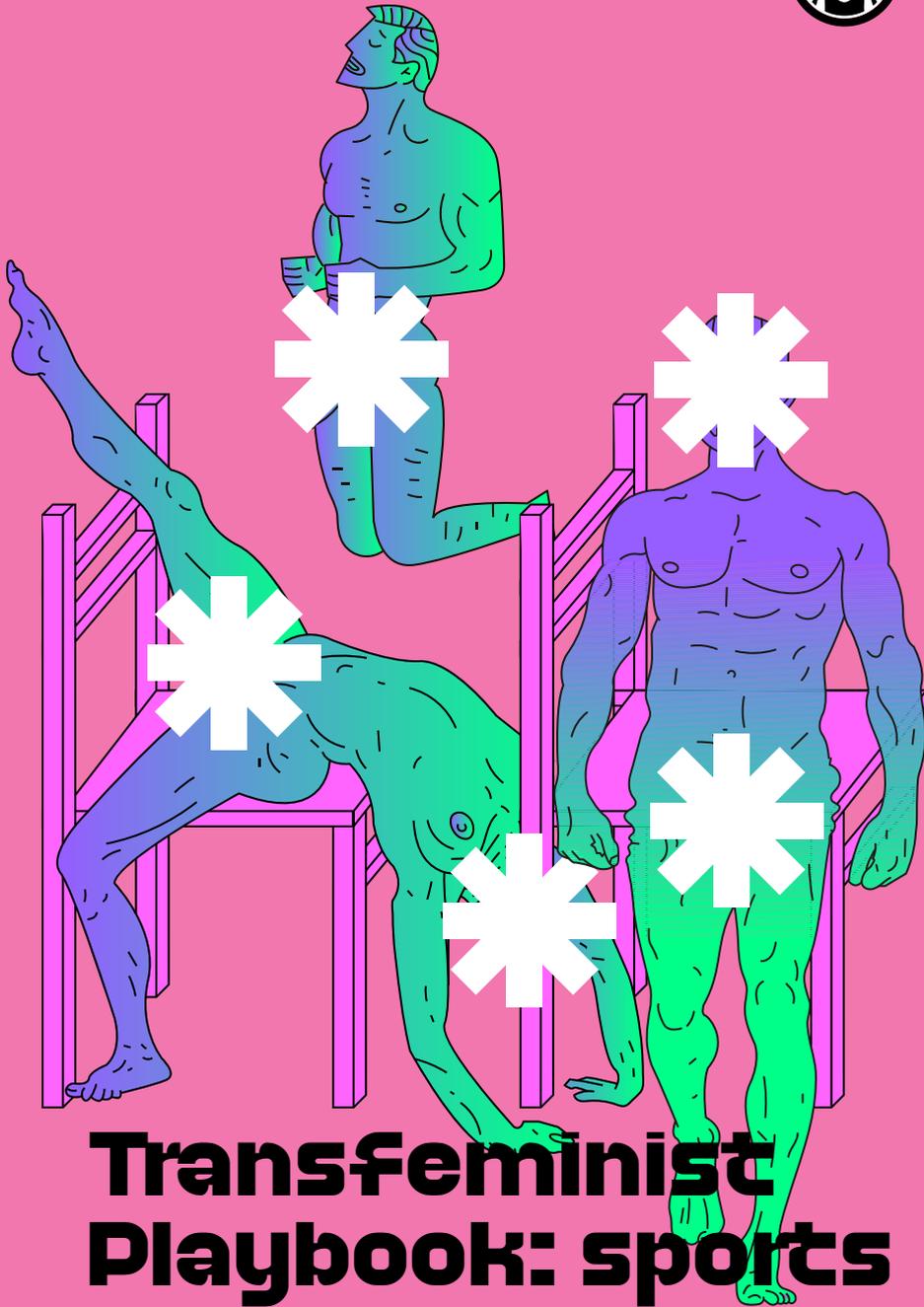




trans mreža
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Transfeminist Playbook: sports edition

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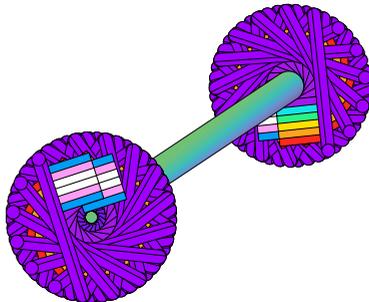


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INTRODUCTION

Even decades after the Stonewall riots, where transgender and gender diverse people stood at the forefront of the fight for gay, lesbian and trans* rights – and after countless books and research publications, the idea of non-binary identities still strikes some as controversial. Today, in times of a strong sentiment against queer communities, despite the progress in laws and legislations; the lives, choices, participation and visibility of transgender people continue to be turned into a political battlefield by anti-rights actors.

Participation of transgender people in sports is about inclusion and (competitive) fairness, and targets mostly transgender women. However, sport has always been more than competition - it is a space where societies demonstrate their (democratic) values, inclusion, and diversity of human bodies. Research shows that transgender people make up around 1 - 2% of the general population, and represent an extremely small percentage of athletes, and even smaller share of professional Olympians (around 0.001%¹). The recent public uproar around participation rights, ranging from testosterone monitoring to complete bans, seems deeply disproportionate. The bodies of transgender and gender-diverse athletes have become object of media controversies.

The debate over transgender athletes in sports has received increased attention, such as the case of swimmer Lia Thomas, with critics claiming that biological differences (particularly testosterone levels) create unfair advantages in women's sports. But this narrative is not true, and it does not only affect transgender women – several cisgender women have been accused of being trans* by their fellow athletes and the public, amplified by media. This is especially visible with women of color, such as **Caster Semenya** (South African cisgender woman and middle-distance runner) and **Imane Khelif** (cisgender Algerian professional female boxer), who have faced false accusations, invasive medical examinations, and even bans from competing because their bodies do not conform to non-defined norms.

Athletes, like everyone else, come in all shapes and sizes, including physical advantages helpful to their sports (such as Michael Phelps' long arms or Simone Biles' body size that potentially help them excel), yet some people's physical attributes have never been questioned in fairness. When watching the great athletes, we observe that being an athlete is more than biology and not limited to body – it is about mindset, courage, dedication, talent, and sometimes luck. Transgender athletes play sports for the same reasons as anyone else – they love the game, they have the drive to compete, and they dedicate their lives to it.

¹ <https://www.sf.gov/trans-women-in-sports-facts-over-fear>

Despite this, governments, sports federations, and institutions are introducing bans or restrictions, framed as necessary to protect fairness in (women's) sport. But it is not about fairness, it's about fear, control, and division. Transgender athletes remain a small minority in sports, and contrary to the popular belief, they are not "taking over" competitions - in fact, they often lose to their cisgender competitors and show no advantage.

This Transfeminist Playbook: Sports Edition emerges from this complex context. It is grounded in the belief that sports should be a space of dignity, inclusion, and justice. Through this new publication, **Trans Network Balkans** offers a framework for understanding why the fight for transgender participation in sport is inseparable from broader struggles for gender justice and democracy. It is the reminder that visibility means acknowledging the presence and dignity of transgender people in every sphere of life - including sports. It also means challenging the narratives that attempt to erase them.

The question is not whether transgender people belong in sports - they already do, for decades. The question is whether our communities (and institutions) are willing to protect the values of equality and dignity that sport claims to represent, or whether they will allow themselves to be instrumentalized within a broader anti-democratic agenda.

Sport has the power to inspire.

This playbook is an invitation to move that work forward.

Naida Kučukalić

Global Unit for Feminism and Gender Democracy
of the Heinrich Böll Foundation

March 2026, Sarajevo



Who Gets to Compete? The History of Sex Segregation in Sport

In 2025, the division of sports into men's and women's categories is a concept that goes almost uninterrogated in mainstream discourse. This division is understood as entirely natural and, more importantly, as being in the interest of women, framed as a means of protecting women's sport from male domination. Yet, if we look at the evolution of this divide and its current state, we can conclude that while sex-based segregation of sports is presented as a matter of biology, history clearly reveals it to be a societal and political mechanism for controlling women's bodies. In this context, contemporary debates concerning trans women in sports are no new phenomenon; they are only the latest phase in the long-standing struggle over women's rights and attempts to define the boundaries of femininity.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WOMEN'S SPORT

Towards the end of the 19th century, sport underwent institutionalization, with the creation of the first sports associations and the establishment of standardized sports regulations. Within this system, sport was used as a tool to mold and prepare men to serve national military and social

interests. It thus came to belong to the public sphere of society reserved solely for men, in contrast to the private sphere that women were entirely relegated to. This social system gave rise not only to gender segregation but to racial and class-based segregation as well.¹ The primary purpose of such segregation was the social exclusion of these groups, as well as keeping structural power in the hands of wealthy white men.²

The first organized sports in which women were able to gain a foothold were those primarily intended for socializing and considered “ladylike,” such as tennis, croquet, golf, and horseback riding. These sports were considered elegant, didn’t cause too much sweating, and the participants were able to compete in long skirts and corsets.

Women were barred from participating in the first modern Olympic Games held in Athens in 1896; at the 1900 Paris Olympics, they were granted the right to compete in the aforementioned “ladylike sports.” Given that men’s sports had long constituted the standard Olympic program, while women’s sports were treated as somewhat secondary or supplementary, women were not allowed to compete alongside men. Such attitudes persist even today, as women’s sports are still considered to exist as “supplementary” or as “add-ons” to the disciplines in which men compete. During the same period, in the United Kingdom, women and girls were playing football, often against men. This practice ended in 1902, when several local federations introduced restrictions on their clubs playing against women’s teams. However, the outbreak of World War I brought renewed popularity to women’s football. As many men were deployed to the front lines, women took over roles previously filled by men, first in factory labor and then on the football field. New football clubs were formed, playing charity matches for war relief, which began to attract tens of thousands of fans.

¹ Witherspoon, K. B. (2021). *Inclusion, exclusion, and segregation*. In S. A. Riess (Ed.), *A cultural history of sport in the modern age* (Vol. 6, pp. 149–172). Bloomsbury Academic.

² Whitten, R. (2025). *Sports participation as a social determinant of athletic sex differences* (Master’s thesis, Colorado State University). Mountain Scholar.

The peak of this popularity came on 26 December 1920, when a record 53,000 fans attended a match between two women's teams in Liverpool.³ Shortly afterwards, in 1921, the Football Association (FA) introduced a ban on women's football, which lasted until 1971, citing the need to protect women "because football is not for them."⁴ The real reason was an effort to revive men's football and its financial revenue—since the FA had no financial control over women's football—as well as to maintain male hegemony in sports.

THE FLAWS IN BIOESSENTIALISM ⁵

The reasons for excluding women from sporting competitions and reducing their access to sports mainly stemmed from the accepted biological notions of the time. In the early 20th century, the myth of female fragility was considered a medical fact, and playing sports was presented as damaging to women's health, as they were allegedly at risk of uterine prolapse/displacement. This 'female fragility' myth persists in sports today in the form of arguments about biological differences between men and women.

While it is true that women have, on average, lower muscle mass and shorter stature than men, this is, first and foremost, an average. The biological and athletic characteristics of individuals within each sex category vary substantially, meaning that the top female athletes generally outperform the vast majority of men. Further, in many sports, one's performance depends on dozens if not hundreds of characteristics, rather than on simple strength or height. This is best evidenced by various sports (such

³ BBC News. (2020, December 26). *The Boxing Day game that changed women's football*. BBC.

⁴ Müller, M. (2016). *Constructing gender incommensurability in competitive sport: Sex/gender testing and the new regulations on female hyperandrogenism*. *Human Studies*, 39(3), 405–431.

⁵ Bioessentialism is the belief that the identity, capabilities and behavior of an individual or group are determined by an innate, unchangeable "essence" which arises from their biology, rather than from social or cultural factors.

as gymnastics, shooting sports, equestrian sports, and figure skating) in which women tend to achieve equal or superior results when competing under the same rules as men, allowing for comparisons.

However, it is important here to interrogate the foundational logic of segregating based on biological differences. While dividing sports along gender lines may seem entirely natural to us, other social constructs, such as race or nationality, aren't used (or, rather, are no longer used) as parameters by which to segregate, despite there being, on average, physiological differences (different average height by country, higher lung capacity in people from high-altitude regions) between them. Even if we stick to strictly biological differences, for example, basketball players tend to be very tall, yet no one is preventing the shorter ones from playing. Muggsy Bogues is a former American basketball player who, standing at 160 cm, was far from the biological average for basketball players; however, rather than being used to exclude him, his biological characteristics enabled him to develop his own style and go on to have a long career in the NBA. Even Lionel Messi, one of the best football players of all time, suffered from a growth hormone deficiency in his youth, requiring treatment. His height, shorter strides, and low center of gravity were crucial to his success. If we take the biologically essentialist argument for not allowing women to compete against men because they are “weaker” or “shorter” to its logical conclusion, it follows that men who are shorter or weaker should likewise be barred from competing.

HAVING SEPARATE WOMEN'S CATEGORIES DOESN'T HELP WOMEN

In 1920, the International Women's Sports Federation (FSFI) was formed in Paris in direct response to the International Olympic Committee's refusal to include more women's events in the Olympic Games. FSFI organized the Women's World Games in 1922, the success of which created sufficient pressure for new women's events to be introduced

into the Olympics.⁶ In some ways, the inclusion process of women's sporting disciplines continues even to this day.

One of the best examples of how sex-based segregation of sports is harmful to women comes from Olympic shooting. At the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, women competed in shooting for the first time, in mixed events alongside men. Although women were not equally represented in this sport relative to men, who had competed in shooting events for decades at the Olympics specifically, and for centuries in general, those who did compete did so with great success. One of them was Margaret Murdock; at the Pan American Games in 1967, she became the first woman ever to win a gold medal in shooting in an international match. Nine years later, at the 1976 Montreal Olympics, Margaret tied for first place with a man. After some deliberation, the judges decided to break the tie, and the gold medal was awarded to her rival, Lenny Basham. In protest, he and Margaret stood together on the first-place podium, even though she had to wear the silver medal.⁷

Following Margaret Murdock's success, Olympic shooting entered a period of sex segregation. Men and women no longer competed together, and the rules themselves were changed. Men's and women's events no longer featured the same number of shots or targets. Until recently, men's and women's pistol events were even shot from different distances; today, though the distance is the same, the competition formats still differ. The official reason given for these changes was to increase the number of medals for women and foster the development of the sport, but it's clear that they were actually implemented to prevent the undermining of male dominance in a sport regarded as distinctly masculine.

⁶ Théberge, N. (1991). *Women and the Olympics: A consideration of gender, sport and social change*. In F. Landry, M. Landry, & M. Yerles (Eds.), *Sport ... The Third Millennium / Le troisième millénaire* (pp. 385–396). Les Presses de l'Université Laval.

⁷ Buczynski, A. R.-M. (2022). *Taking Aim: The evolution of women in competitive shooting sports in the 20th century United States* (Master's thesis, Western Michigan University). Western Michigan University Digital Commons.



The argument derived from biological differences has no merit whatsoever when it comes to shooting, so the only seemingly coherent remaining argument is that of “fostering the development of women’s sports.” However, while this argument may on its surface seem legitimate and supportive of women, at its core, it contributes to further discrimination against them. Instead of empowering women’s sports, segregation consistently leads to women’s sports receiving less investment⁸ and less representation in society and the media, and ultimately results in a lower quality of competition. In addition to this, constant segregation reinforces the idea of women as “not good enough” to compete with men, and women’s sports remain forever secondary and “supplementary” to men’s, which are considered the “standard.”⁹ This treatment of women as second-class athletes becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, where meager funding, low-quality training, lack of opportunities, and negative societal attitudes to women in sport lead to low participation and poorer outcomes, thus reaffirming the belief in women’s inferiority and serving as an excuse to continue denying opportunities and funding.

HOW DO WE DETERMINE WHO COMPETES IN MEN’S, AND WHO IN WOMEN’S SPORTS?

With the institutionalization of women’s sports, the myth of female fragility did not decline in popularity; in fact, by the mid-20th century it had taken on a new form—one that persists to this day. Women’s top athletic results were characterized as “suspicious,” and female athletes deemed too successful became targets of investigations and debates about whether they were “real women.” A narrative emerged claiming to protect women’s sport from cisgender men seeking to infiltrate it in order to win medals. It is important to note that while there were cases of individuals who competed in women’s events being “revealed” to be men later in life, they were few and far between and were most likely

⁸ Mogaji, E., Badejo, F. A., & Charles, S. (2021). *Financial well-being of sportswomen. International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 13(2), 299–319.

⁹ Brake, D.L. (2010). *Playing with the boys: Why separate is not equal in sports*. Oxford University Press.

explained by these individuals having ambiguous or indeterminate genital anatomy.

We must keep in mind that their gender identities could have been a factor as well. The narrative of defending against cis men is indistinguishable from today's discourse about trans women athletes as "men wearing wigs," hungry for medals in women's sports. It was in this context that the need for sports institutions to establish clear rules that strictly segregate men's and women's sports emerged.¹⁰

Since 1946, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF, presently known as World Athletics) have required female athletes (but not male ones) to submit medical certificates as proof of their eligibility to compete. However, due to an increasing number of female athletes whose appearance was deemed "masculine," the IAAF took it upon itself to test all female athletes participating in competitions.¹¹ The first "gynecological inspections" (so-called „nude parades") were introduced at the 1966 European Athletics Championship in Budapest, where all women athletes were required to undergo visual genital examinations before a panel of officials. This invasive and degrading practice was met with a sharp outcry from female athletes from the outset,¹² while its insufficient accuracy and ineffectiveness led sports organizations to conclude that a new testing method would need to be developed. This "insufficient accuracy" was caused by frequent cases of atypical genital anatomy, such as an enlarged clitoris, fused labia, or an unusually placed urethral opening.¹³

By 1967 (1968 for the IOC), the IAAF had already introduced chromosomal testing using the Barr body detection test. This test is based on the notion that men have XY chromosomes while women have XX chro-

¹⁰ Simpson, J. L., Ljungqvist, A., de la Chapelle, A., Ferguson-Smith, M. A., Genel, M., Carlson, A. S., Ehrhardt, A. A., & Ferris, E. (1993). *Gender verification in competitive sports*. *Sports Medicine*, 16(5), 305–315.

¹¹ Pieper, L. P. (2016). *Sex testing: Gender policing in women's sports*. University of Illinois Press.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

mosomes, and thus aims to detect a second X chromosome in order to prove the subject is female. However, this distinction is not so simple. Due to their “female” traits (namely, their primary and secondary sex characteristics), individuals with Androgen insensitivity syndrome (AIS) may never learn that they possess supposedly “male” XY chromosomes and undescended internal testes.¹⁴ As a consequence of AIS, their bodies do not respond to testosterone (or other androgens) or undergo changes typical of bodies with high testosterone levels. Barr body tests classified these women as men. In addition to AIS, there are numerous variations in chromosomal configuration, such as chromosomal mosaicism (XY and XX), Klinefelter syndrome (XXY), and Turner syndrome (X₀, i.e. a single X chromosome). Each of these configurations challenges the binary understanding of gender.

Spanish hurdler Maria José Martínez Patino was banned from competing in the women’s category at the 1985 World University Games in Japan because she failed the Barr body test. Shortly thereafter, she learned that she had AIS, and her case prompted many geneticists to object to the IOC rules. In the aftermath of her case, Albert de la Chapelle, professor of medical genetics at the University of Helsinki, sought the opinion of 15 leading geneticists regarding these rules. Three of them did not respond, while the rest unanimously agreed that these tests were scientifically unfounded, inaccurate, and discriminatory.

