

Most female athletes support categorization by biological sex, research finds

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The majority of female athletes (58%) support categorization by biological sex, rather than gender identity, but views differ according to sporting context, a new study shows.

The study is the largest of its kind, based on comprehensive and rigorous analysis of data. It is [published](#) in the *Journal of Sports Sciences*.

It reports the opinions of 175 national, elite and world-class female athletes from a range of sports and countries regarding the eligibility and inclusion of transgender athletes. Respondents included 26 world champions, 22 Olympians—including two gold, two silver and three bronze medal winners—and six Paralympians.

The study looks in depth at important differences that other surveys fail to include. For example, it includes questions related to "precision sports" such as archery, sports "heavily reliant on physical capacity" such as 100m sprinting, and "contact sports" such as rugby union.

It is also the first study to show that female athlete opinions on transgender athlete eligibility and inclusion differ according to sporting context, level of competition, and stage of career. The survey additionally revealed that a large majority (81%) of [female athletes](#) believe sporting bodies should improve inclusivity for transgender athletes.

The study could become an important resource for sport's governing bodies in establishing rules and procedures.

The study was led by Dr. Shane Heffernan and Dr. Andy Harvey of the Applied Sports Science Technology and Medicine Research Centre (A-STEM) at Swansea University, with principal collaborators Prof. Alun Williams and Dr. Georgina Stebbings of Manchester Metropolitan University Institute of Sport, and Dr. Marie Chollier of the University of Chester.

Dr. Shane Heffernan of Swansea University said, "Our research provides evidence that governing bodies can use confidently—in an often

polarized debate—knowing that it is based on work conducted with the scientific method and peer review. As the IOC framework has recently suggested, athletes' views are important in developing inclusion policies and guidelines in this area. What our survey has done is capture the opinions from a large group of retired and current athletes to help inform governing bodies.

"The key findings are that opinions differ on inclusion of transgender athletes at all levels of sport that we assessed. Nuance must be applied when [policy decisions](#) are being made that affect the lives and sometimes livelihoods of athletes. Importantly, high-level athletes' opinions show that transgender inclusion is valued, but fairness must take priority for athletes at the highest competitive level."

Alun Williams, Professor of Sport and Exercise Genomics at Manchester Metropolitan University Institute of Sport and principal collaborator of the study along with Dr. Georgina Stebbings, noted, "This study is by far the largest of its kind, and provides a detailed, wide-ranging and revealing set of insights, based on robust data that have been independently assessed. It shows that female athlete opinions on transgender eligibility and inclusion differ according to sport, stage of career and level of competition, so sport federations must consider that when asking athletes for their opinions if they are to truly understand the athlete viewpoint.

"Overall, categorization was favored according to biological sex, although [opinion](#) differed according to sporting context. There was least support for trans women eligibility in the female category of contact sports and those heavily reliant on performance-related biological factors that differ between sexes. However, a range of views were expressed regarding some aspects, differing between groups when higher stakes were involved, or when individuals were no longer at the pinnacle of competition. It is crucial that governing bodies ensure policies and

committee membership reflect the key stakeholders and understand that views differ among athlete groups and sports.

"Importantly, the present data demonstrates that to the best of our current understanding, high level competitive athletes do not show evidence of negative opinions towards gender transition in general, with 94.2% being supportive."

Prof. Williams's expertise lies in the upper limits of human physical performance, and he has published widely on genetic profiles of elite athletes, the improvements in performance that can result from physical training, and sport-related injuries, as well as ethical and policy issues. He has also appeared as an expert at the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) for Caster Semenya in her legal battle with the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF).

More information: The perspective of current and retired world class, elite and national athletes on the inclusion and eligibility of transgender athletes in elite sport, *Journal of Sports Sciences* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/02640414.2024.2326354](https://doi.org/10.1080/02640414.2024.2326354)

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