A Study of Challenges that Transgender Athletes Face in Sports

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Abstract: Sports have always been segregated by a traditional gender and sex binary and reinforced where all competitive sports are divided into male and female categories. While a few openly transgender athletes have garnered notoriety and challenged gender identity stereotypes in sports, they face discrimination, judgements, online shaming, and transphobia. The main objective of this research is to provide a platform for transgender athletes to discuss their involvement in sports and share their experiences in the sector, as well as for administrators to address their views on transgender athletes’ participation in sports. Data was collected using a qualitative approach utilising open-ended interviews with two trans athletes and two sports administrators.

Keywords: transgender athletes; sports; sports regulations; changing facilities; sportswear, transphobia

Introduction

Transgender people who compete in competitive sports often wind up on the front pages of newspapers or may even become the subject of a lawsuit. This study intends to raise awareness that, even though rights for transgender people have improved and transgender athletes now have the legal right to compete, there is still a long way to go in terms of societal acceptance. Studies are discussed throughout which highlight the participation of trans athletes in sports, with several issues, such as changing rooms, athletics clothing, and policies, being explored alongside existing literature. The lack of research specifically concerning transgender athletes in Malta inspired the undertaking of this study.

Background to the Subject

Since ancient times, cisgender1 male/female identity has always been classified in sports to promote fair competition. This is due to variations in body size, body composition, aerobic power, and vascular strength, which could give male athletes an advantage to outperform females, specifically in sports that require strength, power, and speed.

Transgender individuals have struggled for their rights for many years, a struggle which has included much debate about how to protect those rights in the context of sport. The participation of transgender athletes has sparked global controversy, focusing on physical benefits with little mention of human rights. Since the 1950s, transgender individuals have been presented in the Western media as controversial and sensationalised figures.

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1 A cisgender man or woman is one whose internal gender identification corresponds to, and presents itself in accordance with, externally imposed societal expectations of behaviour and roles suitable for one’s sex as male or female.
Purpose of the Study

The aim of the research was to examine different issues that transgender athletes face in sports in Malta. Even though in 2022 rights for transgender individuals have improved worldwide, when an issue is not affecting mainstream society, it is pushed to one side and one barely hears about it. 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 on 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 other sexual orientations and/or gender identities. This study could be beneficial for future research on the participation of transgender athletes in Malta since, as of yet, no research has been conducted here nor have transgender athletes participated in team sports here.

Literature Review

As the number of trans athletes participating in sports increases, it is becoming more disputed whether trans athletes should be permitted to compete in events such as the Olympics. Athletes’ engagement in sports, as well as the inclusiveness and societal challenges they face, such as changing rooms, sporting apparel, and sports legislation, are discussed in several works of literature.

The Story of Michelle Dumaresq

In 2006, professional downhill mountain bikers competed on one of the most challenging racing tracks, the crowd energy was high, and the bikers were all eager to conquer the race. At the end, three women stood on the podium for the winning ceremony. Just beforehand, a man handed over a t-shirt to the second woman on the podium and helped her into it, scribed in block letters, it stated: “100% pure woman champ 2006”.

In a flash of a second, some of the spectators started giggling and shouting vulgarities. “She-male! Leave the stage!” “You are not a real woman, head home!”. The message on the t-shirt the second winner was wearing was a direct message about the woman standing atop the podium, Michelle Dumaresq, an openly transgender athlete. The reaction coming from the competitors that Michelle Dumaresq was competing with shows the lack of understanding of transgender identities.

Sex and Gender

Western culture is committed to the idea that there are only two sexes, male and female. However, Fausto-Sterling (1993) argues that viewing sex as a two-sex model is not a precise exemplification because even if one looks at hormones, gonads, internal morphology, and secondary sexual characteristics, one would find a spectrum of at least five sexes or even more. For an individual whose gametes do not conform to either one of the sexes, such as in intersexuality, society tries to change them and medically transforms them into male or female to clearly conform to meet cultural norms.