In the wake of this case, increasing pressure led sports organizations to reconsider the Barr body test and other testing methods, resulting in the complete abolition of sex-verification testing in IAAF competitions starting in 1992. The IOC, on the other hand, continued conducting various methods of testing (Barr body test and PCR/SRY) until 1999, disregarding the opinions of scientists and several countries’ medical associations. Despite abolishing mandatory testing, both organizations retained the right to test and interrogate individual athletes on the grounds of suspi-

¹⁴ It’s important to note that while AIS is a form of intersexuality, most female athletes with this syndrome identify (and are identified as) women since birth. This, and other examples of intersexuality, are the best representation of how scientifically unfounded the concept of binary sex is.

cion, upholding the idea of sex/gender as binary.¹⁵ It is important to note that these tests always disproportionately target athletes from the Global South, who do not fit into the Western ideal of “femininity.”¹⁶

In 2011, following several “controversies” involving female athletes from the Global South who had won medals at international competitions, new rules were implemented. The IOC and IAAF established regulations regarding “hyperandrogenism,” which they defined as “excessive production of androgenic hormones (testosterone).” According to the IAAF rules, the maximum serum testosterone level was limited to less than 10 nanomoles per liter (≤ 10 nmol/L). These rules targeted all female athletes with above-average testosterone levels, who would now be forced to lower them with medication. Of course, the IAAF and IOC never implemented similar rules for men with above-average testosterone levels. The outcome of this was that female athletes had to deliberately curtail their natural advantages (in such sports where higher testosterone levels are an advantage) in order to compete.

The harmful consequences of this policy were best demonstrated in 2013, when IAAF doctors diagnosed four young African women athletes with hyperandrogenism. These intersex women¹⁷ were referred to a specialized center in France where they underwent gonadectomies (removal of undescended testicles) at the “suggestion” of doctors. Although the IAAF later claimed that the athletes had consented to the surgery, they pointed out that it had been made clear to them that they would no longer be allowed to compete if they did not undergo the surgery, and that they were not given a clear explanation of what the procedure actually entailed and how it would affect their lives.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ritchie, I., & Pieper, L. P. (2015). *Gender verifications in sport: From an East/West antagonism to a North/South antagonism*. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 32(7), 965–979

¹⁷ Although this case concerns intersex women, hyperandrogenism can occur in cis women as well. One of its most common causes in cis women is polycystic ovaries.

¹⁸ Schultz, J. (2024). *Regulating bodies: Elite sport policies and their unintended consequences*. Oxford University Press.

Since 2011, sports organizations have attempted to restrict who can compete in women's sports in many different ways, with rules changing almost annually. This has led to the current state of affairs, with no uniform rules across different federations and sports, but rather a variety of testing methods and bans. This year, World Athletics (WA, formerly IAAF) announced the reinstatement of PCR/SRY testing for the first time since the 1990s. The use of SRY tests incorrectly assumes, yet again, that a single gene can reliably determine someone's sex.¹⁹

The apparent inability of sports institutions to establish clear, nondiscriminatory rules regarding women's sports is not unexpected. Throughout all of these attempts, science and life both show us that the notion that sex—unlike gender—is a straightforward, binary, biological category does not hold water. Genitals, genes/chromosomes, hormones, somatic/phenotypic sex—they're merely some of the factors that go into defining a person's sex, and to this day, it has proven impossible to draw a clear line that would allow us to say with certainty that everyone on one side is male and everyone on the other is female.

WHERE ARE TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IN ALL OF THIS?

The official inclusion of transgender athletes first began in 2003, when the International Olympic Committee created the "Stockholm Consensus." This set of rules allows transgender individuals to compete in the Olympic Games, provided that they have undergone gender reassignment surgery, legally changed their gender marker, and, in the case of trans women, have undergone at least two years of hormone therapy to reduce testosterone levels.

These rules were amended in 2015, when the IOC removed the gender reassignment surgery requirement, thus protecting the rights of trans individuals who choose not to undergo surgery. The focus then shifted

¹⁹ Pieper, L. P., Schultz, J., & Krieger, J. (2025, April 3). *Regression, not progress: A response to World Athletics' return to sex testing*. *Idrottsforum.org*.

to testosterone levels (≤ 10 nmol/L) for a year prior to competing.²⁰ This policy created more room for the inclusion of transgender female athletes, as evidenced by the following Olympics.

At the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, Laurel Hubbard became the first trans woman to compete in the weightlifting event, finishing last in her category. That same year, Canadian football player Quinn, who came out as transgender and nonbinary in 2020, became the first trans person to win a gold medal at the Olympics. Two other nonbinary athletes competed at the Tokyo and Paris Games as well: Alana Smith in skateboarding and Nikki Hiltz in track and field.²¹

With the global rise in transphobia over the past decade, transgender women in sports have come under increasing scrutiny. The narrative of protecting women, which has gone through many iterations—from preserving women's fragility, to segregating categories for the purpose of promoting women's sports, and ultimately to protecting women from cisgender men—has now identified a new “threat” in trans women. As a result of this trend, inclusive policies are gradually being rolled back; in 2021, the IOC introduced new regulations that abolished the universal testosterone limit and acknowledged the differing requirements across sports. Through this policy, the IOC transferred decision-making responsibility to individual sports federations, urging them to base any potential restrictions on participation on evidence of a significant competitive advantage. While these guidelines may appear progressive, the lack of mechanisms to monitor and sanction federations that make unfounded decisions has led to considerable variation in regulations across different sports, ranging from the highly inclusive to those that outright prohibit trans women from competing.

²⁰ Kamis, D., & Glick, I. (2025). *Navigating fairness and inclusion: The evolution of rules for transgender athletes in women's sports*. *Advances in Psychiatry and Behavioral Health*, 5(4), 9–15.

²¹ In addition to those mentioned here, many other transgender men and women compete at all levels of sports. Some of them win medals; some do not.

The history of sport clearly demonstrates that it has been used to uphold existing social structures since its institutional inception. From the exclusion of women under the pretext of biological fragility to today's restrictions on trans women under the slogan of "protecting women's sports," it's evident that while the arguments change, the exclusionary structure remains the same. Despite all the rhetoric of defending women and concern for women's sport, these processes have led to increasing repression and policing of what counts as "proper" women's bodies.

Controlling women's bodies under the guise of protecting women is an oppressive practice grounded in policies of exclusion and outdated ideals. This has led us to the current state of affairs, where we divide sports along the lines of sex—a social construct that even sporting institutions themselves are unable to define, and which is continuously used to exclude certain people unjustly. Even athletes who do not face exclusion are forced to contend with social perceptions, lower funding, worse conditions, and many additional structural hurdles.

Contemporary debates on sex-based differences in sport demonstrate that the problem lies not in bodies themselves, but in the lines that society draws around them. We must re-examine these arbitrary boundaries and find ways to make sports a truly inclusive space—one that grants all women the same freedom to compete that is already afforded to men.

IN SHORT:

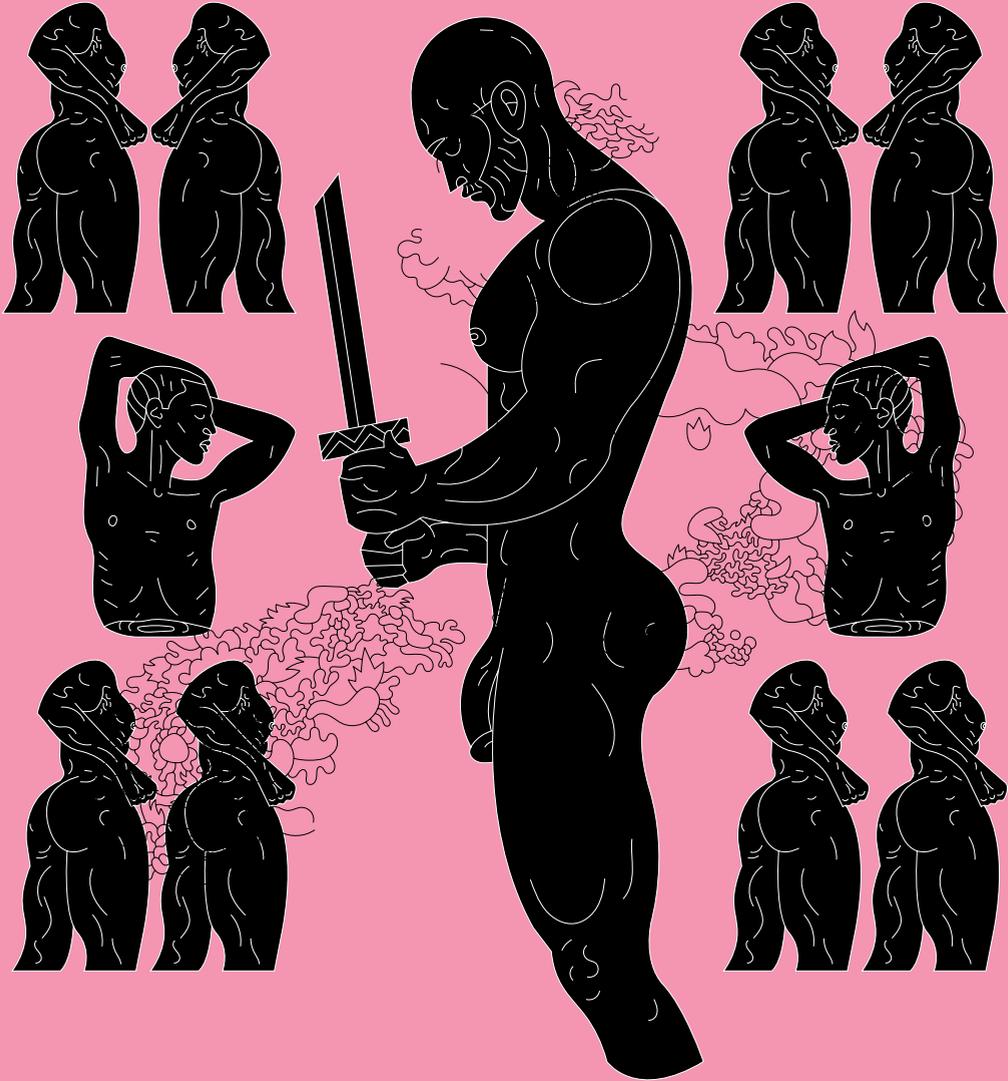
1. **Although the gender divide in sports is most often perceived as natural these days, history teaches us that it was primarily introduced as a means of control and exclusion of women from the public sphere. Official narratives of fostering women's sport have gone hand in hand with increased repression and policing of women within it, while women's sports continue to be underfunded and overshadowed by men's.**

2. Women's sporting categories were established through a tireless struggle against social, political, and medical justifications for the exclusion of women. Despite the progress achieved in regard to the status of women and women's sports, gender segregation continues to result in inequality. Rules and practices remain inconsistent and often discriminatory, and women's sports receive less investment, media attention, and overall support. In other words, the separation of men's and women's categories has not, in itself, contributed to empowering women's sports.

3. The argument of biological essentialism (that is, the narrative of there being inherent, insurmountable biological differences in men's and women's abilities, which is rooted in group averages) serves as an excuse for maintaining male dominance, despite the fact that variations among individuals of all genders far exceed gendered averages, especially in professional sports.

4. Throughout history, women athletes have been subjected to humiliating sex-verification testing, particularly women who belong to the Global Majority, illustrating the point that contemporary narratives and practices around "proving" womanhood aren't new phenomena, but merely the continuation of a longstanding historical trend. This type of testing has never been imposed on men.

5. Restrictions imposed on competitions and on those participating in them are predominantly social rather than biological, and must be thoroughly re-evaluated if we are to achieve inclusivity and fairness in sport.



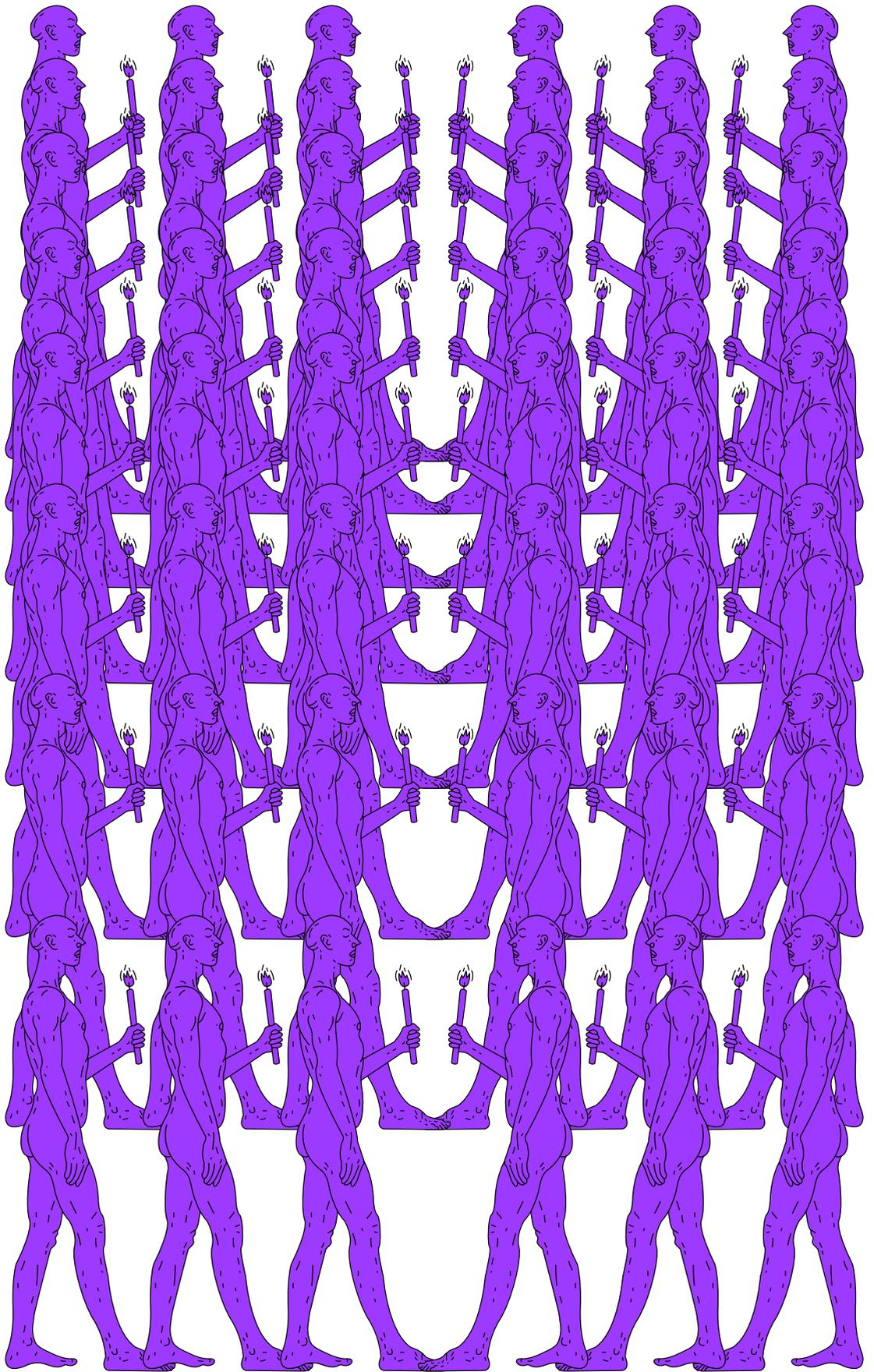
The Role of Sport in Upholding the Gender/Sex Binary and Western Ideals of Femininity

Sport is an important part of public life and, as such, is governed by both its internal rules and external regulations. Governments legally regulate this sphere of life, placing it within an appropriate legislative framework. It is therefore clear that sport is far more than a socially structured physical activity, or a game that may include competition between participants or serve purely for leisure and entertainment. Properly analyzing and understanding the present-day function and influence of sport as a social phenomenon requires us to view it as a social activity that is distinctly “embedded” in each culture of which it is part, structured and operating in accordance with the values of that culture. Modern professional sport should be understood as a product of the West, which has shaped sport as we know it today, exported it worldwide, and institutionalized and commodified it for the purpose of generating profit. The media play a significant role in this commodification process, as their manner of reporting affects both the evolution of sport itself and the upholding and reinforcement of certain norms and political values imposed by the West through sport. As this publication focuses primarily on the exclusion of transgender people from competitive sport and on transphobia present in sport, this section will explore how both the normative gender binary and the specific Western European ideal of the female body and conventional femininity are (re)produced and reinforced within the social institution of sport.

Historically, women were denied access to sport for a very long time. Not only were girls discouraged from playing sports, but any excessive physical activity in women (except in the context of productive labor) was met with disapproval. According to prevailing social attitudes at the time, women were confined to the private sphere of the home and domestic labor and were expected to remain passive and minimally engaged in public life. This also applied to young girls, who were raised and conditioned to be passive and sit still, unlike boys, who were expected to be physically active and always in motion. The need for physical activity and the pursuit of sport was always regarded as “natural” for men, and this part of public life was accordingly gendered as a “male domain,” to which women initially had no access. Women were not allowed to participate in the first modern Olympics in 1896. This ban and their broader exclusion from sport were justified through various sexist and misogynistic arguments at the time. It was believed that women had no place in sports because they were too weak and fragile, that women’s sports were unappealing and uninteresting, and that women playing sports was simply wrong. It was also argued that women shouldn’t play sports to avoid injuring their reproductive organs or altering their bodies in ways that would render them unattractive to men.

The second modern Olympics, held in 1900, marked the first time women were allowed to participate, and even then, only in two individual events (golf and tennis), as well as in croquet and sailing. It was only in 2012 that women were finally able to compete in all the same Olympic events as men, as that was the year the Olympic Committee introduced the women’s boxing event. That same year, women accounted for 44% of all competitors.

Over the course of the 20th century, women’s inclusion in sporting competitions gradually progressed. It is interesting to note that data on athletic performance in some disciplines (marathon, sprint races, swimming) indicates that over a few decades, women consistently achieved dramatic improvements in record times; in contrast, men’s records improved by significantly smaller margins during the same period. This data supports the claim that society’s unequal treatment of women



compared to men, particularly when sport and physical activity are concerned, significantly affects the level of athletic performance that can be achieved. It further demonstrates that the “gender gap” in sport performance is not always, nor necessarily, the result of inherent bodily differences between men and women. Despite the evolving attitudes toward women in this sphere, significant differences between men’s and women’s sports—in terms of funding, popularity, media coverage, decision-making, and governance of sports federations and other major sports institutions—persist to this day. Moreover, regulations concerning, for example, women’s athletic attire, are often designed with the intent of presenting the female body as an object for the male gaze. It is clear that we’re still a long way from true gender equality, and women continue to face significant discrimination in the sporting world.

