Sport can help to clarify the trans debate

Hadley Freeman

Martina Navratilova faced a backlash for her comments on female participation, but at least she has moved the discussion on

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Sport is often dismissed as mere entertainment, but it is where some of the most serious matters play out, from geopolitical relations to international PR. So it’s apt that sport would turn out to be the rock upon which the now long-running arguments about gender should finally crash open.

Two weeks ago Martina Navratilova, one of the greatest athletes of all time, leaped into the notoriously feverish gender debate and wrote that self-identified trans women should not have an automatic right to compete in women’s sports because they have unfair advantages from having been born male. The media, terrified of being on the wrong side of history, responded predictably, and headlines said that Navratilova was “criticised over ‘cheating’ trans women comments”, although this criticism came largely from a relatively unknown cyclist, Rachel McKinnon, with a history of incendiary remarks (such as that lesbians such as Navratilova should “get over their genital hang-ups” when it comes to choosing sexual partners). When Navratilova published a further blog last weekend, firmly restating her position, the headlines again suggested wrongdoing on her part, such as the BBC’s “Navratilova sorry for transgender ‘cheat’ language as she re-enters debate”.

https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/06/sport-trans-martina-navratilova
What got notably less media attention was the support for Navratilova from other elite athletes, including Chris Evert, Billie Jean King, Sally Gunnell, Paula Radcliffe, Kelly Holmes and Nicola Adams. Arguments about gender are now so vicious that most high-profile people would rather eat their hair than speak out. But sport, it turns out, is a more clear-cut issue to some than, say, prisons - where various groups have argued over whether trans women should be housed with female inmates.

The current ideology is that gender identity is at least as important, if not more so, than biological sex. That is why an LGBT sports group like Athlete Ally can dismiss Navratilova’s arguments about male skeletal advantages with a simple “trans women are women”. The International Olympic Committee allows trans women to compete if they have been reducing their testosterone for 12 months; but, increasingly, female athletes are saying that testosterone is not the only advantage. Boys start growing bigger bones, muscles and greater heart capacity from puberty, and no gender switch will undo that. One can firmly defend a person’s right to live in the gender identity of their choosing yet also look at photos of trans women athletes such as Gabrielle Ludwig, Natalie van Gogh and McKinnon standing alongside their strikingly smaller female team-mates, and think Navratilova’s arguments are worth investigating instead of dismissing with cries of bigotry.

Even some of those who argue that trans women should compete against other women know the latter would be at a disadvantage. But to them, this is the price of equality. One columnist wrote last week that if transgender athletes did dominate women’s sport to the exclusion of biological females “would that be that bad? In a way it would be inspiring.” One can only wonder if this columnist would be quite so blaze about an entire sex missing out on sports careers, scholarships and medals if that sex was his own. Strikingly, no one explains why, if biology doesn’t matter, no male athletes are worried about trans men competing against them. Instead, women’s objections were dismissed as “feverish hysteria”, as if bigotry was a natural female trait.

Feminists and the LGBT movement are usually allies, and yet they have become antagonists on this issue - and if there’s one person in this country who has, at the very least, exacerbated this, it’s Maria Miller. In 2017, as chair of the women and equalities committee, Miller produced a report on transgender rights in which she recommended that changing gender should be through a process of “self-declaration” rather than after consultation with a doctor.

Single-sex spaces (such as sport and prisons), which exist because of the significant physical differences between male and female bodies, would become single-gender ones. But if - as the transgender movement rightly argues - sex and gender are two separate things, why should single sex suddenly mean single gender? Miller insisted that the only objections came from “women purporting to be feminists”, and maybe she believed what she was saying. Maybe she was trying to improve her right-on cred after having previously tried to cut the abortion time limits. Whichever, for the next two years, discussions of gender became mired in metaphysical arguments about what is and isn’t a woman. This culminated with the Lib Dem MP Layla Moran arguing she could tell what someone’s sex is, not by their physical body, but by “looking in their soul”.

Miller set off a savage culture war in which the losers were women, trans and not, all of whom felt unfairly attacked; and they were all correct. Biological women felt like they were being told to engage in magical thinking, deny their lived experience and accept the irrelevancy of biology, while trans women felt like they were being asked to defend their identity. None of this would have been as vicious if Miller hadn’t framed the debate so badly.
And Miller herself admits this, kinda. In January she said the government (ie, she) “mishandled” trans rights by focusing on what constitutes a woman. Since then, there has been a sense that the centre ground is being regained, with more open acknowledgements that gender matters, but so does biology. Last week, while sportswomen spoke up, SNP politician Joan McAlpine said there would not be a third option to the biological sex question on Scotland’s 2021 census because “sex and identity are not the same thing. Biological sex is an important demographic variable needed to record and plan services.”