Similarly, when it comes to defining gender, society recognises just two options: women (feminine) and men (masculine). Once the parents get to know the sex of their baby, the baby is seen through a gendered lens according to the social expectations pertaining to the assumed gender. Girls, for example, are expected to wear pink and play with houses and dolls

2 LGBTIQ+ is abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning or queer.
in their pink room, while boys are supposed to play with cars and trucks in their blue room. These roles are carried over into adulthood, where femininity is defined by weakness, indecisiveness, and emotionality, whereas masculinity is defined by strength, steadfastness, and stoicism. Theorists like Butler (2004) explain that gender is a result of social practices; and like other social practices, it is not gender that follows biology but the other way around. She explains the gender stereotypes that are often internalised by men and women which includes beliefs about what a boy or girl should or should not do.

For some people, sex, gender, gender identity, and gender expression\(^3\) align with predictability. However, some people's sex, gender, gender identity,\(^4\) and gender expression may not match. Some individuals feel that their gender identity is neither female nor male, and/or their identity is a combination of both.

**Transgender Athletes in Sports**

Transgender people have been portrayed as controversial and sensationalised personalities in the Western media since the 1950s. In the past sixty years, the sports policy for the eligibility of transgender, intersex,\(^5\) and non-binary\(^6\) athletes has developed significantly, but transgender people still face barriers in participating across the sporting landscape.

The Sports Performance Assessment (SPA) and grassroots sports conducted studies that found that a lack of education, awareness, discrimination, binary gender classification, and sex segregation can lead to transgender people experiencing harassment, stigmatisation, isolation and body dissatisfaction. The latter might result in athletes choosing not to participate in activities or choosing to participate solely in individual sports to avoid body exposure and achieve less social recognition (Jones et al. 2017).

Some believe that permitting transgender athletes to compete in competitive sports is unfair to the cisgender athletes' opponents. They often use hypothetical scenarios where male athletes with outstanding athletic skills annihilate female competitions. They imagine Maurice Greene\(^7\) competing in the women’s 100m final at the Olympic Games. These extreme scenarios, however, fail to consider the effect that gender-confirming surgery and/or years of hormone therapy would have on even the most famous male athletes in the world (Stavely and Keenan 2019).

**Changing Facilities**

According to research by Hargie et al. (2017), sociocultural variables in sports may cause transgender athletes to not participate in sports. The primary and most prominent element affecting social isolation in this area are issues with changing facilities. Some individuals might not be comfortable with their bodies before undergoing gender-conforming

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3 *Gender expression* refers to how each individual expresses their gender identity, as well as how others perceive it.

4 *Gender identity* refers to a person’s internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the gender assigned at birth and includes the personal sense of the body (which may include, if freely chosen, medical, surgical, or other means of altering bodily appearance and functions) and other expressions of gender, such as name, dress, speech, and manners.

5 *Intersex* is when a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not fit the typical binary notions of male or female.

6 *Non-binary* used both as an umbrella term and a gender identity label to refer to people whose gender does not fall within the binary categories of man and woman.

7 Maurice Greene, former track and field sprinter, with a former 100m world record holder with a time of 9.79 seconds.
surgery/ies, and others who do not intend to undertake such surgeries worry about how their presence in the changing room will affect, or be perceived by, others.

A study done by Hargie et al. (2017) showed that around half of the transgender individuals interviewed in their study refrained from using recreational facilities because of rejection from their peers and social concerns. Moreover, the study further details how, when it comes to using changing rooms, transgender individuals were forced to abandon their gender identity and conform to the gender they were assigned at birth, putting them in danger of harassment and abuse.

**Athletic Clothing**

Transgender athletes may have difficulty obtaining clothes that fit societal gender roles and are comfortable to wear; many transgender female athletes have claimed that the clothes are either uncomfortable or overly exposing in a way that makes them uncomfortable (Jones et al. 2017). According to Reilly et al. (2019), transgender people go through varied stages of development while undergoing gender-confirming interventions, and clothing options designed for typical cisgender sizes and body types may not provide an adequate fit. Certain sports, such as gymnastics, in which female athletes must wear leotards, may be very uncomfortable for trans female athletes, especially before undergoing gender conforming surgery/ies, and for those who do not want to undergo such surgeries.