Of course, we cannot reduce women to a monolithic category of gender identity, nor can gender be examined independently of its intersections with race, class, sexuality, and other identity categories. Women and girls from poorer families are certainly not afforded nearly the same opportunities or conditions to train in as those who have all the necessary resources to pursue sport successfully and to a high standard. Lesbians, bisexual women, and other non-heterosexual individuals are subjected to a specific form of violence, exclusion, and discrimination in the context of sport—a space where homophobia is encouraged on a global scale. In recent years, transgender women have not only been actively excluded from sporting competitions through various rules, laws, and regulations, but have also had their ability to participate in any sporting activities revoked or restricted. One of the reasons for this is the erasure of transgender people from public discourse and the persecution they face through campaigns that spread moral panic, portraying transgender women as a threat to cisgender women, to women’s sport, and even as a “threat to the nation,” in the words of U.S. President Donald Trump. These campaigns aim to abolish the inclusive measures that were originally introduced in order to recognize transgender people as legitimate members of society, in which they have always existed. However, to those who enjoy all the privileges of the white, heteropatriarchal social class, transgender individuals present a threat because they undermine

the social structures that were established to keep power and privilege solely in the hands of that class. These structures are the very foundation upon which sex-segregated sport was built.¹

Historically, prohibiting women's participation in sport was also intended to restrict their access to public life and relegate them to the private sphere of home and family, where they were tasked with caring for their husbands and children. After they successfully fought for the right to participate in numerous domains of public life, including sport, they were subjected to a different form of discrimination aimed at pressuring them to withdraw, which many women succumbed to. For example, white middle-class women in the United States rarely pursued athletics during the first half of the 20th century because engaging in this sport affected body shape and muscle mass in distinct ways that led to female athletes being labeled masculine and ridiculed. Their withdrawal from numerous athletic disciplines created opportunities for predominantly Black women to participate, which further reinforced racist stereotypes portraying Black women's bodies as unfeminine. These stereotypes were rooted in racist theories and assumptions of correlation between sexual dimorphism and racial differences, serving to uphold the notion of the alleged superiority of the white race.

Sexual dimorphism refers to the existence of pronounced differences between male and female individuals of the same species. These differences (in addition to different reproductive organs) include size, build, coloration, behavior, and other characteristics. One argument for alleged racial superiority used by eugenicists and racists relied precisely on the existence of sexual differentiation—that is, the apparent visual distinction between men and women who belong to the white race—because it was believed that among Black people, Indigenous groups in North America, and other non-white races, these differences were less pronounced. Some scientists even insisted on the racist assertion that the less “civilized” a race, the less difference there would be between

¹ Travers, “‘Female’ Sport and Testosterone Panic”, in *Justice for Trans Athletes: Challenges and Struggles*, edited by: Ali Durham Greey and Helen Jefferson Lenskyj (Emerald Publishing, 2023), 45-62.

the sexes. They considered prominent sexual dimorphism to exist only in the white race, interpreting it as a mark of progress and civilization.

In her book *The biopolitics of feeling: race, sex, and science in the nineteenth century*, scholar Kyla Schuller states that from the 19th century onward, sex became a racial–imperial project, as part of which binary sex came to “accomplish the work of racial differentiation.” In her work, she reveals the overlooked role of sexual difference in biopolitics—i.e., population management—and indicates that binary models of sex function as one of the key mechanisms of racially structured power. “The discourse of thorough divergence in the character, physiology, mentality, and emotion of men and women emerged in both conservative and feminist discourse of the nineteenth century and served to diagnose a specialized trait that allegedly only the civilized had developed.”²

Philosopher María Lugones notes that “the binary distinction between the sexes can be considered a colonial invention which is explicitly used as a tool for racialization: it denies the humanity of colonized peoples by excluding them from the sphere of Western ‘masculinity’/‘femininity’, while simultaneously erasing alternative gender systems and forms of social organization in which sexual difference is not accorded primary significance.”³ She further stresses that “the very binary system of sex/gender, in the way it was imposed on colonized peoples—in conjunction with practices of exploitation, slavery, and subjugation—is in fact infused with racist Eurocentrism.”⁴ This system is continuously maintained and reproduced through various state ideological apparatuses, which include the social institution of sport.

The idea of the sex/gender binary and pronounced dimorphism, established and imposed by the colonial system, undoubtedly influenced the implementation and design of sex-verification tests in elite sport—un-

² Kyla Schuller, *The biopolitics of feeling: race, sex, and science in the nineteenth century* (Duke University Press, 2017), 16.

³ Bojan Bilić and Aleksa Milanović (2022). “Introduction: In post-Yugoslav trans worlds”, in *Transgender in the Post-Yugoslav Space: Lives, Activisms, Culture*, edited by: Bojan Bilić and Aleksa Milanović (Multimedia institute MAMA, 2022), 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

surprisingly, with no consideration given to the intersection with race. For decades, the most influential sports organizations, such as World Athletics and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), “have relied on conservative medical assessments shaped and conditioned by Eurocentric beliefs, which regard a specific dimorphic sex/gender distinction as a natural phenomenon. In this way, sex testing/gender verification defines a specific category of ‘woman’ within the framework of sport—one that requires female athletes to demonstrate conventional ‘Western’ femininity.”⁵

The gender/sex binary is sustained (and reinforced) through the rules and regulations adopted by the relevant sports institutions, thereby constructing the normative body. The Western ideal of femininity and the female body is defined as the norm and is thus privileged over all other types of women’s bodies. Accordingly, the discrimination and exclusion of certain women serve to construct a specific Western European ideal of femininity and codify it as the norm, any deviation from which is defined as a deformity or transgression. Women whose bodies do not conform to this constructed norm are, at minimum, subjected to ridicule, and in the most extreme cases, they are dehumanized and excluded from sporting competitions. Before the spotlight was on transgender women, Black women and female athletes from China, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union were similarly labeled a threat to women’s sports.

The attitudes of Western media, sports organizations, and athletes toward women athletes from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union demonstrate that the ideal of Western femininity within sport was constructed not only along racial lines, but cultural ones as well. All of this was done in the service of preserving the normative standard and identifying Otherness, which was mocked and marked as inferior, unfeminine, and less worthy because it deviated from established norms of femininity. Soviet female athletes were muscular, physically large, and far stronger than their petite and graceful counterparts from the United States; at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, which saw the Soviet Union parti-

⁵ Lindsay Parks Pieper, “Sex Testing and the Maintenance of Western Femininity in International Sport”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 31:13 (2014): 1558.

cipate for the first time, they won a remarkable number of medals in disciplines requiring physical strength. They continued to win a substantial number of medals at subsequent Olympics, which in turn led to new rules concerning sex verification, as sports organizations publicly expressed doubts about the sex of competitors whose physiques diverged from Western norms of femininity.⁶

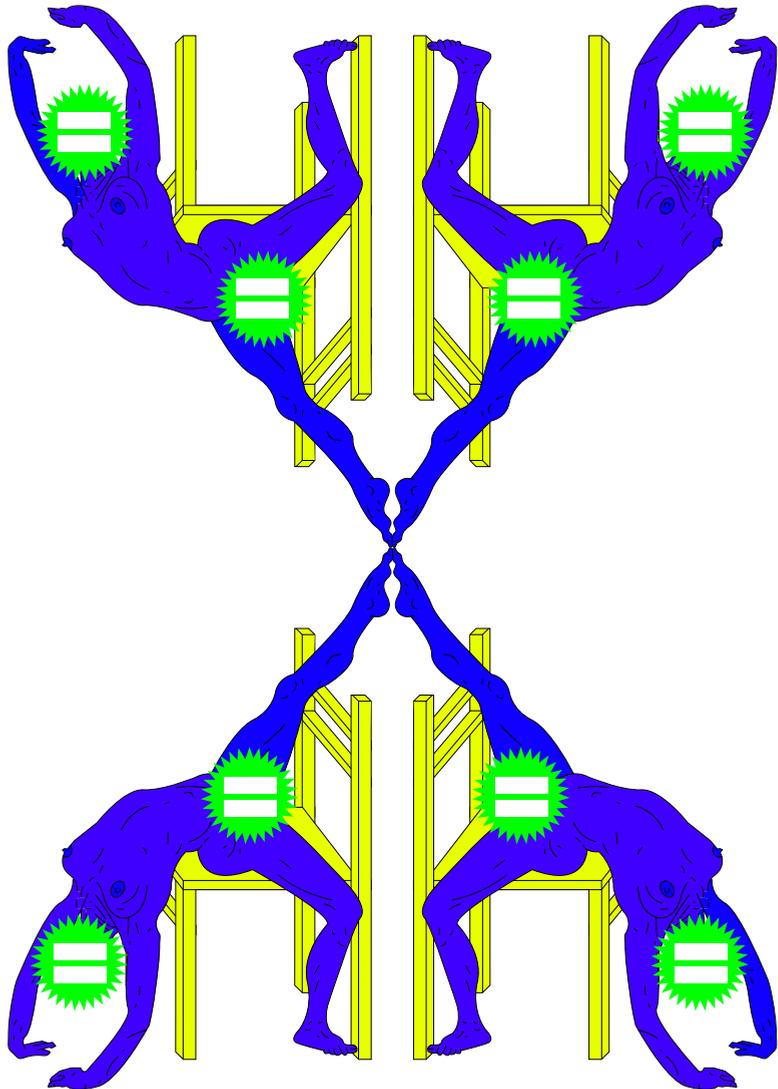
Sports organizations and the Western public responded similarly to Chinese female athletes, who won a large number of medals at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. Following a 24-year boycott, China returned to the Olympics and went on to secure a substantial number of medals at each subsequent Games. Their success was met with suspicion, anxiety, distrust, and condemnation from the Western world. Chinese women athletes met the same fate as their Soviet and Eastern European counterparts, being accused of doping and steroid abuse, despite the lack of any evidence to support such claims. These accusations were circulated by the media, sports associations, officials, and even prominent female athletes, who publicly questioned the legitimacy of Chinese women's athletic achievements without any factual basis.

This dynamic escalated to the point that sixteen elite athletes, fifteen of whom represented the United States, called for the introduction of even more stringent sex-verification tests, measures that many medical experts characterized as reflecting a fundamental misunderstanding of the human body and medical science. Nevertheless, these athletes, along with Western experts and media, persisted in their accusations and predictions that Chinese female athletes would regress, or even completely ruin, women's sport. The athletic results they achieved were incompatible with Western expectations of women and, moreover, contradicted the stereotypes about Chinese people constructed by American popular culture.⁷

⁶ Vanessa Heggie, "Testing sex and gender in sports; reinventing, reimagining and reconstructing histories", *Endeavour*, 34. 4 (2010): 157-163.

⁷ Darcy C. Plymire, "Too Much, Too Fast, Too Soon: Chinese Women Runners, Accusations of Steroid Use, and the Politics of American Track and Field", *Sociology of Sport Journal* 16 (1999): 155-173.

These examples indicate that just as sex and gender are artificially constructed as binary categories, so too are expectations about how the female body should look, the level of strength it can and is permitted to possess, and what femininity itself is. Female athletes' bodies are analyzed and critiqued by female (and male) athletes themselves, both active and retired, as well as by coaches, sports commentators, sports federations and associations, regulatory bodies, the mass media, fans, and, increasingly, right-wing politicians and state leaders who use this issue as convenient populist ammunition against all those who do not conform to imposed norms of gender and sexuality.



TO SUM UP:

- 1. Sport is not merely a physical activity but a social institution that, among other things, reinforces norms and stereotypes related to gender, race, and class. These expectations are particularly pronounced within the narrow, rigid Western ideal of femininity, which prescribes that women not be taller, more muscular, or generally more “masculine” than an arbitrarily imposed upper limit (defined in relation to white women with narrow shoulders, slender frames, and “delicate” features).**
2. Historically, women were not allowed to participate in sports, leading to consequences that persist to this day, such as strict and unjust regulations imposed on their bodies (rooted in discriminatory and restrictive notions of what a woman should be), which deeply infringe on the right to privacy and bodily autonomy.
3. Transgender people face particular exclusion because their existence and participation in sports challenge prevailing prejudices about women, their bodies, and societal gender dynamics. These prejudices harm not only transgender people but everyone, as they perpetuate a false dichotomy between men and women (portraying them as entirely different, with separate social and life roles, while simultaneously imposing restrictions on and dehumanizing both groups). Another manifestation of this prejudice is the belief that the only “proper” romantic and sexual relationships are those between men and women.



4. Bodily standards enforced through sports favor white, Western athletes, while women who deviate from this ideal - whether they're Black, Asian, or transgender - are often challenged, ridiculed, and barred from competition.

5. When all of this is taken into account, it becomes crystal clear that sport can be—and often is—a tool for upholding social hierarchies that consistently and unjustly favor a powerful minority, rather than a neutral competitive field where all participants are awarded equal opportunities and treatment.

Biology, Biopolitics, Bioethics, and Trans People in Sport

For capitalist society, it was biopolitics, the biological, the somatic, the corporal that mattered more than anything else. The body is a biopolitical reality; medicine is a biopolitical strategy.

Michel Foucault.¹

Biopolitics encompasses state and social mechanisms of control over fundamental human life practices. The concept originated as an extension of sovereign power (of the state), which governs life and death. In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault laid the foundations of biopolitics through the concept of biopower, defined as *the power over life and the right to death*.²

Unlike sovereign power, biopower regulates the aspects of life that concern everyday practices within institutions such as the family, the

¹ Foucault, Michel (2003). *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*. Translated by David Macey, Picador, 210.

² Foucault, Michel (2003). Lecture 11, 17 March 1976. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France*, Picador Press.

doctor-patient relationship, and the workplace. According to Foucault, biopower constitutes a social field of power and struggle within which epistemic authorities, in the service of regimes of rationality, intervene in vital aspects of human life. Biopower also refers to the ways in which individuals construct and interpellate subjectivity in the context of the relationship between the individual and the collective.

Among the basic concepts of biopolitics, we can distinguish between two forms of life: *zoe* (life in the sense of the living/non-living distinction) and *bios* (qualified life, or life within society). This distinction enables us to understand and differentiate among the various aspects of human life. In simplified terms, these are the two forms of life: life in itself, and life within society—the civil and political life of a citizen. Through his concept of “bare life,” Agamben expanded on the idea of an individual who is alive, yet excluded from the political system (*Homo Sacer*). In *Vita Activa*, Hannah Arendt highlighted how modern society blurs the once-clear boundary between the private and the political that existed in Antiquity, while Rosi Braidotti’s work problematized the concepts of normality and normativity.

THE DECLARATION AND PERFORMATIVITY OF SEX

Modern biopolitics has progressed beyond the regulatory practices that were central to Michel Foucault’s work. The focus has shifted away from Foucauldian *regulation* of life practices and onto their *construction*. To understand this, one must be familiar with the definition of the performative as a speech act that cannot be described as true or false, but only as successful or unsuccessful. A performative is a speech act that necessarily presupposes authority—that is, a position of authority from which a particular reality is constructed. When we consider the healthcare system, regardless of the material reality—our symptoms, our beliefs, or our assumptions about whether we are healthy or ill, and what that illness is—we become ill not at the moment first symptoms appear or when a disease reaches a particular stage of progression, but at the moment we receive a diagnosis, which is essentially a locutionary act—that is, a

statement of fact, a descriptive act. When such a descriptive act, an act of stating reality, comes from the position of a medical institution, that is, an officially sanctioned authority, and is uttered by a physician as a person possessing both the necessary knowledge and the legal authority to perform said utterance, it becomes a *conviction*, or what Austin termed a perlocutionary act.³

THE FEMALE ATHLETE'S BODY AS A SITE OF BIOPOLITICAL INTERVENTION

From the very moment of conception, the body becomes an object of medical classification. Prenatal tests such as NIPT (*Non-Invasive Prenatal Testing*), which are routinely performed in many countries (for example, Serbia, France, and the United States) as early as the tenth week of pregnancy, can detect the presence of a Y chromosome and thus anticipate the child's sex. This information precedes any direct physical or social contact with the child, yet it already functions as a performative act. Even in cultures that lack a formal *gender reveal*, parents and those around them begin referring to the fetus as a "boy" or a "girl," thereby assigning a whole set of expectations and behavioral patterns. Under the laws of many countries, a fetus whose sole identified characteristic is its chromosomal status is granted certain rights, which it will exercise if born. In Serbia, one such right is the right to inheritance, enshrined in the Constitution.

At birth, the doctor in the labor and delivery unit determines the infant's sex based on the external genitalia. This is then recorded in the civil registry of births, marking the first official act of constituting a social identity. In this way, the newborn body is introduced into the legal, medical, and later educational systems, where sex plays a defining role. As Anne Fau-

³ A perlocutionary act represents the effect or consequence an utterance produces in listeners, i.e., their reactions caused by the speech act, including persuasion, intimidation, motivation, or eliciting an emotional response. Austin, J. L. (1975). *How to Do Things with Words*. 2nd ed., edited by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, Harvard University Press.

sto-Sterling demonstrates in the seminal work *Sexing the Body* and later in *Sex/Gender*, this initial assignment sets in motion a new sex/gender construct,⁴ as a series of social and cultural performatives are subsequently layered onto the biological determination of sex at birth.

In early childhood, the family acts as the authority on clothing colors, toy types, and, later, on the selection of physical activities and on how muscles, balance, socialization, and coordination are developed, all of which shape motor skills in the long term. Children socialized as male are more frequently and intensely encouraged to participate in contact and strength-based sports, while activities emphasizing grace and bodily control are typically reserved for those socialized as female.

During adolescence and within the sports system, these differences are institutionally reinforced through the sex/gender regime and through segregated competition categories. Once an athlete enters professional frameworks, biopolitical authority transfers to sports medical committees, each of which maintains its own regime of truth regarding the body.

SEX/GENDER BIOPOLITICS AND PHARMACOPOLITICS

Sex and gender are ideological products that exist in a historical context, rather than objective scientific facts, although they are grounded in them. To clarify this, we can look back at the COVID-19 pandemic, when each state implemented regulatory measures in line with its own political and ideological positions. The virus itself always had the same morphology, which science described with increasing precision day by day, but how decisions governing people's lives were made did not depend solely on the virus's natural characteristics. Jana Bačević, a sociologist at the University of Cambridge, explained at the time that while

⁴ In her work *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World* (2012), Anne Fausto-Sterling offers an in-depth analysis of how sex and gender are inseparably intertwined and shaped by biological, social, and cultural factors throughout an individual's life. She uses the term sex/gender to highlight the dynamic interplay between these dimensions, emphasizing that they are not separate entities but interconnected processes.

scientists provide advice, it is politicians who make decisions, and therefore responsibility should lie with political institutions.⁵ She stressed the importance of distinguishing between the concepts and respective domains of responsibility of science and politics, noting that politicians often use scientific advice to justify their decisions while avoiding accountability. Phrases such as “follow the science” cannot serve as a justification for political decisions, since scientific data are not absolute and science itself is a field of constant debate, and the formulation, testing, and refutation of new hypotheses.

THE SCIENCE OF SEX

From Aristotle and Galen to modern classifications, sex has always been a biopolitical topic—a site where scientific knowledge and social power intersect. Although the human body has remained largely unchanged from antiquity to the present day, what is considered “sex,” the definition of sex, and the number of recognized sexes have changed throughout history. There are no inherent traits that would allow us to determine whether there is one, two, or multiple sexes. The physiological and anatomical characteristics that existed under a one-sex model continue to exist under a two-sex model. Over the centuries, scientists have studied the anatomy of female and male bodies, performed vivisections and autopsies, and observed differences, but these differences were interpreted through the cultural, social, and scientific paradigms of their time.⁶

Before the contemporary two-sex model became dominant, European medicine and philosophy viewed human sex through the lens of a single-sex model. According to this view, men and women were regarded

⁵ Bačević, Jana. (2020). There's No Such Thing as 'Just Following the Science.' *The Guardian*, 28 Apr. 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/28/theres-no-such-thing-just-following-the-science-coronavirus-advice-political>. Accessed 18 Oct. 2025.

