during their coming out process or during a time when they were seeking a community that will embrace them. The specific stress they experience is known as minority stress, which is stress experienced due to race, ethnicity, and sexuality.¹⁰ Picking up smoking as a coping mechanism for minority stress tends to lead to destructive habits for transgender individuals. For example, resorting to smoking every time they feel minority stress or any stress in general. For those who experience a wide variety of stressors, smoking will highly influence their lives. There’s a number of ways to fix this issue, first starting with providing transgender individuals with alternative “safe havens.” The transgender community should be able to take advantage of big cities like New York as any individual would. In a world where social media has a huge influence on socializing, it would be practical to create transgender community groups on Facebook for cities throughout the world. These groups should be able to meet wherever they chose, such as coffee shops, parks, museums, etc. Human connections made without the influence of drugs tend to be more genuine, and in result transgender individuals may be able to

turn to a new friend for support during stressful time instead of smoking. Community centers could also be created in cities that would be of assistance to transgender people during a hard time of their life. Overall, alternative coping mechanisms for stress that promoting health and wellness should be encouraged towards the transgender community.

Conclusion

Living in the 21st century of America, it may be surprising to discover the discrimination that different genders have experienced not too long ago. Sadly, these forms of discrimination still exist today, especially in physical activity and wellness communities. Transitioning from a previously cisgender-male sports community, any gender that does not fit this description will more than likely experience some form of discrimination. The strict barriers between men and women sports performance should be diminished at levels like middle and high school. At this point in life, young women shouldn't feel inferior to men and students who struggle with what gender they identify shouldn't feel pressured to make a decision. Due to performance difference and injury prevention, it is understandable when separation is imperative, but gym teachers have the ability to make students feel more accepted by promoting inclusion. Regarding transgender individuals specifically, major sports corporations such as the NCAA and the International Olympic Committee have the power to enforce policies that promote inclusion for these individuals. As for healthcare for the transgender community, the issues they face due to discrimination should be handled at a corporate level. No healthcare facility should be unfamiliar with how to address and treat a transgender individual. Additionally, gyms across the world can make simple changes to make transgenders feel more comfortable taking care of their pre and post workout formalities. Lastly, with the cultivation of health and fitness communities welcoming the transgender community, it can be assumed that their overall health would

improve, and they would pick up healthier habits. The one thing slowing this improvement in the transgender community's health is the lack of progressive and linear change. People can continue discussing how changes need to be made, but these changes need to be implemented. All types of genders need to feel welcome in the health and fitness community, or there will continue to be negative health impacts on communities who do not feel comfortable. With progressive change, there can be a vast improvement for health and wellness for all genders.

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