**The Olympic Policy**

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) assures that everyone has the right to participate in sports without regard to gender. The International Olympic Committee met in 2003 in Stockholm and developed The Stockholm Consensus, adopted in 2004, with recommendations for the inclusion of transgender people. After the experts consulted with the International Olympic Committee’s medical commission, they finalised three criteria that transgender athletes must fulfil for their case to be heard by the medical commission. This included that transgender athletes must have undergone sex-reassignment surgery before puberty, have at least a minimum of two years on hormone therapy prior to competing, and an athlete’s chosen sex must be legally recognised. The Stockholm Consensus came into effect three months before the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece, although no transgender athletes competed despite being eligible.

In 2015 the IOC updated the policy as The Stockholm Consensus was criticised for not being informed by evidence-based rationale. As per the 2015 updates, athletes who transition from female to male are entitled to compete in the male category without restorations. Those athletes who transition from male to female must declare that their gender identity is female, and the declaration cannot be changed for a minimum of four years. This update in the policy eliminated the requirement for the athlete to undergo sex-reassignment surgery (IOC 2015).

Although transgender athletes have been able to compete in the Olympics since The Stockholm Consensus six years ago, the first openly transgender athlete to compete in individual sports was in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Laurel Hubbard, a 43-year-old weightlifter from New Zealand, competed in the women’s +87Kg division. Despite failing to complete the lifts in the first half of the competition, and being eliminated, her presence in the Olympics made history.

After two years of consultations with more than 250 athletes and stakeholders, the IOC amended its 2015 policy and released a new framework on fairness, inclusion, and non-
discrimination based on gender identity and sex variations. The IOC committee agreed to eliminate unnecessary medical treatment and prioritise the athletes' psychological, physical, and mental well-being. The IOC 2021 Framework, states that “everyone, regardless of their gender identity, expression and/or sex variations should be able to participate in sports safely and without prejudice” (IOC 2021: 2).

The IOC concluded that every sports federation in each sport, including its governing body, must determine how an athlete may be at a disproportionate advantage against their peers, taking into consideration the nature of every sport. The IOC also produced a statement outlining ten key principles and criteria that international federations and sports organisations must follow when developing and executing eligibility standards for organised competitions. Therefore, the IOC will no longer position regulations that define eligibility criteria for every sport.

**Policies in Malta**

In May 2015, the Maltese government enacted the Gender Identity, Gender Expression, Sex Characteristic Act which gives Maltese citizens the right to have their gender identity recognised and to freely develop their person according to their gender identity. This law gave the right to all transgender athletes to compete in the gender category that they have assigned on their ID card.

When it comes to sports in Malta, the Sports Act, 2002, 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 as only sex is mentioned in the act. When it comes to Maltese organisations, no regulations have yet been issued, nor has it been determined whether transgender athletes would be allowed to compete. In Malta, as of yet, no sports organisations have publicly posted any regulations that include trans athletes.

**Methodology**

The data for this study was gathered using a qualitative methodology, with semi-structured interviews being conducted as a means of data gathering. Four participants took part in the study: two transgender athletes who participated in individual sports and two administrators who work in the sports industry. This was developed to examine different issues that transgender athletes face in sports in Malta.

Due to Malta being a small island with a small population, the community of transgender individuals is small, which was one of the obstacles that had to be overcome. To find the right participants for the research, the researcher asked local communities, committee members, and activists to contact potential participants. A description of the study was shared with the informants that they needed to provide to the athletes, and they were given an email so that they could contact the researcher directly. 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.

For choosing the two sports affiliates, no criteria were needed. Their role in the research was simply to reflect their own ideas rather than those of the organisation for which they work. For the transgender participants, there was only one criterion: they had to be former athletes or must have previously competed or taken part in sports.
The interviews were prepared in both Maltese and English, and all participants were given the choice of conducting it in either language. Basic terms were utilised throughout the interview and questions were kept as simple as was necessary for all participants to comprehend. In the beginning of the interview, questions were designed to gather basic demographic information about the participants, such as age, gender, and pronouns, and to help respondents gain confidence. Additionally, this helped the researcher get a better image of whom was being interviewed. Other questions were not structured and consisted of open-ended questions, and the participants were given the space to express their opinions on various topics, developing deeper, and detail rich insight into the subjects rather than merely provide yes or no answers.