⁶ Laqueur, Thomas (1994). *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Harvard University Press.

as variations of the same basic form: the female body was considered an internal version of the male body, with the vagina being understood as an “internal penis” and the ovaries as “internal testes.”⁷ Differences between the sexes were not seen as ontological, but rather as reflections of the distinct social and cultural roles that men and women performed within the community.⁸

The two-sex model, which paints the male and female organisms as two opposed yet complementary systems, emerged under the influence of Enlightenment-era ideas and advances in biology during the 18th and 19th centuries. This new medical discourse insisted on an inherent physical and psychological opposition between the sexes, which became the foundation of social norms and gender regulation.⁹ Dena Goodman examines how differences between the sexes became crucial to social and political structures during the Enlightenment era. She analyzes how philosophers of the time, such as Voltaire and d’Alembert, used the concept of sex-based differences to justify gender roles and social norms, thereby further solidifying the two-sex model.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Schiebinger explores how, in the 18th century, the anatomy of sexual difference served as the foundation for defining the relationship between the sexes, including the social norms that shaped the roles of men and women.

In her humorous essay,¹¹ Anne Fausto-Sterling critiques the rigidity of the binary sex system. Instead, she proposes five sexes to illustrate the fluidity and complexity of human sexuality: male, female, herm, merm, and ferm

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Fletcher, Anthony (1995). *Gender, Sex, and Subordination in England, 1500–1800*. Yale University Press; Goodman, Dena (2001). *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment*. Cornell University Press.

⁹ Harvey, Karen (2002). *Reading Sex in the Eighteenth Century: Bodies and Gender in English Erotic Culture*. Cambridge University Press; Laqueur, Thomas (1994). *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Harvard University Press.

¹⁰ Goodman, Dena (2001). *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment*. Cornell University Press.

¹¹ Fausto-Sterling, Anne (1993). How Many Sexes Are There? *New York Times*, 12 March 1993, p. A19. <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/12/opinion/how-many-sexes-are-there.html>

(individuals with varying distributions of primary and secondary sexual characteristics).¹² Although intended as a joke, her model effectively highlights the limitations of the binary approach and creates room for discussions of multi-sex models and nonbinary identities. This idea not only dismantles the binary but also reveals that “nature” has never been neutral.

CONTEMPORARY DEFINITIONS OF THE NUMBER OF SEXES

In the present day, sex is most commonly defined within the framework of a binary male-female system. This system is based on a combination of biological, genetic, and anatomical-physiological characteristics. Male sex is typically determined by the presence of XY chromosomes, a penis, and testes, while the presence of XX chromosomes, a vagina, and ovaries defines female sex. However, contemporary biology and medical practice recognize the existence of intersex individuals whose characteristics do not strictly conform to these binary categories.¹³

In addition to biological criteria, contemporary definitions of sex also incorporate a social and legal dimension, namely sex as recognized on the basis of gender identity and official documentation. For this reason, some contemporary systems, including international health and legal standards, recognize more than two sexes, most commonly through additional categories such as “intersex” or “unspecified.” In this context, the existence of trans people raises a further issue. Although their gender identity may be legally recognized, biological criteria may not correspond to that identity, creating a discrepancy between the legal and medical/biological recognition of sex. This approach seeks to reflect the complexity of human bodies and identities: it retains the binary model as the dominant framework within most legal and social institutions, while simultaneously creating space for sex pluralism.¹⁴

¹² Fausto-Sterling, Anne (2000). “The Five Sexes, Revisited.” *The Sciences*, vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 18–23.

¹³ Fausto-Sterling, Anne (2000). *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. Basic Books.

¹⁴ Ibid; Laqueur, Thomas (1994). *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Harvard University Press.

The evolution from a one-sex to a two-sex model—along with the critical humor of the five-sex proposal—illustrates how science, society, and religion (especially Christian discourse, which affirms a strict division between men and women) have shaped our understanding of sex, which continues to inform contemporary defenses of “two sexes” in legal and political contexts. However, biological, scientific, and medical approaches to determining sex and the number of recognized sexes are not the only things susceptible to change. Legal categories of sex, gender, and sex/gender are even more unstable—particularly when it comes to sport.

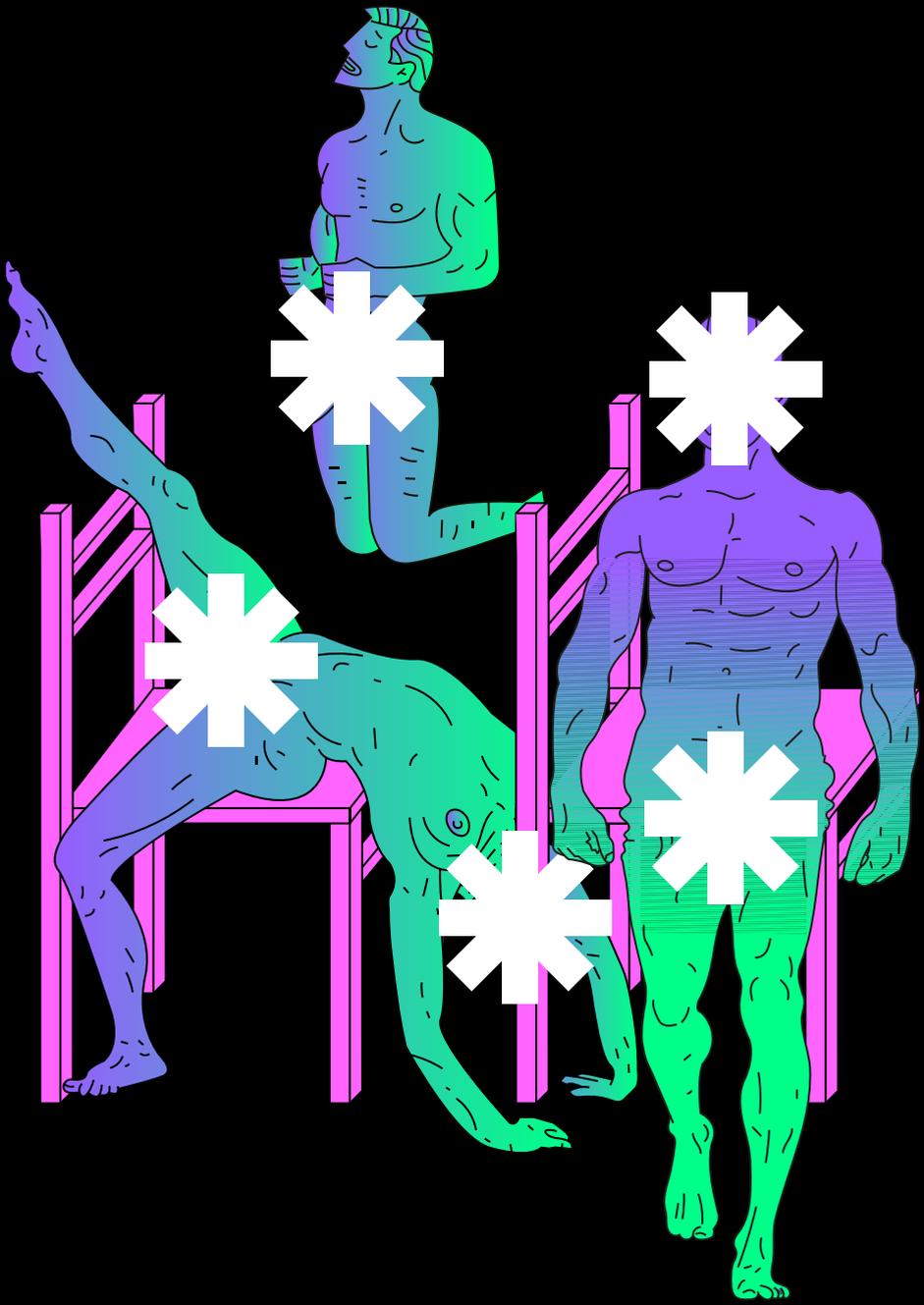
THE TRANS BODY IN SPORT

Historically, the female body has been treated as an aberration of the male in medical science. Humoral theory¹⁵ and Aristotle’s distinction between male and female animals¹⁶ illustrate the historical discontinuity in the understanding of differentiation between male and female bodies in medicine and related disciplines. The Renaissance model of the ideal human was based on the body of an adult white male, while the female body was largely ignored in scientific representations. Feminist critiques of humanism (Irigaray, Hartsock, hooks, Ware) point out that the humanist universal subject in medicine has always been male, healthy, and white. The idea of the universal body was founded on the exclusion of a significant number of cases that deviated from this norm.¹⁷

¹⁵ According to humoral medicine—the predominant medical model in Europe from antiquity until the early 19th century—the human body is composed of four bodily fluids, or humors: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. Each fluid had a characteristic quality: hot, cold, dry, or moist. Health and temperament depended on the balance of these humors. The female body was seen as an “internalized/inverted version of the male”; men were considered hotter and drier, women colder and moister (Laquer et al.).

¹⁶ Laquer explains Aristotle’s limited perspective on sexual opposition as follows: ‘By a ‘male’ animal we mean one which generates in another, by ‘female’ one which generates in itself.’ Laqueur, Thomas (1994). *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Harvard University Press, 30.

¹⁷ Braidotti, Rosi (2013). *The Posthuman*. Polity Press.



Within this framework, the trans body is not an exception but rather a symptom: it reveals how the mechanisms of normalization operate. From a historical perspective, we can observe that the female body also “emerges” over time, even though it has always existed. This emergence refers to the performative constitution of the female subject, which occurs when the social consensus—or what Foucault calls a regime of truth—renders it *politically visible*. In the same way, one can speak of the “emergence” of the trans body. The works of Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti expand the discourse on the body beyond the spectrum of human forms and into transhumanism, hybrid forms of life, and ecofeminism.

On the topic of bodily differentiation, Paul B. Preciado highlights modifications in the *pharmacopornographic era*, one in which the pharmaceutical and pornographic industries merge into a shared economy of bodies and desire. Although he does not primarily deal with the body within sport, contemporary sport is inseparable from the concept of pharmacopornography. Pharmacy governs hormones, while pornography governs the representation of desirable bodies; together, they shape the ways in which we conceive of and inhabit the body. In this context, the trans body, more than any other, becomes a laboratory for the contemporary biopolitical order, simultaneously an object of extreme regulation and a subject of resistance.

Trans people in sport are subjected to biopolitical regulation that automatically marginalizes their lives and activities if they do not conform to the system’s expectations. This regulation is performed by rendering certain classes within society illegal through national or supranational decisions, automatically placing them in the sphere of criminality alongside those who are offenders by choice, whether they crossed borders illegally or used banned performance-enhancing substances.

One of the most well-known examples of such biopolitical regulation in sport is the case of María José Martínez-Patiño.¹⁸ Between 1968 and 2000, female athletes were required to undergo genetic testing to pro-

¹⁸ Martínez-Patiño, María José (2005). Personal Account: A Woman Tried and Tested. *The Lancet* 366 (S1): S38.

ve their sex before being allowed to compete. Martínez-Patiño, a talented Spanish track and field athlete, passed the initial test and received a “Certificate of Femininity.”¹⁹ However, it was later discovered that she had XY chromosomes and androgen insensitivity, meaning her body did not respond to testosterone and did not develop male characteristics. As a result, she was forced to withdraw from competition, her results were erased from national records, her scholarship was revoked, and her story was publicly exposed.

This case reveals how biopolitical norms shape bodies and sex categories in sport, often in arbitrary and unethical ways. Institutions seek to control what is deemed as the “proper” body for competition. Likewise, Martínez-Patiño’s example reveals the harmful consequences of such regulations, which disrupt not only an individual’s athletic career but also their psychological well-being and social life. Despite these obstacles, Martínez-Patiño successfully challenged the regulations and played an active role in effecting change, which ultimately led to the abolition of mandatory chromosomal testing for women in athletics.

POLITICS, WAR, AND A NEW TURNING POINT IN DEFINING GENDER AND SEX IN SPORT

Following the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022, Russia was suspended by the IOC for violating the Olympic Charter by incorporating sports organizations from the occupied Ukrainian regions. This kind of decisive political response shows that, just as sport is not immune to the effects of biological and gender norms, it is not insulated from geopolitical tensions either, and that the quasi-judicial application of sports organizations’ rules can be conditioned by the wider political context. But what does this have to do with the body?

Boxer Imane Khelif’s performance at the 2024 Paris Olympics was overshadowed by calls for sex testing, to be carried out not by the IOC but by the International Boxing Association (IBA), an organization with strong financial and political ties to Russia. The political conflict between the

¹⁹ Ibid.

Eastern and Western blocs is thus essentially reflected in the struggle over authority to determine sex in sport. Who, then, is the legitimate guardian of fairness in sport? In the meantime, the case of Algerian Olympic champion Imane Khelif has become the latest flashpoint in debates about sex verification. World Boxing, an international federation founded in 2023 in response to the suspension of the Russian-led International Boxing Association (IBA), has assumed regulatory authority over Olympic boxing and is cooperating with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in preparations for the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles. In 2025, this organization introduced a new policy entitled “Sex, Age and Weight,” under which all female boxers over the age of 18 who wish to participate in competitions administered by World Boxing are required to undergo PCR-based genetic testing (or an equivalent medical test) in order to determine their “sex at birth.” Khelif was explicitly named as an athlete who would not be allowed to compete in the women’s category until such testing was carried out. This decision generated significant media and public attention because it raises questions about privacy and stigmatization, as well as because Khelif has stated that she was “born a woman, raised as a woman,” and has never changed her gender identity.

BIOETHICS, GENDER, AND SEX AT THE INTERSECTION OF POLITICS AND SPORT

The suspension of Russia by the IOC and demands for mandatory sex testing in the case of Khelif demonstrate that the boundary between sex and gender in sport repeatedly becomes politically contentious and polarized during times of global crisis. While Western-oriented sports organizations face pressure to integrate gender identity and protect the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals, there is simultaneous pressure to return to more rigorous biological criteria, testing, and genetic analyses, especially in sports that are traditionally under intense public scrutiny (such as boxing and athletics). The Khelif case shows that sport cannot remain a neutral ground in times of crisis; the issue of sex in sports is always intertwined with geopolitics, national ideologies, human rights discourse, and negotiations around the right to privacy.

CURRENT REGIMES OF “TRUTH” ABOUT THE BODY

Biopolitical distinctions between sex and gender in sport can be viewed through the lens of historical and conceptual advancements in science and social studies. The timeline of bodily regulation in sport shows how control over the body has evolved from social norms to strict biological regulation. When we examine this trajectory, it becomes clear that biological regulation arises from social conditions, rather than from inherent biological differences between the sexes.

At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, this type of control was primarily gendered, i.e. social. Women exercised separately, wearing specially adapted clothing, while physically demanding sports were off-limits to them. These restrictions were driven by shame, morality, and cultural expectations, rather than by any actual physiological capabilities.

The period between 1920 and 1950 was characterized by a combination of gendered social control with the introduction of the first biological tests. The Olympics established standardized disciplines, with women only allowed to participate in activities deemed “appropriate.” While the social framework continued to shape access to sports, the first physiological criteria began to play a role in regulating participation.

Over the following period, feminist initiatives—such as *Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972* in the USA—granted women access to sports previously considered “male”, and the focus gradually shifted away from social and biological regulation. However, this is when the body became the subject of physiological evaluation through the first gynecological examinations and strict inspections.

From 1967 until the mid-1980s, the focus shifted from gender to sex, that is, biological determination, with the introduction of the Barr body test, testosterone testing, and chromosomal analyses, while social norms lost their dominant role. Between 1992 and 1996, the use of genetic tests (PCR, SRY gene test) led to more sophisticated evaluation of bodily characteri-

stics. The final Barr body test, performed at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, marked the end of chromosomal control.

In the new millennium, the regulation of the body in sport encompasses global anti-doping standards and legislation, with sex, i.e., biological determination, remaining dominant. Alongside this, contemporary regimes of “truth” about the body reveal how the concepts of sex and gender identity intersect with multiple structures of authority. During the 20th century, the Olympic Committee and the International Association of Athletics Federations (now World Athletics) implemented sex-verification testing, ranging from the Barr body test in 1968 to analyses of testosterone levels in the 21st century. Contemporary policies, such as the World Athletics DSD Regulations (2019), no longer seek to determine an athlete’s sex, but instead focus on their hormone levels. Female athletes with testosterone levels above 2.5 nmol/L are required to lower those levels through hormonal therapy in order to compete in the women’s category. In this way, performative determination (“she is/n’t a woman”) is replaced by a locutionary description (“she has a higher testosterone level than prescribed”), which, in Foucauldian terms, illustrates the power-shift toward biological governance of the body at the micro-level. This is precisely where the intersection of multiple structures of authority—prenatal genetics, the state registry, medical expertise, and sports regulations—over a single body is apparent. Each produces its own truth, but only at their intersection does what we call a *biopolitical reality*²⁰ emerge: the body as a site of constant negotiation between biological, legal, and social identity.

²⁰ For capitalist society, it was biopolitics, the biological, the somatic, the corporal that mattered more than anything else. The body is a biopolitical reality; medicine is a biopolitical strategy. Pour la société capitaliste, c’est le bio-politique qui importait avant tout, la biologique, le somatique, le corporel. Le corps est une réalité bio-politique; la médecine est une stratégie bio-politique (Foucault, Michel (1994). *Dits et écrits, 1954–1988*. Vol. 3: 1976–1979. Gallimard).

Period	Bodily regulation regime / focus	Emphasis on	Explanation / examples	Note
Late 19th – early 20th century	Segregated training, clubs, social norms	gender	Women train separately, often in specialized clothing; playing physically demanding sports is prohibited for them.	Emphasis on shame, morality and cultural norms, not on physiological tests.
1920–1950	Olympic disciplines and standardization	gender + sex	The Olympics introduce strict disciplines; only ones deemed “appropriate” are accessible to women.	Attention begins to focus on biological characteristics, but gender still dictates what is “appropriate”.
1960–1980	Increased inclusion and societal re-evaluation	gender + sex	Feminist initiatives enable women to access previously “male” sports.	Gender stereotypes are challenged, but the body is still subject to physiological evaluation
1967–1985	Gynecological exams, hormonal and chromosomal testing	gender	IAAF and IOC introduce the Barr body test as well as testosterone and hormonal testing for women in athletics.	Focus shifts from social norms to biological criteria.
1992–1996	Genetic testing (PCR, SRY gene)	gender	Implementation of SRY gene tests in women; the final Barr body test is performed at the Atlanta Olympics.	Biological control becomes technologically sophisticated
1999–present day	Doping and legal regulation	gender	WADA establishes global anti-doping standards; legislation includes hormonal and genetic criteria.	The body is subject to medical and legal regulation; inclusion of trans athletes is controversial.