It was revealed last weekend that Downview prison in south London will be the first in Europe to have a unit for trans prisoners, in response to “significant concern” among the female prisoners about the arrival of male-bodied inmates. And it may well be that, one day, trans athletes will have their own category too. Because, contrary to anyone’s breezily dogmatic platitudes, this is not a black-and-white issue. The greys are still taking shape.

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Elite sport is becoming a platform to target the trans community

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A transgender pride flag at a protest against white supremacy and discrimination after the events in Charlottesville, Virginia. Michael Moloney/Shutterstock

Tennis champion Martina Navratilova recently called the participation of transgender women in elite female sporting competitions “insane” and “cheating”.

And she’s not alone. Several other prominent women athletes have also used social media, mainly Twitter, to voice their concern about the eligibility of transgender women in sport, including former British swimmer Sharron Davies, double Olympic champion Dame Kelly Holmes, and former long-distance runner Paula Radcliffe.

There is an inherent contempt that lies within these statements, and it impacts more than just trans athletes. It can impact the integrity of public discourse by reducing the debate to be about whether trans women are “real women”, and we need to move past this crude and destructive rhetoric.

Here, I use the term trans as an umbrella term to include all identities within the trans community, such as transgender and transitioned athletes.

What is the debate really about?

So why have we revisited this discussion in recent weeks? We are witnessing a broader movement against the trans community.

Australian gay rights activists Dennis Altman and Jonathan Symons call it the “queer wars” in their book of the same title. They explain how resistance to LGBTI issues across the globe is being used by governments and religious leaders to uphold traditional values, and increased polarisation towards LGBTI rights.
In recent years, we saw bathrooms used as a platform for division in the US. In 2016, North Carolina became the first US state to introduce a law prohibiting transgender people from using the restroom corresponding to their gender.

Read more: The transgender bathroom controversy: Four essential reads

Then, in Australia, the Australian Christian Lobby suggested a “yes” vote for marriage equality would lead to boys wearing dresses to the detriment of society.

And the UK saw backlash against a youth trans charity, called Mermaids, where half a million pounds of funding was disputed.

It seems sport is now being used as yet another tool to incite fear and hatred towards the trans community.

Some male commentators have raised concerns that the integrity of women’s sport is at risk. But where have these so-called male champions of change been in advancing women’s sport in recent years?

Another commonly-cited issue is that men might identify as women to reap rewards in competition. There have been no reported cases of men transitioning to women to earn money and dominate podiums. It is simply a myth.

Do trans polices in sport work?

The introduction of the International Olympic Committee’s policy on trans athletes in 2003 – amended in 2013 to remove surgical requirements and introduce a minimal level of testosterone – has led to no publicly out trans athletes competing at the Olympic games.

At the Commonwealth Games, trans weightlifter Laurel Hubbard qualified, but had to withdraw due to injury.
Therefore, the perception that trans women are, and will, dominate women's elite sport is not supported with any clear evidence.

UK research also found, after reviewing a series of trans policies in elite sport:

"the majority of these policies were unfairly discriminating against transgender people, especially transgender females".

Read more: Israel Folau's comments remind us homophobia and transphobia are ever present in Australian sport

If we are to start scrutinising the ethics and integrity around cheating and enforcing a level playing field, there are many other places we could start.

Match fixing, illegal gambling markets, substance abuse, and corruption have been found to exist within local grassroots matches in Victoria. Issues around ball tampering, match fixing at various levels of tennis, doping within various sporting codes, and salary cap breaches have also been reported at the elite level.

Particularly in women's sport, there is a disproportionate allocation of funding and resources compared to men's sport, a gross lack of media coverage, and women continue to fight for equal pay.
Advancing trans and gender diverse inclusion in sport

New guidelines and policies are being introduced from various sporting codes in the coming year in Australia.

The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission led the way with updated guidelines last year, but the most prominent policy to be released soon will be the Australian Human Rights Commission and Sport Australia's guidelines for Trans and Gender Diverse Athletes in Sport. This will likely be adopted by most sporting codes in Australia.

But as the debate continues, it is important we hear from trans athletes. No trans person has the same transition experience and there is great diversity among the trans community. We also need to understand the wider impact of negative commentary against this community.

Read more: Being transgender is not a mental illness, and the WHO should acknowledge this

What we have seen so far from the Olympic movement is promising in promoting trans inclusion in sport. The International Olympic Committee released mini documentaries about trans athletes in sport, and Tokyo 2020 is set to have gender neutral bathrooms.

We must remember that sport is a human right, and should be accessible to everybody, regardless of gender identity.