The transgender athletes were encouraged to think about their experiences and how they affected them in sports. These participants were not bound by any structure and were allowed to speak about their experiences in whichever way was most relevant to them. The questions mostly focused on the participants' thoughts, experiences, knowledge, abilities, ideas, and preferences. Later in the interview, questions evolved from general enquiries which acted as icebreakers, to more in-depth issues such as bullying, changing rooms, sport facilities, and joy experiences. The primary topics included in this interview were their sporting history, self-definition of gender identity, and sporting identity, sporting joys, challenges, and their strategies for coping with any obstacles they had faced while participating in sport.

The sports organisations representatives' interviews followed a similar format to compare their perspectives on the subject. They were asked to express their personal views on the subject rather than the opinions of the organisations for which they work. They were asked questions about changing rooms, regulations, and sports facilities, and were provided with scenarios posing what they would do if they were in such situations. The interviews were structured similarly to be able to analyse the difference in perception and ideology between transgender athletes and the sports organisers when being asked similar questions. How they reacted and their engagement towards the subject would be recognised and might be able to explain any possible gap between the two mentalities.

For data analysis, thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse, and report repeated patterns. Following the completion of all interviews, the responses were sorted into several topics and all the responses for each theme were compared. This method was chosen to compare and analyse the answers of trans athletes and administrators to a particular subject and, additionally, to observe their thoughts, opinions, and ideas. Transgender participants were given the pseudonyms of Participant One and Participant Two, and the administrators were given the pseudonyms of Participant Three and Participant Four.

All interviews, both audio and video recordings, were transcribed and read to encourage familiarity and observe patterns that appear in the data. To help organise the data, coding was used to label data extracts. All codes were divided into potential themes and analysed to determine whether they could be divided into sub-themes. Themes were revised to ensure they contained enough data and were distinct enough to support analysis and some similar themes were merged.

**Ethical Considerations**

All participants in the study were informed about the data's confidentiality, and they were assured that no names or identifiers of gender would be used or disclosed in the study. Due to Covid-19, participants were given the option of conducting the interview online or in person.
Prior to the interview, all participants were informed about the study’s details and assured of ethical norms such as anonymity and confidentiality. To make the respondents as comfortable as possible and get the best possible answers in the interview, the researcher avoided using leading questions, double-barrelled questions, negatively phrased questions, and rating questions.

After confirming the interview dates via email, the participants were emailed a copy of the informed consent form, which they were requested to read and sign electronically before the interview began. Before the start of the interview, the consent was orally reiterated, and participants were reminded that the recording would only be transformed into notes. All participants were informed that they had the right to stop the interview at any time without any negative consequences and that they could refrain from answering any questions which they might not feel comfortable answering.

At the beginning of the interview, the researcher explained the study’s aim and logic, as well as their role as a researcher. The participants gave their permission to record the face-to-face meetings and the online sessions for transcribing purposes. Before the transcription began, names and identifying information were erased, and participants were informed that the transcript would be accessible only to the researcher.

**Research Findings**

From the face-to-face and online interviews with two transgender athletes and two sports administrators, findings were analysed and linked with other studies. Data collected was grouped into themes that were identified such as the participation of transgender athletes in sports, sports policies, changing rooms, athletic clothing, coaches, and personal experience.

**Transgender Participation in Sports**

The question of whether transgender athletes should participate in sports and whether they have a physical advantage over other athletes has been, and continues to be, debated. All participants—both the transgender athletes and sports organisation representatives—interviewed in the study agreed that transgender athletes should be competing in sports; however, they all stated that it must be done under certain regulations, such as controlling the level of individuals’ hormones. Both administrators agreed with the participation of transgender athletes in sports, however, one of them stated that transgender athletes should only compete in sports where their advantage would not make a difference. Doing so, transgender athletes would only be allowed to participate in particular sports; if a transgender athlete excels in certain sports, why would we exclude them from participation in those sports simply because they are trans?

So, while both administrators agreed with trans athletes participating in sports, when discussing the participation of Lauren Hubbard, both administrators stated that they thought that she had an advantage over the other athletes. Participant Four stated:

*Ifhem weightlifting trid is-saħħa ... li kienet raġel ... naħseb jiena her strength xorta ħa jibqa’ parti li kienet male din qabel.*

(‘Look, in weightlifting you need strength ... The fact she was male ... I think her strength is still a big part of her being was a male before’).
In this scenario, both administrators failed to take into consideration the effect of hormone therapy and even implied that there would always be a difference between trans females and cis females when it comes to strength. A study done by Harper et al. (2021) states that hormone therapy reduces haemoglobin to levels seen in cisgender women. However, it was suggested that strength and lean body mass in muscle areas remained above that of cisgender women after three years; future studies were recommended due to the paucity of data.