CONCLUSION: ETHICS, RESISTANCE, AND RESPONSIBILITY

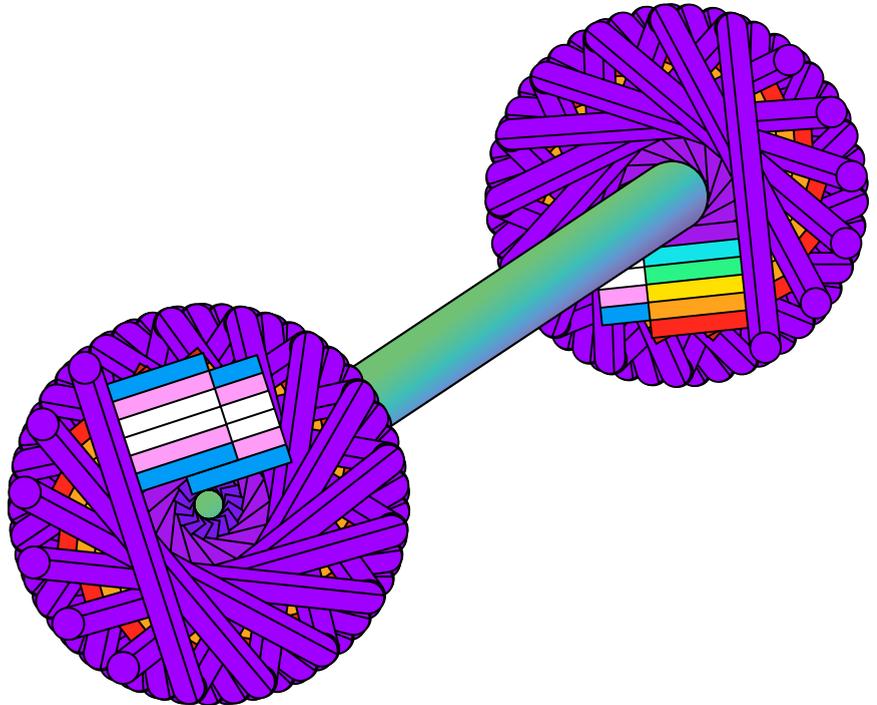
Natasha Lennard draws attention to the limitations of resistance that relies on liberal conceptions of human rights. In her essay *Know Your Rights*, she criticizes these limitations, pointing out that rights are often recognized only within the frameworks deemed acceptable by the state. Such an approach atomizes resistance, focusing on procedural or formal rights while overlooking deeper structural injustices. This is particularly relevant for trans athletes and other subjects whose bodies are regulated by biopolitical norms, as it demonstrates that effective resistance requires action that goes beyond formal rights and toward meaningfully re-examining and redefining those rights and their underlying norms - that is, the biopower that directly governs and controls the body.

Whether fortunate or unfortunate, the primary arenas of biopolitical discourse in the post-COVID era are not theory classrooms but the mass media and social networks. Analyses of gendered health, pharmacopolitics, the ways in which global trends affect bodies, and debates about the trans body in sport have become part of mainstream discourse. Under these conditions, where the balance between science and politics remains contested, marginalized groups, whose lives are shaped by arbitrary rules and social norms, pay the highest price. Therefore, one possible way to resist and reshape public discourse on trans bodies in sport may be to raise awareness of the arbitrary nature of fundamental concepts that are far too often treated as self-evident.

For resistance to be articulated, the subject must be re-established through a materially grounded sense of social responsibility.²¹ According to Foucault, the construction and interpellation of subjectivity within the individual-collective relationship forms the basis of biopower. This is an ambitious demand, as the work of regulating one's own life practices is often invisible, unregulated, or even illegal. In the context of transgender people, however, such illicit activities are rarely a conscio-

²¹ Braidotti, Rosi. (2005). *Affirming the Affirmative: On Nomadic Affectivity*. *Rhizomes*, no. 11/12. <https://rhizomes.net/issue11/braidotti.html>. Accessed 18 Oct. 2025.

us form of resistance, but rather result from a lack of institutional support. Nevertheless, they create tension and prompt a re-examination of how permeable the boundary between the political and the private really is. Challenging the existing order opens up space for new forms of political subjectivity.²² The challenge of politically articulating awareness of non-belonging within the existing, inadequate categories, and the active struggle to overcome subjection to the commodification of one's differences, still stand between us and the process of full political subjectivation.²³



²² Rancière, Jacques (2004). *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Bloomsbury Academic.

²³ Braidotti, Rosi. (2005).



IN SUMMARY:

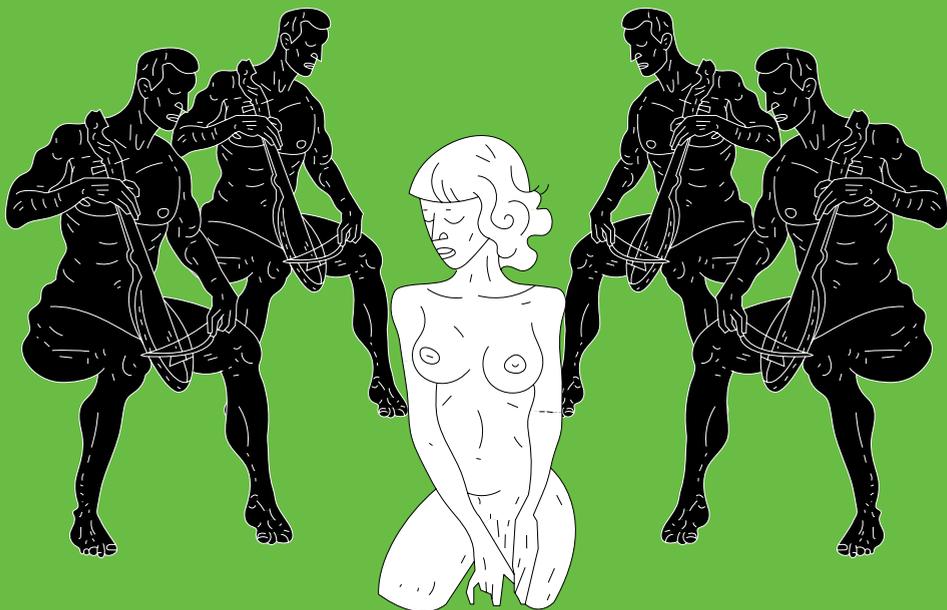
- 1. Biopolitics refers to the social and state mechanisms that control people's lives, and by extension on their bodies. From the moment of conception, people are subjected to this kind of control through medical, legal, and social regulations. This is especially significant when we're discussing the rights and restrictions affecting women in sport.**
2. Today, sex and gender are understood as social constructs that rely on biological, genetic, and anatomical characteristics, but they were also created and shaped by historical changes. Viewing sex through the lens of a "universal" male and female body excludes a huge number of people who deviate from the average in various ways. One group particularly affected by this is trans people, who are often denied not only the right to participate in sport but also fundamental rights that make a dignified life possible.



3. Sex and gender are social and ideological constructs, not scientific facts (even though this is often insisted upon). A similar example that can help us better understand this is the COVID pandemic. Although the virus's biological structure was the same everywhere, each country adopted different measures based on its own political and ideological positions.

4. The historical development of sports rules indicates that perceptions of gender and sex have changed over time; they used to more clearly reflect social norms, whereas today there is a growing effort to tie them to “strict biological categories,” even though real biological categories—and the diversity of human bodies themselves—do not support such a rigid distinction between “male” and “female.”

5. Modern regimes regulating sex in sport reveal a complex web of power, science, and politics, where the right to compete is often mediated through not only biological norms, but also by deeply political and social ones.



Why the Issue of Trans People in Sport Matters in the Post-Yugoslav Balkans:

The International and Neocolonial Nature of the Anti-Gender Movement

WHEN SPORT ISN'T ABOUT SPORT

Sport and physical activity are integral to the lives of countless people across cultures. During the period of Yugoslav socialist self-management in what is now the post-Yugoslav space of the Balkans¹, sport was defined as *physical culture*, deeply embedded in the national and cultural habitus of the region. That is precisely why, under socialist governance, sport was framed as *fiskultura*, bringing together the masses in organized physical activity while celebrating athletic excellence.² However, in the words of Ozren Pupovac: “suspended between negation and anticipation, post-socialist societies are a beginning without end.”³

¹ As in the previous issue of the Playbook, we prefer to use this term over ‘the Western Balkans’, which we consider bureaucratic and, in some respects, even colonial in character. By contrast, ‘post-Yugoslav’ references the period following the break-up of Yugoslavia, when the conservative counterattack, or counterrevolution, was carried out in the most brutal manner through the wars of the 1990s.

² Mijatov, N. S. (2019). Sport as an instrument of socialism: The Yugoslav experience [PhD Thesis]. University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy.

³ Pupovac, O. (2010, maj 12). *Present perfect, or the time of post-socialism*. Eurozine. <https://www.eurozine.com/present-perfect-or-the-time-of-post-socialism/>

According to analyses by sports experts, sport in our countries has also been shaped by processes of transition, nationalism, privatization, and (European) integration.⁴ This integration hasn't occurred yet—in fact, it is legitimate to question whether it will happen at all, and whether it is necessary. What has occurred instead is the near-total privatization of social aspects of life, nationalism with lethal consequences, and the consolidation of autocratic regimes supported by imperial powers operating in the region—all of which have disproportionately affected the most vulnerable social groups, who have been exploited in service to political agendas even within sport.

Sport is a combination of multiple elements—exercise, play, catharsis, and more—that are not inherently tied to any particular political brand or value system. The political meaning of sport is produced through the way it is practiced and the social position it occupies. This, in turn, challenges us to take sport seriously and to create conditions that bring out its best qualities, rather than its worst.⁵ Nevertheless, there is a long history of excluding many communities from sport, and of its misuse for political purposes. Not a single woman competed in the first modern Olympics, held in 1896; they weren't included until 1900. Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the Olympics, believed that the participation of women would be “impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic, and wrong.”⁶ The first African-American to win an Olympic medal was George Coleman in 1904, and the history of racial segregation and bans in sport, much like gender-based ones, is extensive. Much has already been written about the various bans on participation in different sports, and these are analyzed in more depth in other sections of this Playbook. What all rationales for exclusion from sport have in common is the instrumentalization of biological essentialism, whether in regard to

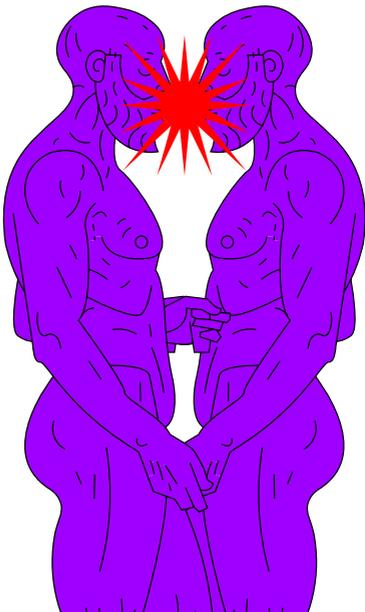
⁴ Begović, M. (2024). *Sports Policy and Politics in the Western Balkans* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003246992>

⁵ Kuhn, G. (2015). *Playing as if the world mattered: An illustrated history of activism in sports*. PM Press.

⁶ Women in Sport, NAT'L LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA, <https://www.nla.gov.au/digital-classroom/year-7/sport-and-australian-culture/women-sport> [<https://perma.cc/EgJT-YGYg>].

physical appearance (such as muscle mass and bone structure), chromosomes, or testosterone levels. For example, increased inclusion of women in competitive sports also led to more Olympic medals won overall. In the 1960s, sex-verification testing was introduced exclusively for female athletes. In 1966, it was first carried out on Polish sprinter Ewa Kłobukowska, in a procedure known as the “nude parade,” which involved invasive genital examinations to verify female sex. Little has changed today when we look at trans people, whose involvement in sports has become one of the most hotly debated issues of our time.

When we consider the state of sport in the post-Yugoslav Balkans—the lack of investment in athletes, their working conditions, long-standing national phantasms and conflicts fueled by sport, the clientelism and monopolies exerted by big capital and organized crime, and, finally, the complete absence of visible professional trans athletes in the region—it’s fair to ask: **why does the issue of trans people in sports feature so prominently in the public discourse of the post-Yugoslav Balkans at all?** Answering this question requires us to address one of the most effective strategies of what’s known as the *anti-gender movement*—the fact that the narratives it promotes are far better known to the public than the movement itself, which in our region is chiefly examined and challenged by feminists within academic and activist circles.



CREATING A NEW GLOBAL AUTHORITARIAN ORDER

As a reminder, the framework we use to analyze the anti-gender movement in this Playbook draws on the findings of the large-scale international project *Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice*, implemented from October 2019 to September 2025.⁷ The global anti-gender movement has grown to such an extent that, despite regional differences, it is now evident that the right-wing *counter-international* has reached every corner of the world. This is why the concept of *countering backlash* is crucial to this framework; it references the pushback against gender equality, initially led by the Vatican in response to two United Nations (UN) conferences: the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo, and the 1995 World Conference on Women held in Beijing. Since then, right-wing actors—led by religious authorities, populist politicians, and conservative media and intellectuals—have worked hard to slow or roll back any progress toward greater gender equality. Their targets have included reproductive rights, women’s bodily autonomy, and the rights of LGBTIQ+ communities. Of course, regional trends should also be taken into account. We can argue that in our post-Yugoslav context, this conservative backlash was accompanied by the devastation of war, only to later be reshaped by the period of so-called neoliberal transition.⁸

Today, analyses increasingly show that the anti-gender movement is not merely reactionary resistance to advancements in human rights and

⁷ Over six years, this project, hosted by the *Institute of Development Studies* (IDS) at the University of Sussex in Brighton, UK, has fostered collaboration between research centers and organizations from six partner countries: Brazil, Bangladesh, India, Kenya, Lebanon, and Uganda, as well as four short-term partnerships with collaborators from India, Pakistan, Serbia, and Turkey. We chose this framework because it takes into account diverse global contexts, thereby decentralizing approaches to anti-gender tendencies. In this way, we also examine our region within the context of these broader global networks.

⁸ Bobičić, N., and Ulićević, J. Dž. (2024). “Anti-gender narratives in Montenegro - the use of democratic methods against gender and democracy.” In *The Transfeminist Playbook*, edited by A. Milanović, M. Jovanović and J. Dž. Ulićević (120-155). Trans Network Balkan.

gender equality, but one of the main pillars of the broader *anti-democratic movement*, which aims to establish a *new global order*. This order is characterized by a clear hierarchy dominated by big capital and led by an opportunistic alliance of authoritarian and patriarchal political leaders, tech lords, and right-wing philosophers, who simultaneously collaborate and compete for dominance within said order. To understand the background of this movement requires understanding its ultimate goal—creating a world in which democracy and its institutions no longer exist in any form.⁹ The scope of this movement is most clearly reflected in the variety of strategies it employs. These strategies primarily target: abortion rights and the right to self-determination, which enable bodily autonomy; freedom of movement and the ability to leave uninhabitable areas in search of a better life, which undermine the (neo)colonial nature of the international order; and the right to education, which fosters the development of critical thinking, understanding of oppression, and acceptance of societal diversity. This is precisely why these powers have most directly aimed their political strategies at women, LGBTIQ people—particularly trans people in recent years—and migrants. In fact, one could argue that LGBTIQ rights have become one of the main battlegrounds between democratic and anti-democratic forces on the global stage.¹⁰ Why is this the case, and how did the issue of trans athletes become the most hotly debated and lucrative topic for the global right?

TRANS PEOPLE IN SPORTS – A SOFT SPOT IN THE UNDERBELLY OF DEMOCRACY

In their most recent book *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, Judith Butler writes: “For gender to be identified as a threat to all of life, civilization, society, thought, and the like, it has to gather up a wide range of fears and anxieties—no matter how they contradict one another—package them into a

⁹ Alexander Avila: The Tech Billionaire to Fascist Pipeline: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olhugUhfG14>

¹⁰ Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (2024) *Strongmen and Violence: Interlinkages of anti-feminism and anti-democratic developments*. Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, Berlin.

single bundle, and subsume them under a single name.” We examined several studies on trans people’s involvement in sports and sport-related physical activities. For example, a 2016 meta-analysis that systematically reviewed eight studies and 31 sports policies on this topic found that the main barrier to transgender people’s participation in sport was the lack of an inclusive and comfortable/safe environment. The review also determined that trans people generally have negative experiences in competitive sports, due to restrictions imposed through sports policies. It concluded that most of the examined policies regarding transgender athletes in competitive sport were not evidence-based.¹¹ Academia notes that studies on the impact of testosterone in athletics have often suffered from serious methodological flaws, or have even shown that groups with lower testosterone levels actually achieved better results in sporting events.¹² Reviews of data from the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) have not found any evidence of a causal link between testosterone and athletic performance to date.¹³ Debate continues over whether differences in testosterone levels between sexes affect physical performance, or whether other factors, such as social distinctions, are more responsible for observed performance gaps.¹⁴ This point is particularly significant when we consider that discussions about trans people in sport rarely concern participation in recreational activities, focusing instead on competitive sports where exceptionally high-performing athletes compete. These debates frequently overlook questions of fair conditions that would enable equitable competition, especially given the class-based nature of elite sport, i.e., the fact that competing at the highest level requires substantial material and non-material resources to ensure athletes can train effectively and secure medals when margins of victory are slim, which is always the case in professional sport.

¹¹ Jones, B. A., Arcelus, J., Bouman, W. P., & Haycraft, E. (2017). Sport and Transgender People: A Systematic Review of the Literature Relating to Sport Participation and Competitive Sport Policies. *Sports medicine* (Auckland, N.Z.), 47(4), 701–716. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-016-0621-y>.

¹² Rebecca M. Jordan-Young & Katrina Karkazis, 4 Myths about Testosterone, *SCI. A M.* (June 18, 2019), <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/4-myths-about-testosterone/>.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Anti-gender actors who weaponize the issue of trans people strategically reduce this debate to 'biological differences'—an ideological ground steeped in gendered prejudice and widespread ignorance of how bodies actually function—thereby doing what they do best: manufacturing panic, diverting attention from the core issues, and constructing an effective smokescreen for their own profiteering agendas. The deeply unfair nature of this debate becomes evident when we consider the example of Michael Phelps, the former American swimmer and the most decorated Olympian in history, with 28 Olympic medals. Phelps has unusually long arms and double-jointed elbows and knees, which allow for hypermobility; he also produces significantly less lactic acid than expected, allowing him to swim for much longer than his competitors without fatigue. Yet he was never been barred from competition, nor was his biological advantage ever problematized. On the contrary, it was hailed as “the perfect body for swimming,” earning him the nickname “the Flying Fish.”¹⁵

Anti-trans political campaigns launched in the United States are also indicative of this broader trend. In the spring of 2020, Idaho became the first U.S. state to ban trans girls and women from women's sports. In the following two years, fifteen states passed similar laws. A conservative politician working on Title IX issues, who spoke candidly about this rise in legislation for *Time* magazine, on the condition of anonymity, described it as “sort of a gateway drug for people into the larger debate around gender and who gets to call themselves a woman.”¹⁶ In the same article, the president of the conservative advocacy group American Principles Project (APP), Terry Schilling, said: “What makes this issue of trans sports different, and so explosive politically... is because politicians are willing to talk about it.” During the 2020 election campaign, APP and its affiliated super PAC spent over \$5 million on ads claiming, among other things, that Democratic support for trans athletes is a threat to women's sports. That the issue of trans people in sports constitutes a soft spot in the underbelly of democracy is further confirmed

¹⁵ Why Michael Phelps has the perfect body for swimming. (2020, May 14). *Biography*. <https://www.biography.com/athletes/michael-phelp-perfect-body-swimming>

¹⁶ Carlisle, M. (n.d.). Inside the Right-Wing Movement to Ban Trans Youth From Sports. *TIME*. <https://time.com/6176799/trans-sports-bans-conservative-movement/>

by research showing that, in the two years following the Idaho ban, conservative state lawmakers introduced a series of bills targeting LGBTQ youth. In 2022 alone, roughly 240 anti-LGBTQ bills were filed, about half of which specifically targeted trans people.¹⁷ That this issue significantly contributed to the success of the Republican Party and to Donald Trump's return to the presidency in 2024 is evidenced by the fact that the participation of trans people in sport was one of the central topics of his campaign. That said, the right's instrumentalization of this issue for its own gain predates the most recent U.S. presidential campaign.

