

# The problem of male inclusion in women's sport

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## What is going on in Olympic boxing?

There are two boxers competing in the women's category who appear to be male. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) took over the regulation of Olympic boxing at Tokyo and Paris for governance reasons (alleged corruption by the International Boxing Federation, the IBA). The IOC says these boxers are eligible because their passports say "female". The IBA says it conducted "gender tests" in 2022 and 2023, and that two separate labs have deemed these boxers ineligible for the female category. It said these tests were blood tests which established that the boxers have XY (male) chromosomes.

It seems likely these two boxers have disorders or differences of sex development (DSD). The IOC has said these are DSD cases not transgender. Some males with DSD are wrongly registered female at birth but go through male puberty and so have male performance advantage. DSD males in women's sport may be few in number, but they have a disproportionate impact. In the Rio Olympics in 2016, all three Olympic medals in the women's 800m went to DSD males, including South Africa's Caster Semenya.

Since then, the inclusion of trans-identifying males in women's sport has grown as an issue at every level of sport in many countries. So there are now two ways that female athletes can find themselves facing male competitors. If, as it seems, these two boxers have male advantage, the effect is the same, whether DSD or transgender, and women lose out.

## Separate sex categories in sport are essential for women and girls

Sex matters in sport. This is common sense and not in dispute. Most sports separate competition by sex because male bodies have many large physical advantages over female bodies, with little overlap. (For example, every female world record in athletics has been broken by teenage boys, often thousands of times a year.<sup>1</sup>)

Male sporting advantage is present from the earliest years: little boys are larger, stronger and faster than little girls.<sup>2</sup> But the gap widens hugely during puberty, as boys develop under the influence of testosterone. More than 20 published studies confirm that almost all this developmental advantage is retained even if a male adult takes drugs to suppress testosterone production<sup>3</sup>.

Allowing male advantage into the female sport category destroys fair competition for women and girls, and can be a safety risk, especially in contact and combat sports.

<sup>1</sup> Boys vs Women (accessed August 2024). *Male High School Athletes vs Female Olympians*.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory A Brown and Tommy Lundberg (2023). *Should transwomen be allowed to compete in women's sports?*

<sup>3</sup> Emma N Hilton and Tommy R Lundberg. 'Transgender Women in the Female Category of Sport: Perspectives on Testosterone Suppression and Performance Advantage'. *Sports Medicine*. 2021 Feb;51(2):199-214.

## “Trans inclusion” policies exclude women from sport at all levels

Women and girls are losing their place to male rivals, or dropping out of their sport because it is unfair, unsafe or no longer enjoyable, as Fair Play For Women documented in a report in 2024.<sup>4</sup>

Women and girls report that they are under pressure to accommodate biologically male players who identify as trans in their teams or events. **99.99% of sport is grassroots, so if including male players in elite or professional sport is unfair and unacceptable, then it’s unfair and unacceptable in all sport.**

If girls do not have their own teams and competitions in school and as teenagers, they will have no development pathway into sport. Girls already drop out of sport more than boys; making it unfair will exacerbate the problem.

Leaving women without fair and safe access to sporting competition is indirect discrimination on the grounds of sex. Help is needed because sportswomen are called transphobic if they complain. The 2024 Fair Play For Women report shows evidence of silencing and intimidation. The UK Sports Council Equality Group also reported on this in 2021, in its transgender inclusion project report.<sup>5</sup>

## Why not allow “just a few” trans-identifying males (or males with DSDs) into the women’s category?

Any sport which offers separate women’s activity is acknowledging the need for separate events for women and girls. Every male takes the place of a female, and makes it unfair, and sometimes unsafe for other females. Why is “just a few” ever acceptable, when any number is unfair?

The need for single-sex competition is obvious, but it’s also widely accepted that single-sex training and recreational sessions (such as British Cycling’s women-only Breeze rides and women-only swimming sessions) are important for women and girls for a range of reasons – religious, cultural and personal. Personal reasons may include past sexual assault or abuse, body image including mastectomy, managing menstruation or feeling inadequate to play or keep up with men.

The presence of one male makes a space mixed-sex instead of female-only. The loss of single-sex provision, the presence of males and the fear that males will be present, in changing rooms or in the activity itself, are all deterrents to women and girls.

## The UK already has strong laws and guidance to solve this

**Guidance:** The Sports Council Equality Group (SCEG)<sup>6</sup> commissioned independent sport experts to conduct a world-leading review, published in September 2021.

- There is no way to achieve trans inclusion into the female category without loss of fairness, safety and inclusion for natal females.

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<sup>4</sup> Fair Play For Women (2024). *How “inclusion” in sport is harming women and girls*

<sup>5</sup> Sports Council Equality Group (2021). *Guidance For Transgender Inclusion In Domestic Sport 2021*.

<sup>6</sup> SCEG comprises UK Sport, Sport England, SportScotland, SportWales and SportNI.

- Sports must choose what they prioritise and how. Inclusion for all can be achieved without opening up the female category (for example by offering an open category and a female-only category).

**Legislation:** Existing provisions in Equality Act 2010 allow all males, including those identifying as women, to be lawfully excluded from the female category for reasons of fairness and safety.

**Public support:** Polling consistently shows more people in favour of protecting female sports than in favour of including males with a trans identity. National governing bodies (NGBs) which survey their members find 75 to 90% in favour of restricting their female category to those born female, though these are rarely made public.

### Which sports have protected the female category?

**World federations:** athletics, swimming, cycling, rugby, cricket, netball, boxing, weightlifting.

**In the UK:** athletics (stated intention but no policy yet), boxing, cycling, modern pentathlon, orienteering, rugby union, rugby league, swimming, triathlon, water-ski and wakeboard.

**Protected in England** but not in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: badminton, rowing, sea shore angling, volleyball, walking football, wheelchair basketball.

This leaves most sports<sup>7</sup> allowing male-born players into female categories. Some require those males to undergo medical intervention (lowering testosterone, which is proven *not* to make it fair) and some don't (in cricket, it's enough to simply declare yourself a woman). In most sports, in practice, the criterion is self-ID – males need to simply say they are women. The Football Association (England) has approved 72 trans-identifying male players in women's football. One male footballer in a women's league affects dozens of female players, because it becomes unfair and unsafe to tackle, making the game unfair for every opposing team.

### Why has this not been resolved yet?

Some sports governing bodies are worried about facing backlash from trans pressure groups and false accusations of "wanting to ban trans people from sport". Some are confused about the law. Others are choosing to prioritise the wishes of trans-identifying males over fairness, inclusion and safety for women.

### Find out more

See also our one-page [Briefing on sport and DSDs \(disorders of sex development\)](#).

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<sup>7</sup> Including archery, basketball, canoeing, cricket, fencing, football, golf, gymnastics, handball, hockey, ice-hockey, judo, netball, sailing, skiing, squash, table-tennis, taekwondo, tennis, weightlifting, wrestling.