Considering what Participant Four said, even though the athlete has transitioned, the administrator still sees Lauren Hubbard as having masculine strength. When discussing with Participant One about the athletic advantage of trans athletes, they stated:

*I have been transitioning since 2015 and the strength I had before and the strength I have now is completely, totally different to what I had you know... adding I did the orchidectomy hormones so... even for example to participate in events I have to have a full blood count where testosterone has to be till this level. If you skip this level, you won't be able to compete.*

Despite the fact that Lauren Hubbard did not do well at the Olympics, both administrators, contrary to what her results have shown, still felt that she had an advantage over the other competitors. Clearly, if Lauren Hubbard won a gold medal in weightlifting, her result would be linked to people’s interpretations of her gender rather than her abilities. Both trans athletes stated that they think this judgment is discriminatory and Participant One stated:

*I think because it’s like a taboo ... People have this mentality that because someone is trans they are still biologically what they were born ... like they don’t consider like the amount of effort that the athlete puts in ... She didn’t do as well as how people say she would have done... People, because she’s a trans female, in their logic they think about things that would have been ... like she came first, she broke new records ... But it’s not the case ... I think people lack knowledge about things so ... It caused a controversy which is (‘shrugs shoulder’).*

Viewing the advantage of trans athletes from a perspective of gender rather than abilities when it comes to sports shows that transphobia in sports is about sexism. Female athletes are expected to look conventionally attractive and competitive. When it comes to female athletes, being perceived as too strong or too built is considered as unfair to the other females; nevertheless, when it comes to male sports, these genetic disparities are cherished, such as Michael Phelps’ abnormally large wingspan, which is praised rather than condemned (Hesse 2019). Female dominance is regarded as maleness in sports, such as Serena Williams, whose physique has led to her being accused of being a man throughout her career. Serena Williams, in an interview for the *New York Times*, stated that some people believed that she was born a man because of her powerful arms (Clarey 2018). Society regulates female bodies by creating an image of what a female body should look like and electrifying an obsession with fairness in women’s sport. Women in sports should not be restricted by what constitutes an appropriate feminine physique. Trans and cis athletes should not have to prove that their bodies are feminine enough. Trans athletes are being perceived as not looking feminine enough or looking too masculine next to the

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8 Lauren Hubbard is the first transgender athlete who competed in the summer Olympics of 2020.

9 Michael Fred Phelps II is a former competitive swimmer and most successful Olympian of all time. He is a record holder in the men’s 400-metre individual, 200-metre freestyle, 100-meter butterfly, 200-metre butterfly and 200-metre individual medley.

10 Serena Williams is a professional tennis player, ranked world No.1 by the Tennis Association. She won 23 Grand Slam single titles.
other female athletes; they are judged for their appearance, which is why society is judging trans athletes primarily on their gender rather than their abilities.

Whether trans athletes win or lose, controversy is raised by their participation, despite competing under sporting regulations. Most of the time, they are mocked or condemned on social media throughout the world, with some individuals expressing hatred against transgender athletes. Transgender Participant One stated:

*I guess people lack the knowledge so when people lack knowledge they tend to speak with hate and like negative comments.*

This is the reality that transgender athletes must deal with to participate in team sports. Trans athletes either stop participating in sports or participate in individual sports where their identity is better concealed. Transgender athletes’ participation in sports was never discussed or incorporated in the Maltese sports curriculum. Participant One stated:

*I think it’s because we’re still far back on these issues ... Like I mean we did progress, but I think it’s still a big taboo compared to the other countries, I guess.*

To date, no one in Malta has publicly stated that they are trans and that they are participating in a team sport. This could be due to a variety of factors, including the island’s demographics, where the population of citizens is very low, and having a trans athlete in a team sport would be even more highlighted. Participant One stated:

*I think it’s probably because since Malta is like small everyone like knows everyone and you can be more of a target for hate and harassment. This might be one of the reasons why there are no trans athletes participating in team sports in Malta as yet.*