The weaponization of trans athletes—and trans issues more broadly—began after 2015, when the U.S. Supreme Court enshrined the right to same-sex marriage, seemingly putting that matter to rest.¹⁸ Almost immediately, attention shifted to trans people's access to public toilets, with panic stoked about the alleged threat of sexual assault that trans women posed to cis women in women's restrooms. However, when North Carolina implemented a ban on trans people using bathrooms consistent with their gender identity, the move backfired dramatically: companies launched widespread boycotts of the state, costing it an estimated \$3.76 billion.¹⁹ That November, the state's Republican Governor, Pat McCrory, lost his re-election bid. As a result, trans people's

¹⁷ *Nearly 240 anti-LGBTQ bills filed in 2022 so far, most of them targeting trans people.* (2022, March 22). NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/nearly-240-anti-lgbtq-bills-filed-2022-far-targeting-trans-people-rcna20418>

¹⁸ Today, we are witnessing growing pressures to reopen this matter, after the groundwork was laid precisely through attacks on the trans rights. See, for example: Alfonseca, K. (2025, March 3). *Some Republican lawmakers increase calls against gay-marriage SCOTUS ruling.* ABC News. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/republican-lawmakers-increase-calls-gay-marriage-scotus-ruling/story?id=119395181> (abcnews.go.com) ili Wehle, K. (2025, September 22). *Same-sex marriage might be unsafe.* Politico Magazine. Available at: <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2025/09/22/same-sex-marriage-might-be-unsafe-00568474> <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2025/09/22/same-sex-marriage-might-be-unsafe-00568474>

¹⁹ The Associated Press. (2017, March 27). *"Bathroom bill" to cost North Carolina \$3.76 billion.* CNBC. <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/03/27/bathroom-bill-to-cost-north-carolina-376-billion.html>

bathroom access soon came to be seen as a losing issue, and political campaigns largely stopped focusing on it. However, following Trump's election to the presidency, attacks on laws and policies designed to protect trans people intensified once again.

As *Time* reports in its investigative article, it was not until 2018 that two Black trans girls, Andraya Yearwood and Terry Miller, won state high school track championships in Connecticut. The media immediately turned this story into a frenzy, which was soon followed by Idaho introducing a ban on trans athletes in sports. By 2019, the issue had become a political battleground, or, as the Center for Feminist Policy put it, a "soft spot" that enabled concessions to be made to anti-democratic forces. Conservative politicians, including Donald Trump Jr., began tweeting extensively about transgender athletes. That same year, an APP-affiliated super PAC spent around \$600,000 on advertising in the Kentucky gubernatorial race, claiming that the Democratic candidate, Andy Beshear, was a threat to women's sports.

The American Principles Project contracted the data science firm Evolving Strategies to track the impact of its messaging, with estimates suggesting that its advertising helped draw around 25,000 voters to the Republican Party. APP and its affiliated super PAC subsequently increased spending on this issue, investing a total of over \$5 million on ads in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Georgia.²⁰ These campaigns stoked fear by claiming Democrats who supported the inclusion of trans people in sport were endangering women's sport.

By the end of 2020, at least 20 proposals to ban trans people from competing in sports had been introduced in U.S. state legislatures. In 2024 alone, state lawmakers across the country put forward over 600 anti-trans bills, including 48 that would specifically bar trans women from educational sports programs. In 2023, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives passed the *Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act*, which prohibits trans women athletes from participating

²⁰ Carlisle, M. (n.d.). Inside the Right-Wing Movement to Ban Trans Youth From Sports. *TIME*. <https://time.com/6176799/trans-sports-bans-conservative-movement/>

in women's and girls' sports programs in federally funded schools and educational institutions.

Unlike the debate over bathroom access, this approach proved far more effective, with Democrats and businesses in the U.S. remaining largely silent on the matter. The mobilization of all the key players to carry out the “dirty work” of anti-democratic forces is apparent from the fact that this campaign received funding from right-wing think tanks such as Policy Exchange, who simultaneously led campaigns to combat alleged “leftist” attitudes on U.S. university campuses, oppose judicial oversight of government, and advocate for leaving the European Court of Human Rights. They also helped draft laws restricting climate activists' right to protest, while receiving funding from fossil fuel companies.²¹ The same think tank also launched a campaign in the U.K. aimed at cutting public funding for all national governing bodies that allow trans women to compete in sports.²²

This has become a contested issue even in progressive, leftist circles, where we continuously hear support for trans people expressed in every context except sport. The goal of anti-democratic, anti-gender movements—to identify a hot-button issue capable of sparking a deafening debate, one in which solid arguments based on scientific and empirical evidence are set aside in favor of emotion, fear, and anxiety—has been fully achieved. Their strategy is grounded in research and in the experience of right-wing political actors. The Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) and the Brookings Institution have found that “80% of Republicans believe America is at risk of losing its cul-

²¹ Horton, H. (2022, June 15). Thinktank that briefed against XR given \$30k by ExxonMobil in 2017. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jun/15/thinktank-that-briefed-against-xr-given-30k-by-exxon-mobil-in-2017>

²² MacInnes, P. (2023, December 29). Ministers urged to enforce female-only categories in UK grassroots sport. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/dec/29/rightwing-thinktank-female-only-categories-uk-grassroots-sport>

ture and identity.”²³ Naturally, this discourse didn’t stay confined to the U.S.; owing to its hegemonic position and strategy of exporting anti-democratic policies to both peripheral and other imperialist countries, it has spread worldwide, with the post-Yugoslav Balkans by no means an exception.

PERIPHERIES – TESTING GROUNDS AND IMPORTERS OF IMPERIAL PRODUCTS

Thanks to the work of numerous researchers, theorists, and activists, we can now confidently say that there is extensive evidence showing how the heteronormative, binary model of gender was imposed on the Global South by colonial powers. This knowledge is grounded in analyses of the legacies of slavery and colonialism, the implementation of dehumanizing surgical and other medicalizing practices of sex assignment and corrective practices under the guise of “scientific progress,” and the forced adaptation of nonwhite bodies to comply with the “white ideal.” These practices are not merely a thing of the past, as evidenced by the exporting of the anti-gender movement not only to the Global South and peripheral countries of (neo)colonial experience, but also to other imperialist nations, which have then pursued their own imperial and neocolonial agendas in regions of interest.

In a Western-oriented world—or, at least, one under Western patronage—Russia under Vladimir Putin is often cited as an example of patriarchal laws and the implementation of the “Moscow playbook” for destabilizing countries the Kremlin lays claim to. This is not without merit. Russia’s National Security Strategy explicitly defined gender as a threat to national security as early as 2015, identifying it as a Western influen-

²³ Jones, R. P., Jackson, N., Orcés, D., Huff, I., Holcomb, T., Carnegie Corporation of New York, Wilbur and Hilda Glenn Family Foundation, Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock, Sean Sands, Tim Duffy, Lauren Leibowitz, & Kivvit. (2021). FINDINGS FROM THE 2021 AMERICAN VALUES SURVEY. In *FINDINGS FROM THE 2021 AMERICAN VALUES SURVEY*. <https://www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/PRRI-Oct-2021-AVS.pdf>

ce that endangers the unity and spiritual identity of the Russian nation. In a speech on February 24th, 2022, President Putin justified the war in Ukraine as a fight against Western attempts to destroy Russia's "traditional values," among other things. In this narrative, where the West is said to impose values contrary to "human nature," devaluing women and LGBTIQ people and stripping them of the right to a political voice is instrumental in justifying both authoritarian domestic policies and aggressive wars abroad.²⁴ However, what is often overlooked is that anti-gender activists from the U.S. were themselves coming to Russia even before Putin began intensively using anti-gender propaganda for his own purposes. Evangelical pastor Scott Lively from Massachusetts toured Uganda in 2009, laying the groundwork for the introduction of "anti-gay" laws. Under these laws, LGBTIQ people initially faced the death penalty because of their identities, and later, once the law was passed and queer identities criminalized, they faced lengthy prison sentences as well. Lively also toured Russia between 2006 and 2009, visiting at least 50 cities, and later took credit for the "anti-gay propaganda law" that Putin passed in 2013.²⁵

The Wikileaks "Intolerance Network" identified an entire network of operatives with ties to the organization CitizenGo, active in Russia, Hungary, Germany, Spain, Italy, Chile, Mexico, Brazil, and the USA. CitizenGo was founded by Ignacio Arsuaga, who also serves as a representative of the World Congress of Families, with the aim of globalizing the anti-gender agenda. His key connection to Russian oligarchs is Aleksey Komov, a leading activist against abortion and LGBTIQ rights in Russia, who previously served on CitizenGo's board of directors.²⁶ Russian oligarchs also meddled in last year's Olympics, when the International

²⁴ Bias, L. (2022) 'The International of Antifeminists'. Engenderings (blog). London School of Economics and Political Science. 24 February 2023. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2023/02/24/4808/>

²⁵ Report: Scott Lively and the export of Hate. (2024, May 30). HRC. <https://www.hrc.org/resources/report-scott-lively-and-the-exportation-of-hate>

²⁶ Jackson, J., McIntyre, N., Khan, M., Roussi, A., & Kove-Seyram, S. (2025, May 21). Unholy alliance: the far-right religious network attacking reproductive and LGBTQ+ rights. *TBIJ*. <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2022-09-25/unholy-alliance-the-far-right-religious-network-attacking-reproductive-and-lgbtq-rights>

Boxing Association (IBA) spread the false claim that boxer Imane Khelif is a man.²⁷ This organization is also known to have ties to the Kremlin and to Putin.²⁸

When we consider the particular vulnerability of countries with a colonial and neocolonial history, which remain highly dependent on imperial powers and international financial institutions, it becomes clear that malicious actors who attack and weaponize gender under the guise of defense against imperialism are, in actuality, serving the interests of imperial powers. In our region, the Balkan right-wing, especially in Serbia and Croatia, uses gatherings organized by these groups to develop their regional strategies.²⁹ These two countries function as the regional hegemony, simultaneously exporting anti-gender narratives, practices, and infrastructure to other countries in the post-Yugoslav Balkans. In 2023, Belgrade hosted a global pro-life summit, while in 2024, one of the world's largest anti-gender organizations, Agenda Europe (now rebranded as Vision Network), held its conference in Zagreb.³⁰

The very fact that two major gatherings of global anti-gender organizations took place within the post-Yugoslav bloc in just two years, paired with the understanding that it is a site where various imperial interests intersect, points to the motivations behind the instrumentalization of gender issues, particularly those concerning trans people. Considering

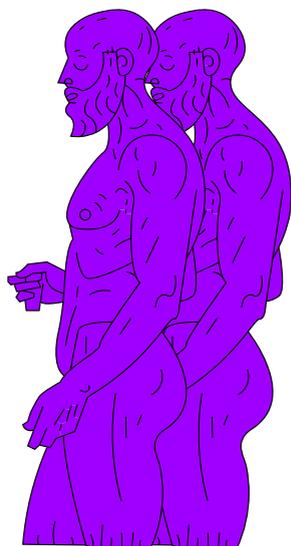
²⁷ Ruddock, D. (2024, August 9). *Russia, disinformation and two Olympic boxers*. Index on Censorship. <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2024/08/russia-disinformation-and-two-olympic-boxers/>

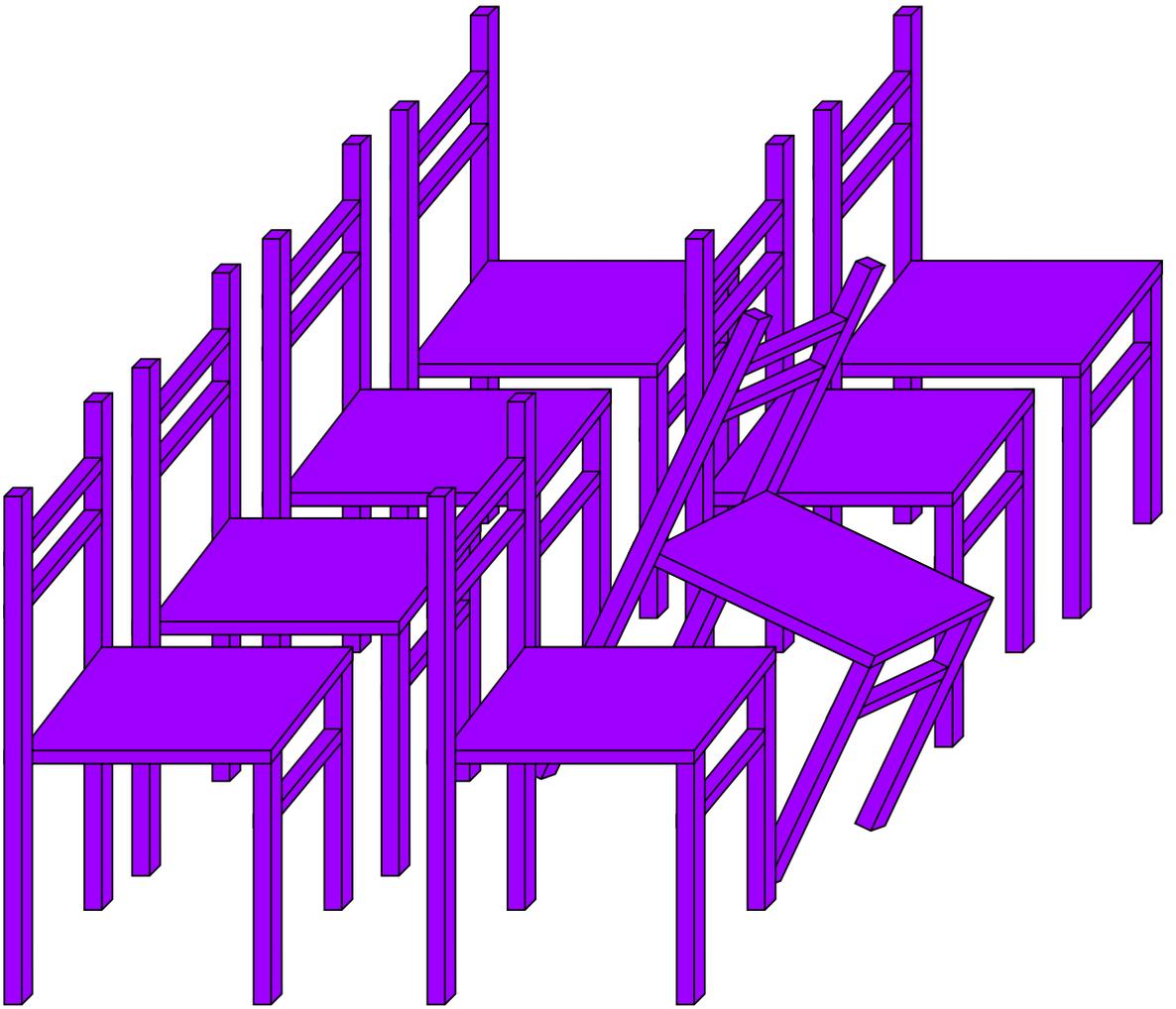
²⁸ *What is the IBA? Governing body behind Olympic boxing storm has Russian ties, troubled history*. (2024, August 4). PBS News. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/what-is-the-iba-governing-body-behind-olympic-boxing-storm-has-russian-ties-troubled-history#:~:text=Kremlen%20introduced%20Russian%20state%2Dcontrolled,took%20over%20in%20late%202020.>

²⁹ BIRN, Madalin Necsutu. "Balkan Conservatives Unite at Family Congress in Moldova." *Balkan Insight*, 17 Sept. 2018, balkaninsight.com/2018/09/17/conservative-balkans-leaders-cheered-for-family-values-in-moldova-09-15-2018-1/. Accessed 22 July 2025.

³⁰ Šimičević, H. (2024, March 23). *Istina o Agendi – Portal Novosti*. Retrieved July 22, 2025, from Portal Novosti website: <https://www.portalnovosti.com/istina-o-agendi/>

the lack of even a single professional trans athlete across the region, contrasted with the intensified attacks on women's rights and trans rights in recent years, this raises the question: what is the real agenda behind introducing this incendiary topic into the post-Yugoslav Balkans? Research has repeatedly shown that anti-gender actors are internationally interconnected, that they pursue their political and economic interests by targeting various social justice issues, and that their deliberate selection of these issues is guided by studies into which ones are the most profitable. One thing is clear—the issue of trans people in sport is, in practice, neither primarily about trans people nor about sport.

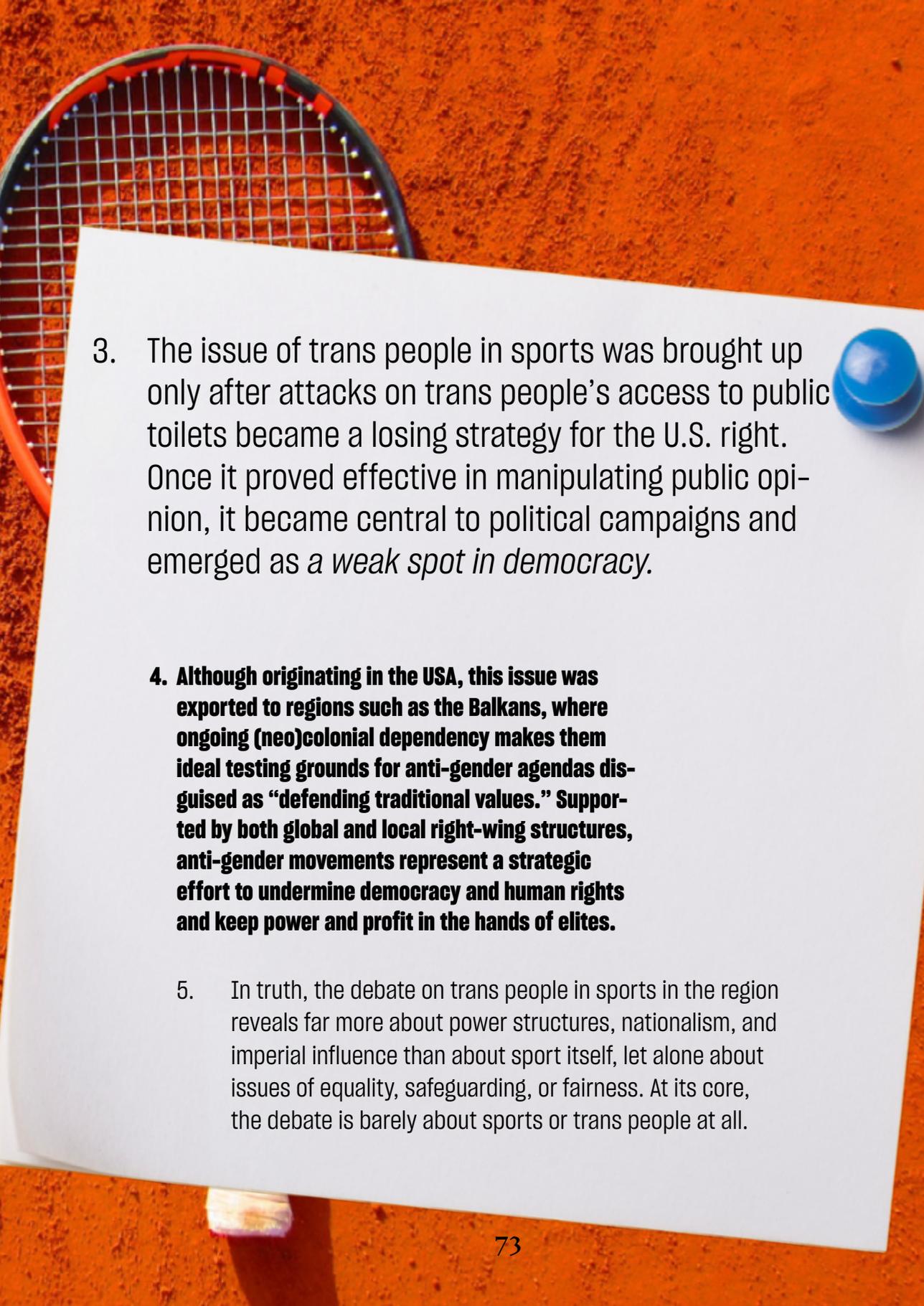




LET'S REVISE:



- 1. The problem of trans people in sport in the post-Yugoslav Balkans does not stem from the actual presence of trans athletes. Instead, it has been weaponized as a political tool in the service of a broader anti-gender and anti-democratic agenda, funded by major geopolitical powers competing for influence in the region.**
2. Sport has historically been used for the exclusion of marginalized groups, and modern anti-gender narratives, rooted in bioessentialism and centered on the emotionally charged topic of trans athletes, serve to spread panic and legitimize oppressive policies. This example accurately reflects the current state of democracy.



