

A study of challenges that transgender athletes face in sports

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Aim of the Research

By conducting this research, transgender athletes were given the opportunity to share their opinions alongside administrators in sports facilities, who shared their perspectives on trans athletes in sports.

Research of transgender athletes in sports has never been conducted in Malta; comparable studies on LGBTIQ+ have been conducted, but transgender needs are distinct from those of others.

Literature Review

The story of *Michelle Dumaresq* was narrated to give the readers an understanding of what a transgender athlete goes through when competing in competitive events and how trans athletes end up victims of transphobia.

Moreover, definitions and theories about *sex and gender* are presented to analyse how such terms are socially constructed, and anything that falls out of “normality” society tries to change it to meet cultural norms.

Cisgender male/female identity has always been classified in sports to promote fair competition leaving transgender athletes to be portrayed as controversial.

Changing rooms and *athletic clothing* were two issues discussed that trans athletes face in sports.

Some individuals might not be comfortable with their bodies before undergoing gender-conforming surgery/ies, and others who do not intend to undertake such surgeries often worry about how their presence in the changing room will affect or be perceived by others.

Athletic clothing was discussed, and how certain sports forces trans athletes to choose between not participating in sports or being outed to everyone.

When it comes to Maltese organisations, *no regulations* have yet been issued, nor has it been determined if transgender athletes would be allowed to compete.

When it comes to sports in Malta, the Sports Act, Chapter 455, Article 3, states, “The State recognizes that no discrimination should be permitted on the grounds of sex, race, colour, religion or political opinion or residence within different localities of Malta in the access to sports facilities or sports activities.” However, whether this law applies to transgender athletes in sports is debatable.

Regarding transgender athletes’ involvement in team sports in Malta, *no literature* has been established, and no trans athlete has publicly confirmed that they are trans in a team sport.

Methodology

A *qualitative methodology* was chosen to gather data by conducting interviews with transgender athletes and sports representatives.

Open-ended questions were asked both in Maltese and in English. Basic demographic information was asked first to help the responders gain confidence, and then more in-depth issues such as bullying, changing rooms, and sports facilities were discussed.

A *non-random strategy* was utilised. Three of the participants were recruited using the process of *snowball sampling*, whilst one other participant volunteered after learning about the study on social media. Criteria for transgender participants were that they had to be former athletes or must have previously competed or taken part in sports. *Thematic analysis* was used to identify, analyse and report repeated patterns. Transgender participants were given the codes of participant One and participant Two, and the administrators were given the codes of participant Three and participant Four.

Findings & Discussion

One of the administrators stated that transgender athletes should only compete in sports where their advantage would not make a difference, and such a statement would result in the exclusion of participation in the sports only because they are trans. Administrators failed to consider the effect of hormone therapy and even stated they there will always be a difference.

Both trans athletes did not agree with having a separate category. However, administrators considered it and only said it was impossible due to the lack of athletes. One of the administrators compared transgender category with the Special Olympics, which shows that people are still viewing trans athletes as if they are different abilities from the other people with whom they would be competing

Participant one stated that the issues surrounding *changing facilities* are not only for transgender athletes but an issue for everyone. One of the administrators stated that this is not an issue and even suggested that there are other options, such as changing in a car, not taking into consideration the adverse circumstances that this might result, not only for transgender athletes. The other administrator considered having trans athletes in the changing room inappropriate.

When discussing the *Sports Act*, both trans participants felt that it does not include trans athletes and that they are unaware of any regulations in sports that mention trans athletes. Both athletes remarked that the Sport Act is insufficient and that it should be revised. One of the administrators stated that this Act applies to males and females, whereas Participant Three stated that the substance of it is not discrimination.

Recommendations

A coaching education plan on LGBTIQ+ inclusion should be developed to provide coaches with guiding principles for creating an inclusive environment, practices, and regulations in their sports organisations.

It will be resourceful if *research* is done to analyse whether sports coaches in Malta are transphobic and whether they are willing to coach trans athletes in their teams.

Revise the Maltese SPORTS ACT, which till nowadays only specifies no discrimination based on sex. It is recommended that gender identity is added alongside sex so that trans athletes are better protected in this act.

Having **gender-neutral, accessible changing rooms** would give privacy to everyone and decrease the chances of harassment and discrimination. Every new sports facility in Malta should be obligated to build a neutral changing room that guarantees everyone's safety.

A policy should be issued that every team member should have access to appropriate sports uniforms and that they feel comfortable wearing; no athlete should be required to wear a gendered uniform that conflicts with the athlete's gender identity.