When asked if they think there should be a separate category for transgender athletes to participate in, both trans athletes said no instantly. Participant Two stated:

*Because that is not inclusive for transgender, I guess ... you’re like telling them you’re not male and you’re not female, you’re transgender and it’s not like identity as a male or female.*

Both administrators took the transgender category in consideration, but they stated that in Malta this would not be possible due to lack of athletes. Participant Four stated:

*Ithem dik bhal m’għandna eżempju l-Ispecial Olympics .... (Look this is like having the Special Olympics...).*

In this scenario, Participant Four compared transgender athletes with a movement whose purpose is to provide training and competition opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities. This shows that individuals are still pathologising trans people, viewing trans individuals as if they are different from normal people or that they are not able to achieve the same results under the same conditions.

*Changing Facilities*

According to Hargie et al. (2017), societal factors and contexts, such as those experienced in changing facilities, are the main reasons why transgender athletes do not participate in sports. Both transgender athletes in the study agreed that this could be one of the
reasons why in Malta we do not have any transgender athletes participating in team sport as yet; indeed, Participant One stated that the issues surrounding changing facilities are not only for transgender athletes but an issue for everyone that is uncomfortable changing and showering in front of others. Most of Malta’s present changing facilities lack privacy, leaving athletes to shower and change their sportswear in front of one another; an athlete who feels uncomfortable doing so might not participate in sports rather than deal with the uncomfortable situation. In the study, both transgender athletes admitted that neither one of them uses changing facilities and avoids doing so. Transgender Participant Two stated:

I try not to go too much to the changing room ... So, I keep everything like with me and mostly like I never shower in changing rooms or change ... If I need to use the toilet, I try to avoid using the toilet, you know.

This statement gives an idea of what transgender athletes do in order to avoid uncomfortable situations. However, when discussing this with Participant Three, they did not agree that changing facilities may be a reason trans athletes do not participate in team sports. Instead, the participant suggested that there are other options, such as changing in the car, not taking into consideration the risks of doing so, and other negative circumstances and safety concerns that changing in a car could result in. Participant Three failed to consider the larger context that a trans athlete would encounter if caught changing in a car, an action which increases the risk of being outed and assaulted. Furthermore, if the trans athlete is a member of a team sport and is required to change their sports gear in the locker room in front of their teammates, how would it be possible for the trans athlete to change in the car?

A study done by Hargie, et al. (2017) disclosed that around half of transgender individuals interviewed in their study would refrain from using recreational facilities because of rejection from their peers and social concerns. Considering this finding, this could be why both transgender athletes in the study stated they avoid using locker rooms, perhaps to avoid rejection from other people and having these social concerns. However, when asked if they have ever been confronted or bullied in locker rooms or bathrooms during sports, both participants responded that they never had any issues, taking in consideration that both participants may have not felt comfortable enough during the interview to talk about it, and also the fact that both transgender athletes stated that they avoid using the locker rooms; so whilst a cisgender athlete uses the changing room frequently, transgender athletes only do so when there is an urgent need.

Some people may not be comfortable with their bodies prior to undergoing gender-conforming surgery, and others may not want to do such surgeries, leaving them additionally concerned about how their presence in the changing room would be seen by others. One of the administrators stated that this might increase the likelihood of bullying in the locker room but said that this is due to a lack of education since even simply having black or gay individuals in the locker room could also result in bullying. The second administrator, on the other hand, did not agree with having athletes in the locker room who had not had or would not have, gender-conforming surgery, claiming that such a situation was inappropriate:

Le inti immaġina tkun f’changing room li l-players huma kollha tfaljiet u jkun hemm trans bil-parti ta’ raġel hemmek magħhom ... jien għalija hemmek to question.... Nahseb mhux adattata.

(No, imagine, you are in a changing room full of female athletes, and there is a trans with their male part there with them .... For me it’s a question ... I don’t think it’s suitable).
The findings raise the question of whether Malta’s sports facilities are inclusive enough for transgender athletes or, for that matter, any athlete participating in sports. The current changing facilities may cause individuals to feel uncomfortable or become victims of bullying as a result of body shaming, which occurs in these facilities. So much so that one of the administrator participants stated that, unfortunately, these days bullying in the changing room is normal. Even in the sport that the participant coaches, there was a case of bullying between the players (all cis-gender) which was termed as funny bullying that might hurt some people’s feelings. This case shows that not only could transgender athletes become victims of bullying in the changing room but anyone might be picked on. However, even though changing rooms are an issue for everyone, we are still using these facilitates.