3. The issue of trans people in sports was brought up only after attacks on trans people's access to public toilets became a losing strategy for the U.S. right. Once it proved effective in manipulating public opinion, it became central to political campaigns and emerged as *a weak spot in democracy*.

4. Although originating in the USA, this issue was exported to regions such as the Balkans, where ongoing (neo)colonial dependency makes them ideal testing grounds for anti-gender agendas disguised as “defending traditional values.” Supported by both global and local right-wing structures, anti-gender movements represent a strategic effort to undermine democracy and human rights and keep power and profit in the hands of elites.

5. In truth, the debate on trans people in sports in the region reveals far more about power structures, nationalism, and imperial influence than about sport itself, let alone about issues of equality, safeguarding, or fairness. At its core, the debate is barely about sports or trans people at all.



A Transfeminist Analysis of Media Coverage of “Gender Troubles” in Sport

This study of media texts draws from a corpus of 278 individual pieces published between 2018 and 2025 on online portals in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Klix.ba, Dnevni Avaz, and Nezavisne novine), Montenegro (Vijesti, CdM, and Pobjeda), Croatia (24sata, Index.hr, and Večernji list), North Macedonia (Sloboden Pečat, Lokalno.mk, and Plusinfo.mk), and Serbia (Informer, Kurir, and Telegraf). The material was manually coded, allowing us to conduct an in-depth content analysis by carefully reading each text and identifying key recurring themes. These media outlets represent a significant segment of the public sphere and have a substantial impact on shaping discourse around gender and sexual minorities, especially in the context of sport as a field often associated with “biological” or “natural” differences between the sexes. Additionally, the choice to focus on these sources provides a comparative insight into the regional context, as media outlets across this region share similar narrative patterns and symbolic references. This approach enables us to identify shared discursive strategies that shape public conversations about transgender issues and sport across the Western Balkans.

“IF I WERE A MAN FOR JUST ONE DAY” – THE IMANE KHELIF CASE

„What has the world come to?!” – when a news article starts with these words, you’d probably expect it to be about serious international issues, that the author is reflecting on matters of great public concern. For example, what has the world come to when we are watching the genocide in Gaza unfold live? What has the world come to when the summers are persistently getting hotter, and massive floods and wildfires are increasingly more common? We’re one step away from bringing in foreign mining companies to dig up our fertile land and pollute our drinking water, so what exactly have we come to? No, really, what has the world come to when prices have soared so much that every item in the store now costs at least twice, if not several times, more than it did before the COVID-19 pandemic, while wages have barely increased? When the Jeff Bezoses of the world are renting out entire cities for their tacky weddings, while poverty has never been higher? Nuclear sabres are being rattled, neo-fascists are gathering at concerts and marching ever more openly through our streets... “What on Earth is going on here?!”

If your mind went to any of these places, you were sorely mistaken. Somehow, the tabloid *Informer* managed to explore complex international and existential matters in, of all places, its Sports section! Chief among these matters was trans women’s participation in sports. One of the headlines published in this *media*¹, outlet as part of its coverage of the 2024 Paris Olympic Games read: “What on Earth is going on here?! Men to compete in women’s categories” (*Informer*, 30/07/2024), and the article opens with the author’s thoughtful contemplation: “What has the world come to?! Two athletes, proven to be biologically male, have been allowed to com-

¹ We use the word *media* here not in its most common contemporary sense—referring to various kinds of journalistic content—but in its original Latin meaning, medium: a medium or mediator. Thus, outlets like *Informer* and similar tabloids are not considered informational (in this case, the Latin maxim ‘nomen est omen’ clearly does not apply), let alone analytical media. Rather, they are understood as sites of mediation between reality and fantasy, sites where the lies of the ruling capitalist elites in Europe’s southeastern periphery are manufactured.

pete in the women's category at the Paris Olympic Games!" Yes, you read that right. The biggest problem in the world in the year of our Lord 2024 was not wars, hunger, inflation, or ecological catastrophe—it was the fact that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had allowed men to compete in the women's category! In other words, a global disgrace and an outrageous injustice against womankind!!!

There was hardly anyone who wasn't exposed to such headlines during last summer's Olympics. Whether or not you cared about sports, all it took was having an internet connection, and the "information" would reach you that a "male" boxer from Algeria had beaten up an Italian female boxer so badly that she was forced to concede the match. As people were doomscrolling through photos of holidays, then images of bombed-out cities, a couple of weddings, and a few capsized migrant boats in the Mediterranean, the algorithm spat out the news that a man was battering a woman, with the blessing of the IOC and out in the open, for the whole world to see. For many, that was where the line was finally drawn. It was the last straw—the last drop in an already brimming bucket.

As it usually goes with this kind of "media" content, panic erupted across social media—panic accompanied by disgust, moral judgment, and mocking memes. Once again, the scapegoats were TGI communities, accused of not respecting women, of taking up women's spaces, and of being violent. Allies were viciously attacked as well—how dare they defend the right to gender self-determination *now*, can they not see that women's rights are (supposedly) at risk...? And so on, and so forth. The waves of transphobia directed at Algerian athlete Imane Khelif were layered with racism as well. In the midst of the war in Gaza, an Arab woman dared to get up on the biggest sporting stage in the world and "beat up" an Italian woman. Oh, please - like an Arab woman could ever be better than a European. That's *obviously* some kind of scam.

Two or three days—and billions of furious and concerned social media posts, and hundreds of millions of heated online debates—later, credible media finally broke through the barrage of fake news to confirm that Imane is a cis woman. She might look "mannish" and "unconventional," she

might not fit the 1950s-era stereotype of the white American housewife, but she is not a trans woman. Once the milk had been spilled, and yet another media witch-hunt had already swept through TGI communities around the world, there was little consolation to be found in attempts at damage control and tempering the outrage. At least Imane got to stay in the competition, and in the end, through her own hard work and remarkable skill, she won the most prestigious prize in the world of sport - an Olympic gold medal. But the price she paid to get there was enormous. If anything, this media frenzy resulted in Imane having to compete under tougher conditions than her counterparts, not easier ones, as had been initially implied when she was presented as a “biologically” stronger “man.”

So, let's take a few steps back, dial down the exclamation marks, and ease off the emotionally charged approach to the information presented to us by the modern media. Maybe then certain things will start to make a bit more sense. It's vital that we recognize the mechanisms tabloids and the right-wing propaganda machine predictably and systematically use at both the local and international levels. Yesterday, it was Imane; tomorrow, it could be anyone or anything else.

Just looking at the headline of the previously mentioned article, a few common textual traps immediately jump out. First, the very title conveys the **feeling** of confusion and irritated bafflement, which is then repeated in the opening sentence. With this framing, the information in the text is immediately perceived as at the very least strange, or even “abnormal” and against “common sense.” And we, the readers, are automatically inducted into this imagined community of collectively shocked observers. That's why it takes additional effort to emotionally distance ourselves and approach the information presented in the text as objectively and critically as possible. After all, who wants to be seen as opposed to common sense and to the widely accepted norm?

The second step is the claim that the two athletes are “proven” to be biological men. The “evidence” cited is that Imane Khelif of Algeria and Lin Yu-ting of Taiwan were disqualified from the World Championship in New Delhi in March 2023 “due to doubts about their sex,” and that DNA

testing had been carried out. According to Umar Kremlev, president of the International Boxing Association (IBA), the results of these tests confirmed the presence of XY chromosomes. The article goes on to quote: “As such, they are accused of trying to trick their competitors by pretending to be women in order to compete in their category.” It took only a single, small step to get from **claims about biology** to outright **accusations of fraud**. Yet, this small step becomes a long and winding path if we ask ourselves why the president of an international sports association would publicly disclose athletes’ test results. Are these two athletes subjected to testing simply because they “don’t look like women,” or is this standard procedure for all boxers, male and female, or for all athletes in other disciplines as well?² Was the full complexity of sex at the DNA level considered, in line with the latest medical knowledge, or was some outdated 20th-century model used, and which one exactly? For that matter, how does the IBA operate, who are its top officials, and why do their standards differ from those of the highest international authorities, like the IOC? Answering these questions, and many others, takes time and research. That’s why tabloids can publish half-verified, unverified, or even outright false news without accountability, while credible media’s fact-checking processes take more time. By the time the truth reaches the public, the damage has already been done.

The third strategy used in these kinds of texts is harrowing testimony from the other side. In this case, the floor is given to Mexican boxer Brianda Tamara, who, describing her match against Imane, says, among other things, that her punches hurt a lot: “I don’t think I’ve ever felt like that in my 13 years of boxing, not even when sparring with male colleagues. Thank God I got out of the ring alive that day. And I’m glad that they’ve finally realized what this is.” Such overwrought testimony, like the talk of ‘getting out of the ring alive’—even though professional boxing has rules and standard safeguarding protocols that apply to all matches—serves to heighten the impact and mask the underlying prejudiced societal assumptions of how women are supposed to look. By contrast, when Novak Đoković, figuratively speaking, “demolishes” his opponents well

² Following the Paris Olympics, World Boxing introduced mandatory genetic testing for all competitors.

into his late thirties, or when the younger, wildly successful Carlos Alcaraz is leagues ahead of the rest of the field, no one rushes to check their hormone levels or scrutinize their physical predispositions. Instead, they are hailed as the best of the best.

Demonizing equality is the fourth trick that right-wing media rely on repeatedly. In this case, the article concludes with the opinion of an athlete from a different sport. Swimmer Nancy Hogshead-Makar is quoted as claiming that men have a punch 162% stronger than women's. The piece then ends fittingly on a quote from her: "*Gender ideology and equality are going to get women killed.*" The conservative narrative treats rights as a finite resource, as if there aren't enough of them to go around, meaning that one must fight for their slice of the pie, which is in complete opposition to the true notion of equality as something that applies to everyone and exists for everyone, regardless of their identity or other personal characteristics. Ironically enough, this kind of discourse tends to settle on gender equality as its main scapegoat—the very same gender equality that protects women from violence, that fights for all women everywhere, and that is enshrined in international legal documents.

It's also worth paying attention to the article's **paratext**, specifically the photographs, deliberately chosen to emphasize stereotypically masculine features in both Lin Yu-ting and Imane. The piece is not signed with the author's full name and surname; instead, the "source" is given only as the initials M. Z. This does nothing to improve the transparency of the information, which is merely relayed from global right-wing media. The article's **publication date** was July 30th, two days before the Italian boxer conceded the match, marking the start of the worldwide campaign against Imane Khelif.

As we can see, the media first set the **trap**, and one by one, everyone took the bait: first, Imane's colleague Angela Carini (who panicked and conceded their match after just 46 seconds),³ then the sports media, and through them the wider public. The media **constructed a reality** by declaring Imane to be a man, and that lie then fell on the fertile ground of prejudice and uncritical consumption of tabloid media.

³ Imane's next rival was Hungarian boxer Anna Luca Hámori, who decided to focus on boxing and disregard the media's coverage.

One group of topics that directly spills over from global media and into the regional outlets we analyzed concerns issues of **gender self-termination**. Journalists—most often anonymously, that is, through unsigned texts—primarily use the word “sex”, or attempt to describe Imane Khelif’s “gender troubles.” Initial reporting on her case often included misgendering, with masculine pronouns and nouns used to refer to her and her work. Among other recurring phrases were those insisting on a strict biological sex binary, such as “biologically male sex” or “biological man” (J.R., 02/08/2024). Sometimes they would simply cast vague doubt on her womanhood, describing her as “a boxer whose sex is unknown” (Telegraf, S.L., 01/08/2024).

As the story remained in the spotlight, increasingly nuanced levels of gender distinctions could be seen in Informer’s pages, including the claim that Imane was “proven to be a man, but feels like a woman” (Informer, M.V., 01/08/2024). Imane’s family was dragged into the story (Informer, Lj.V., 02/08/2024), and her childhood photos were circulated (Telegraf, V.Đ., 02/08/2024). By the Olympic final on 10 August 2024, the narrative had shifted somewhat. The news of her gold medal win was positively framed in the headline: “Brilliant Algerian wins the gold and settles the sex dilemma!”—“I’m a woman like any other woman. I was born a woman, I lived a woman, I competed as a woman, there’s no doubt about that. Of course, there are enemies of success. And that also gives my success a special taste because of these attacks,” Khelif said after her win. (Informer, J.R., 10/08/2024)

Her celebration, which began in Paris, continued in Algeria: “Male, female, it doesn’t matter, the nation is thrilled! A spectacular welcome for the Algerian!” (Informer, J.R., 13/08/2024) But the media didn’t back down, not even when she consulted lawyers and announced lawsuits against those who had spread false reports about her identity. The same day news broke that Imane Khelif had become the new Olympic champion, Informer also published the opinion of a British influencer who is part of the TGI community.

„*Stop the presses! This is proof that Imane Khelif is a man! (PHOTO)*—‘A man in Algeria would only ever be allowed to carry another man like this, and would never carry a woman this way or touch her bare thighs! This is proof! You don’t need a biological test; this is even stronger evidence that Imane Khelif is a man,’ claims Oli London, a British influencer who was born male, later identified as nonbinary, underwent several cosmetic surgeries to become a woman, and finally announced a year ago that he would stop putting his body through this torture and asked to be referred to as ‘he’ from now on.” (Informer, V.T., 10/08/2024)

It is worth noting that, of all the statements published over those few days, the Balkan tabloid media chose to report precisely the one that may sound “controversial” because it came from someone who was de-transitioning. It is also interesting to observe how, in addition to biology/“nature,” cultural and social norms—i.e., “nurture”—are introduced as factors in assessing someone’s gender identity.

Once Pandora’s box of speculation on Imane Khelif’s gender was opened, the cogs of the media machine kept spinning perpetually. By the cutoff date for texts that made it into our corpus, sporadic reports about her “gender troubles” were still appearing, and the media and bureaucratic persecution had not yet ended. On the contrary, in October, another article appeared, written in a scandalous tone and reporting a supposed bombshell discovery made by French journalist Djaffar Ait Aoudia, based on an alleged copy of Imane Khelif’s physical examination report.

“It’s all out in the open now! The Algerian female boxer is a MALE BOXER! She definitely has testicles and a micropenis! [...] According to Aoudia, the clinical report reveals that an MRI determined Khelif does not have a uterus, but instead has internal testes and a ‘micropenis’ resembling an enlarged clitoris. Chromosomal testing further confirmed that Khelif has a KSI karyotype, while hormone tests found her testosterone levels to be in the typical male range. The report also suggested that Khelif’s parents may even have been blood relatives.” (Informer, V.Ž., 04/11/2024)

Not only does this violate the privacy of a world-class athlete, but it also drags her family history into the narrative, taking the whole story to a new low of unethical media practices and unprofessionalism.

Prompted by this story, the International Boxing Association introduced additional testing, and so the saga continues. Despite Trump's anti-gender crusade, Imane remains determined to participate in the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics. Speaking of Trump, he was among the right-wing figures who publicly criticized Imane's participation in the Olympics, a stance also reported in our local media (Index Vijesti, 18/08/2024). Chiming in were the usual suspects: Elon Musk and J.K. Rowling (Telegraf, S.P., 14/08/2024), along with our region's very own inescapable clone of the global right, Aleksandar Vučić: 'Can you believe this degeneracy and insanity, this disease that is taking over the world, where men show up, beat women senseless, and win medals for it? Madness has taken over the world, and everything has gone completely insane,' said Vučić.' (Telegraf, S.P., 01/08/2024)

Gender-based violence is another topic that was frequently abused and exploited in emotionally manipulative ways in the analyzed material. To take an example from our region, a statement made by former world kickboxing champion Nenad Pagonis—who was arrested less than two months before the Olympics on charges of domestic abuse against his ex-wife—was widely reported: "I push a woman away in self-defense after she attacked me, and they label me an abuser and crucify me in the public eye. This guy beats up a woman at the Olympics in front of everyone, and they give him a gold medal," Pagonis wrote on Instagram, sparking an uproar (Informer, J.R., 02/08/2024). The *media* outlet *Informer* evidently deemed it appropriate to publish the reaction of an athlete who was currently involved in a domestic violence case. Several other athletes from the Balkans—all of them men—also voiced outrage that the Olympics allowed a "man" to compete in women's sports, including basketball players Danilo Anđušić (Kurir Sport, 02/08/2024) and Igor Rakočević. The latter went beyond this specific case, filtering the entire Olympics through a conservative lens: "'Another huge fail for the Paris Olympics (in addition to the shameful opening ceremony and to

promoting transvestites, “drag queens,” and obesity instead of sport). If this nonsense continues, women’s sport is finished,’ Rakočević thundered.” (Telegraf, S.l., 31/07/2024)

In addition to these individual reactions, a debate was organized on Kurir Television, featuring Stanka Pejović, general secretary of the sports association “Radnički,” and Predrag Azdejković, journalist and LGBT activist (Kurir Television, 03/08/2024). Prior to the debate, the Sports Society of Serbia had awarded an honorary gold medal to Angela Carini (Telegraf, S.P., 01/08/2024). In March 2025, a piece was published about the match between Nikolina Gajić from Serbia and Imane Khelif. Following the familiar template, the story was presented in highly sensationalized terms: “Serbian boxer suffers horror in the ring! Female boxer accused of being male leaves her bedridden for ten days... ‘It took me seven to ten days to recover. My nose, forehead, and head all hurt. Everything. She hits like a man...’ Gajić believes that Khelif would have won the men’s category as well, had she played in it, and that no one could stand against her in the ring.” (Informer, J.J., 07/03/2025).

Among the *media* writings on this topic that we analyzed, one of the few pieces written in column form was authored by journalist Marta Petrović, who signed her full name (also a rarity). The article, titled “‘I Sold Bread on the Streets So I Could Compete’: Will People Give This Boxer A Pass Because of Her Difficult Life Story?”, is notable for introducing a class perspective. Yet even Petrović falls into line with her colleagues: “It is what it is now—Imane, who has XY chromosomes and ‘feels like a woman,’ won. Angela, who doesn’t ‘feel like,’ but rather is a woman, lost... Given the kinds of situations we’re seeing more often in competitions, maybe now is the right time for organizers to consider introducing special categories and testing. Simply put, biological facts can’t always yield to people’s feelings.” (Ona.Telegraf.rs, 02/08/2024)

What genes Imane has is not public knowledge; what counts as biological “facts” should first be explained by biologists familiar with the current scientific understanding of the issue; finally, the idea that she merely “*feels like a woman*” is an inaccurate description of her iden-



tity. The column format allows for a degree of authorial freedom, but it also clearly exposes any lack of depth or knowledge in the author's approach—as is the case with this text, published the day after the “scandal” went viral. Before long, many of the assumptions in the piece proved incorrect, and the commentary itself aged poorly.