When the participants were asked about gender-neutral changing rooms, both administrators agreed that they believe the architects designing these facilities are unaware of the option or that they may be viewed as unnecessary costs; neither one of the administrators took into account the responsibility of the clubs or committee, since they are the ones agreeing to the facilities being built. The dilemma is whether we have simply become accustomed to the existing changing room design, even though it is harmful, or whether we have failed to address the matter.

Both transgender athletes in the study believed that gender-neutral changing rooms are beneficial and that they would be both comfortable using them. They also feel that having these locker rooms will encourage more trans athletes to participate in sports. Participant Two stated:

Yes, I think so, I think it would encourage people to feel comfortable going to gyms and like any team dressing room and everything.

Maltese Policy

In Malta, the Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics Act 2015 gave all transgender athletes the right to compete in sports in the gender that they have assigned on their ID card. However, the Sport Act’s (2002) Chapter 455, Article 3 states:

The State recognizes that no discrimination should be permitted on the grounds of sex, race, color, religion or political opinion or residence within different localities of Malta in the access to sport facilities or to sport activities.

This leaves in doubt whether this act is inclusive of transgender athletes since gender identity is not mentioned as a ground for non-discrimination. Both trans athletes stated that they do not believe it includes transgender athletes and that they are unaware of any regulations in sports that mention transgender athletes.

Both athletes remarked that the Sports Act (2002) is insufficient and that it should be revised to incorporate provisions that specifically reference transgender athletes. Participant Two stated:

Not directly because it doesn’t mention transgender or like people in the spectrum ... It's just a broad statement.

Participant Four indicated that the legislation only applies to males and females, whereas Participant Three stated:

You have to keep in mind that this law it was written in the 90s at the time, maybe it needs to be updated but at that time, the word sex was used but it’s only purely because
the gist, the understanding, the spirit of the law is that there is no discrimination on (the basis of) gender.

Even if the legislation does not mention trans athletes, the substance of it, according to Participant Four, is that there is no discrimination; nonetheless, if the participant had not been informed that the interview was about trans athletes, would the participant even have considered trans athletes in the act? All participants agreed that the legislation needs to be amended or that new acts need to be developed.

Establishing such policies in Malta would start to increase awareness and acknowledge that there are transgender athletes. Transgender Participant Two stated:

*I think, like, specific like regulation that shows that... yes, we acknowledge that there are transgender athletes and yes, they can take part in this and that.*

Athletic Clothing

When the participants were asked about sportswear, their responses were mixed, with some believing it is a problem and others believing it is not. Participant Three stated that this is merely a circumstance until it is accepted by society and sportswear should not be an issue that stops transgender athletes from participating in sports. Participant Three demonstrated a limited knowledge of trans athletes and neglected to consider what trans female athletes must do to avoid being outed. Trans athletes may feel uncomfortable wearing tight clothes, resulting in gender dysphoria.

When discussing sportswear with transgender Participant Two, the swimming scenario was used as an example; would a trans male athlete who has not had, or does not want to have, a subcutaneous mastectomy be accepted in the male swimming sports, and how would other athletes react to him wearing different sportswear? Regarding this particular issue, Participant Two stated that this might be an issue for a trans athlete which could result in trans athletes not participating in sports such as swimming. Similarly, how would a trans female athlete be perceived practising gymnastics with a bulge? This causes trans females to be outed without having a choice, and given that trans athletes are already being criticised for participating in sports, such a situation would increase harassment and transphobia against transgender athletes.

Coaches

In the interviews, Participants One and Two acknowledged that coaches in Malta are inclusive. However, they underlined that they are not informed/educated about issues which transgender athletes might face as well as about correct terminology amongst other aspects. Participant Two stated that they had previously had to explain what terms should be used or how they should be addressed, the participant stated:

*I sat down, and he was like ‘do you mind if I ask you this?’ ... I realised that this person knows completely nothing about trans people ... He was scared that he would say something or that he would upset me and stuff like that ... I was like listen ... you have to stay explaining so I think yeah, we need to educate everyone because just imagine ... Me, I was patient, and I was answering and he’s asking questions but there might be someone who’s introvert(ed) and won’t answer.*
These incidents highlight the fact that information and education need to be provided to eliminate such scenarios, and that, also, as transgender Participant One highlighted:

*I think Maltese culture is like not inclusive in its own like way, for example how the coaches talk if a player for example does a mistake, they use slur words ... they don't mean it in a harmful such way ... I think it's more of the culture and how we got brought up.*

**Personal Experience**

When both trans athletes were asked about their personal experiences in the sports sector, they were both positive and did not mention any challenges from coaches or teammates. However, Participant One stated they had previously met athletes who made negative comments:

*He was against transgender ... according to him once you are born a man you remain a man.*

During the interview, the administrators were asked about their experiences with transgender athletes in the sports industry, administrator Participant Four stated:

*Le, le ... Qatt ma kellna kazi.*
*(No, no ... we never had cases.)*

The participant referred to having transgender athletes in sports as ‘cases’; this shows that the administrator does not have enough information or knowledge about how to address transgender athletes, leaving in doubt the success of the outcome if the participant does meet a transgender athlete at the facility.

**The Way Forward**

One word which reoccurred several times in the interviews of both trans athletes and administrators was education. All participants agreed that there is a lack of education in Malta on such issues. The fact that, as of yet, no sports organisation in Malta has established a set of regulations or mentioned trans athletes in sports shows that trans athletes have no importance in Malta. This underlined the need to educate everyone in the sports sector, including coaches, players, and administrators. In Malta, 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.

In such a situation, every sports organisation in Malta should officially adopt a transgender-inclusive policy to ensure that trans athletes are not barred from participating in sports and that no barriers are imposed but ensure that fair competition is maintained. As Participant Two stated, trans athletes in Malta are still considered a taboo, where no one talks about the subject or still considers trans athletes as “different” from the rest of society, this matter needs to be addressed by starting to introduce and educate children about LGBTIQ+ terms as this will teach children the value of empathy and respect for others. Further studies are suggested to be done to so as to analyse the physical education syllabus in Malta to see whether it is inclusive of LGBTIQ+.

To promote fair competition, sports organisations are suggested to adopt scientifically based regulations that require trans athletes to meet criteria specific to the sport they are
participating in. Such regulations would safeguard trans athletes and guarantee that they can be themselves without fear of prejudice while participating in sports.

As highlighted during the interviews, in Malta we do not have any gender-neutral changing rooms. In conclusion, having these would be not only beneficial for trans athletes, but for every individual who feels uncomfortable changing or showering in front of others. The purpose of having gender-neutral, accessible changing rooms is to provide privacy to everyone and decrease the chances of harassment and discrimination. In such a situation every new sports facility in Malta is suggested to be obliged to build a neutral changing room where it guarantees safety for everyone. Such changing rooms would consist of a restroom and shower cubicles that have a floor-to-ceiling wall, a common area where one can gather to wait for a stall to be available, and an open space for the locker room.

It is suggested that all trans athletes should be permitted to dress consistently with their gender identities. Sports organisations are suggested to review their dress codes and see that they are not outdated and gendered and making sure the athletes are comfortable in their apparel. Policies that protect trans athletes need to be implemented, a training program for coaches and staff about LGBTIQ+ be established, and better changing room facilities to provide privacy for everyone be made mandatory.

Another suggestion is to revise the Maltese Sport Act (2002) which still only specifies no discrimination based on sex. It is recommended that gender identity is added alongside with sex so that trans athletes are better protected in this act. It is suggested that further research is needed in the future on transphobia and homophobia in sports in the local context. This would help trans athletes avoid having to choose between who they are and the sports they love.

**Conclusion**

Trans athletes in Malta would like to partake in sports or go to a sports facility without worrying that they might get harrassed, made fun of, or physically abused. Trans athletes must be made to feel welcome in sports organisations but, to achieve this, sports organisations need to ensure that their facilities are improved and that coaches and staff are all well-educated regarding trans athletes.

**List of References**


Hargie, O, Mitchell, D. and Somerville, I. 2017. ‘People have a knack of making you feel excluded if they catch on to your difference: Transgender experiences of exclusion in sport’, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 52(2), 223-239.