Journalists, scientists, conservative politicians, right-leaning athletes—in short, **right-wing actors**—have once again joined forces to persecute a woman and deny her the right to choose her professional path freely.

SWIMMING TO FREEDOM: THE CASE OF LIA THOMAS

The issue of trans women in sport is not one of sporting regulations, but of social relations, gender norms, and the right to exist in all of one's many complexities. Sport has always been more than mere competition; it is a space in which social identities, structures, and hierarchies of power are shaped and reaffirmed. Precisely because of sport's symbolic role, the way trans athletes are represented in the media is not simply a matter of perception, but a powerful tool for shaping social reality.

Picture this: you wake up in the morning, grab your phone, and open a news portal. A headline smacks you straight in the face: “*Trans Woman Ruins Sport*,” “*Scandal at the Competition*,” “*A Man Competing Among Women*.” You don't know who, or what, or where—but you know that something is “abnormal,” “unfair,” “dangerous.” You click. And just like that, you're exactly where they want you to be.

At a time when humanity is facing existential threats, some parts of the media insist that what really deserves our attention is not climate change, the collapse of public healthcare, or the rise of the far right; rather, it would seem one of the most pressing problems of our time is... Lia Thomas. Yes, you read that correctly—a transgender swimmer who “threatens the principle of fair play” in sport. Lia Thomas is an ideal target: visible enough to attract attention, marginalized enough to be unable to defend her-

self, and “different” enough for fears, intolerance, and cultural moralism to be projected onto her. But where is this level of hysteria around trans women in sport coming from, in our particular region? Could it be a matter of precaution? Only, it’s not clear what kind of precaution is needed at a time when trans people around the world are losing even their most basic rights. A threat amounting to little more than a rounding error in scale is being framed as the root of the gravest injustices.

Let’s be honest—the world is on fire, and Lia Thomas is not the match. In a world that’s burning, she’s not a fire to be put out. At best, she’s a smoke screen for far deeper societal issues. A decoy. A convenient distraction to keep us from seeing the real reasons the world is falling apart around us.

As you might—or might not—recall, Laurel Hubbard was also written about in these parts. First trans woman at the Olympic Games, weightlifting, Tokyo 2021. And how did our media cover it? *“How a former weightlifter became a woman, and the headline story: This isn’t fair.”* (Večernji list, 09/04/2018, authored by Hina). *“He changed his sex, but not his sport.”* (Kurir, 09/04/2018, author unknown). *“A disgrace to sport.”* *“The transgender weightlifter in Tokyo is a slap in the face to fairness in sport”* (Index, 14/06/2021, author unknown). Of course, the real blow wasn’t to sport, but to Laurel herself—delivered through headlines, clickbait, and comment sections, where her trans identity became a pretext for relentless public harassment.

It’s a well-rehearsed script: first, deadnaming (using someone’s old name), then misgendering, showing pre-transition photos, followed by the shock factor—*“she used to be a man!”*—and, finally, the fearmongering: *“and now they’re competing with women!”* Phrases like *“biological man,”* *“advantage,”* *“injustice,”* and *“women’s sports will disappear”* are hammered home. And the same line is repeated like a mantra: *“It’s not fair to real women.”*

And while we’re on the topic of “real women,” let’s remember that many of them are barely granted the right to participate in sports at all, and that they were barred from competitions for years. Remember the Serbian wo-

men's national football team? No, you don't, because no one writes about them. And who even decides what a real woman is? In this narrative, it's the editor, the clickbait writer, if there even is one. Or, at this rate, why not let Putin decide? After all—as an *Informer* headline tell us—he once declared: “*Tr*nnies⁴ should be banned from competing! They don't belong in women's sports.*” (*Informer*, 25/12/2021, author unknown). Laurel didn't take anyone's gold medal. She didn't “steamroll the competition.” She didn't “dominate.” But the headlines did. Trans women weren't seen as athletes, or even people—they were a scandal. Even back then, the formula was already set.

“*SCANDAL! DISCRIMINATION IN SPORTS! Former man IS BREAKING women's competition records!*” (*Informer*, 18/02/2022, author unknown), followed the next day by another headline: “*SHE'S SWIMMING WITH GIRLS, BUT HAS MALE GENITALS! She used to be a man—see what she looks like now!*” (*Informer*, 19/02/2022, author unknown). The same pattern only intensified when Lia Thomas came onto the scene. A swimmer, an American, a trans woman, the winner of a collegiate competition. The headlines: “*Former man is breaking women's competition records,*” “*Women vs. Lia Thomas!*” Which women? All women? Or only the ones tabloids choose to shove into the spotlight when they want to sow panic and fear? “*Women's sports will disappear*”—because of trans women, of course, because trans women are a threat, an extremely dire threat. Not just to sport, but to order. To the system. To what is supposed to be clear and straightforward: male–female. Winner–loser. Us–them. All historically very familiar.

Most trans athletes lack resources, lack support, lack money. Today, sport isn't just about talent—sport is a luxury. Coaches, supplements, equipment, medical care, time—they all cost money. And trans people, especially those who aren't middle or upper-class, often have nothing to start with. And when they win in spite of it all—that's when they're told they don't belong. Then comes the infamous “scientific” justification—and herein lies the main trap. The very same “science” that is used to “exclude”

⁴ Note: The original published headline does not censor this term.



trans women from sports today once held that women were the weaker sex. For centuries, science kept “proving” that women had smaller brains, weaker muscles, and were emotionally unstable. They weren’t allowed to run, vote, or get an education—all of it “scientifically” justified. The same model was applied to race: measuring skulls, analyzing nasal shapes, and creating a hierarchy of the more and less valuable.⁵ And today it’s trans people’s turn to be the target. Same patterns. Same vocabulary: “advantage,” “unnatural,” “unfair.”

They talk about how trans women are “endangering women,” while at the same time, women are penalized for wearing shorts instead of swimsuits.⁶ Women in sports are still underpaid, underrepresented, under-sponsored, and under-recognized. “We’re protecting women’s sports,” they claim—but every time women speak out against sexism, the support evaporates. Trans women become the scapegoat, a convenient excuse to keep the status quo intact, and to once again deal a blow to women under the guise of “concern” for them. You know how the media say they “care about sports”? You know how they “care about women”? By not even knowing if a single women’s sports team exists in their own city.

Trump, Putin, all the right-wing tabloids—they all know there are political points to be scored here. Not because sport matters to them, but because control does. The power to decide who is allowed to exist. To compete. To be a woman. “*Trump Strips Trophies from Transgender Swimmer: Liberals Seethe with Rage*” (Informer, 03/07/2025, D.M.).

Where does a politics of exclusion, rooted in hypocrisy and self-interest, lead us? To a version of justice that stays silent while women endure discrimination for years, yet suddenly finds its voice when it’s time to exclude those it doesn’t understand? Trans women don’t become a problem simply by participating. They don’t become a problem when they lose. They become a “threat” only when they win. Only then are

⁵ https://rosalux.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/06g_vodic_kroz_ideologije_2_marko_skoric_i_aleksej_kisjuhas_ako_2015.pdf

⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/07/20/norway-handball-team-fined-shorts/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

they labeled “dominant,” “unfair,” “biologically superior.” “Biological advantage”—a new term for a very old story. When Black women first entered sports, they were described as “beasts,” “unnaturally strong,” “unfeminine.” When a woman in boxing or football doesn’t look like a runway model, she’s immediately branded “mannish”—or maybe she’s trans? But being trans—now that’s truly “unfair.” And then we hear the familiar refrain: “We have nothing against trans people; we just want fair sports.” Right, just like they once said, “We have nothing against women, we just think boxing is dangerous for them.” Or, “We have nothing against Black people, it’s just that they’re genetically not suited for swimming.” Sound familiar? It should. This isn’t the first time. It’s the same old narrative, dressed up in new packaging. And it won’t stop at trans women. Because once they’re done with them, they’ll move on to the next “other.”

And when all of that still isn’t enough, institutions step in on the side of transphobia. Results are annulled. Retroactively. Apologies are issued to the “real” women athletes. That is the price of transphobia: they take away your right to success, all while claiming to “understand” you.

The media know perfectly well that no one is going to click on a headline like “An Analysis of Sports Regulations in the Context of Gender Politics.” Nope. But write “*Man Invades Women’s Pool!*”—now *that* makes people’s hearts skip a beat. That’s eye-gouging stuff. And you know what? They don’t care if that person trained for ten years, if they follow every regulation to the letter, and if their results are entirely valid. None of that matters. What matters is that you clicked. And that you’re already angry. The media don’t want to talk about the system, because the system is abstract. You know what isn’t? A specific person. A specific face. Ideally, someone who doesn’t fit in. And that’s where headlines like “*AMERICA IN COLLAPSE: WOMEN AGAINST LIA THOMAS! Women’s sport will disappear! Girls are devastated about having to compete against men!*” come in (Informer, 19 February 2022, author unknown). Because once you put a face to the problem, everything becomes simple. You stop asking about rules, context, and statistics. You just see: “*there she is—she’s the one to blame.*” This mechanism is well known

within media representation theory. Stuart Hall argued that meaning is not something that exists, but something that is constructed.⁷ And the meaning of “trans woman” in the context of sport, as constructed by our tabloids, is not that of a person, nor an athlete—it’s that of a threat.

An even more effective formula than plain shock is shock wrapped in fake concern, through which you’re led to believe you’re standing on the side of “justice.” But this isn’t really concern; it’s manipulation. It’s a tactic designed to draw you in and elicit outrage, while keeping you from seeing that you’re actually defending injustice. And it works best when it uses language that pretends to be moral while being nothing but pure sensationalism.

In the media, there’s an (unwritten?) rule: *Repeat something often enough, and it becomes the truth.* And so, every time a trans person wins at anything, the same script kicks in: “biological advantage,” “endangering women’s sports,” “unnatural,” “scandal.” Even when it isn’t true, it’s repeated again and again. And once people have heard something a hundred times, they stop questioning it. They just nod and say: “Well... there must be something to it... I’m sure it’s true.” That’s normalization through exhaustion. You wear people down until they’re left with only a vague sense of being “against it”—without ever really knowing what “it” even is.

Do you know when a news portal last ran a headline like: “*Trans Athlete Competes, Fails to Place in the Top Ten*”? Never. Because that doesn’t sell. There’s no scandal. No “threat.” And the truth is that trans people in sport also lose. They’re not dominant. They’re not “unstoppable machines.” In most cases, they’re athletes like any others, just with far more obstacles in their way. But when they win, well, that becomes the headline. When they lose—silence. Because truth doesn’t generate clicks the way deception does.

The headline doesn’t act as information. The headline acts as a me-

⁷ <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/88476>

dia lynching. That's why, in outlets like *Telegraf*, *Kurir*, *Index*, *Informer*, *24sata*, and *Večernji list*, we find examples of linguistic violence packaged as supposed "news," and, of course, almost always written by anonymous or unknown authors.

As stated in a *Kurir* article published on August 6, 2023, by an unknown author: "It is clear that Lia has no real competition among the girls, and it appears that her opponents are dealing with far bigger problems than losing in the pool. This refers primarily to the situation in the locker room, where they feel uncomfortable sharing space with a person who was born as a man, has male genitalia, and identifies as a lesbian—she is attracted to women! This is what prompted Riley Gaines to publicly tell the story of what she endured during her college years, when she had numerous encounters with Thomas at competitions and in locker rooms—encounters in which Thomas allegedly showed no regard for those around her. 'It was one of those situations where you try not to look. But you can't completely ignore it—you can't unsee it. It's like a bad car wreck,' Riley said. When asked directly about Thomas' genitalia, she replied: 'I was trying to run away from this question. Okay, a 193-centimeter-tall male. You can imagine... I'll leave it to you—use your imagination.'"

A clear pattern of sexualizing and demonizing trans women emerges. The text features: sexualization of trans bodies through detailed description of physical characteristics (height, genitalia); stigmatization and public disclosing of sexual orientation, through emphasizing that the trans woman is a lesbian (used as an added element of "threat"); dehumanization through comparing the presence of a trans body to a "bad car wreck"; and normalization of transphobia under the guise of false sympathy for cis women, who are portrayed as victims despite there being no evidence of any real danger to them. Institutional responsibility, like that of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to provide adequate infrastructure (such as private changing rooms), is never discussed. Instead, all pressure and blame are directed at the trans woman, who is merely doing what anyone in a locker room does: changing clothes. Are we forgetting that violence is committed by

violent people, not by people with specific identities?

On June 2, 2022, *Kurir* (author unknown) relayed a column by British journalist Dan Wootton, which stated: “Watching Good Morning America’s exclusive interview with trans swimmer Lia Thomas wasn’t an easy experience. Of course, my heart went out to an individual who openly admits to being deeply troubled in recent years, haunted by suicidal thoughts and all the other mental torture that comes with believing you were born in the wrong body. But I also felt deep sympathy for the women athletes who have trained for years and dedicated their lives to competing in the pool, only to have a biological man blow them out of the water. [...] So, while I have much compassion for Lia Thomas, she seems to have very little for the women whose sporting dreams she has shattered. And she certainly has no concern for her former UPenn female teammates, who felt uncomfortable about sharing the changing rooms with someone with male genitalia that still respond to attractive women.”

This text is a textbook example of a manipulative, falsely empathetic narrative that tries to mask transphobic views behind a sympathetic veneer. This construct is a classic case of what could be called “performative empathy”: the author declaratively expresses sympathy for the trans person, only to quickly resort to “rationalized” transphobia, framed as a logical argument about “fair play,” but fundamentally denying trans people the right to compete at all. And finally, “genitals that respond”? This baselessly sexualizes the trans body, suggesting that the mere physical presence of a trans woman in women’s spaces is improper or predatory, thus implicitly linking trans identity with sexual deviance—a classic model of stigmatization dating back to the 20th century. This isn’t care; it’s fetishization and pathologization of trans identity.

At the end of the day, headlines and texts like these aren’t meant to inform you—they’re meant to scare you. To tell you: the world is changing, you don’t understand it, but we know who’s to blame. Here’s the headline. Here’s the face. Here’s the problem. And while your eyes are fixed on this trans woman who won a competition, you’re blind to the real issues: schools without plumbing or clean water, people dying of hun-

ger, women's rights being trampled for decades, and sport becoming a game for the wealthy. This is known as distraction through demonization. You create an enemy so that everyone forgets who the real ones are. In a society obsessed with binary divisions, sport is one of the institutions that enforces that binary—a site where what constitutes a “normal” body is defined, where it’s decided who is allowed to participate and under what conditions. When the media use phrases like “biological advantage” and “unfairness,” they’re not merely describing a sporting scenario; they’re actively participating in controlling and excluding those who don’t fit the established mold. Trans women undermine the entrenched hierarchy, and the reactions they provoke have little to do with sport—they are deeply social and political. So no, this is not a story about sport. This is a story about exclusion. About a mechanism that keeps repeating itself through history: first Black people, then women, then gay people, and now it’s trans people’s turn. So no, Lia Thomas is not the problem. The problem is the headlines that shamelessly, unethically, unprofessionally, and dehumanizingly address this issue; the society that stays silent; and the audience that mindlessly nods along. The problem is the society that refuses to accept the complexity of gender and identity, that turns sport into a battlefield for its fears, prejudices, and need for control. And while our eyes are fixed on a single athlete, we fail to see the true cost of transphobia in our society and media—a cost measured in trans lives.

WHEN TO USE THIS GAME PLAN:

The insights and lessons contained in this chapter are most useful in conversations where your counterpart cites or references media headlines and articles like the ones discussed here, or when they rely on similar types of arguments. They also come in handy in discussions about the power and role of the media in shaping not only societal narratives, but our everyday lives as well.

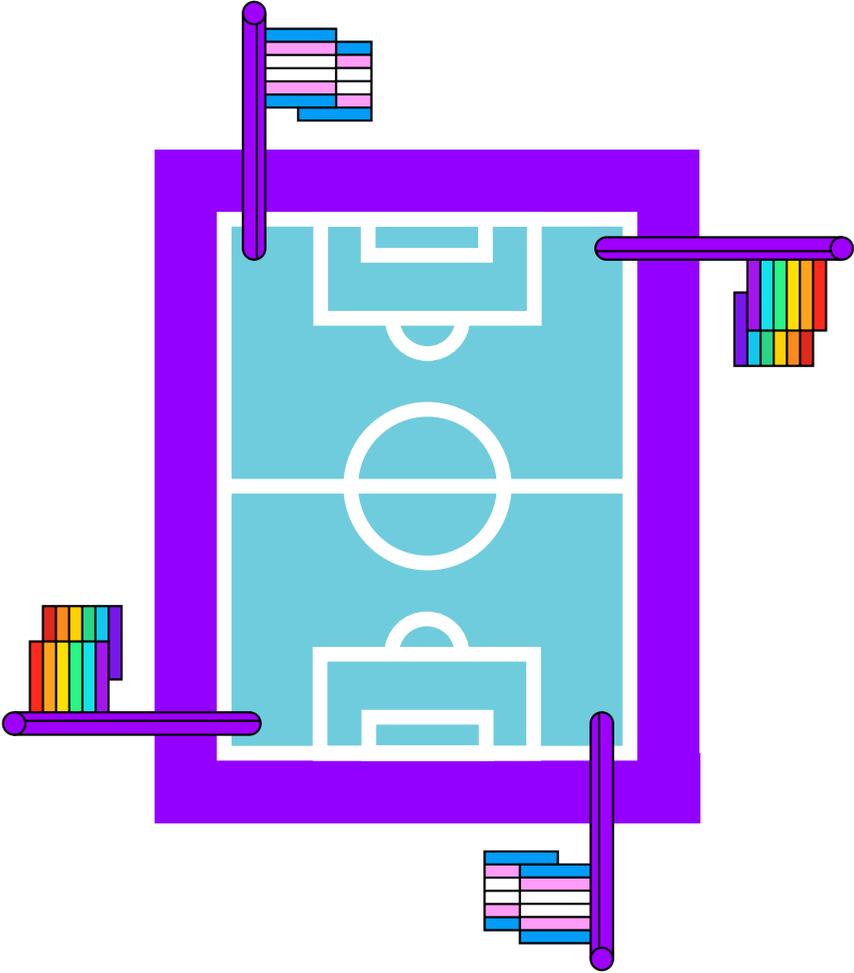
ESSENTIAL PLAYS:



To properly train your critical thinking in an era oversaturated with misinformation, it's essential to remember that the goal of many media outlets and conglomerates is not merely to convey important information—it's to accumulate profit and power through readership and followers (not to mention that these very profits and power can then be (ab)used in a variety of ways to serve the interests of those who control these media).

The distribution of information should be handled responsibly, in a way that ensures truthful and dignified presentation of said information; yet, more often than not, we witness its weaponization. Whether it's to score political points or rack up clicks, the goal remains the same—profiteers will always pursue profit. In that pursuit, ethics, professionalism, and objectivity are easily cast aside.

This text aims to illustrate just how easily information can be manipulated when the goal is to sensationalize the most vulnerable among us. Let's remember these examples—they help us see through the lies and stand up for the truth.



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