

Article

Gender Policing in Girls' and Women's Sports

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Abstract: This paper will show that sporting institutions that police the boundaries of women's sports do so to keep sportswomen constrained in ways that men's sports and male athletes are not. This paper explores three methods that sporting establishments have used to police and constrain women's sports and sportswomen: the exclusion of women and the creation of different rules for men's and women's sports, the policing of international sporting administrations of which women can compete in women's sports by invoking the specter of "gender fraud", and the exclusion of trans women from sports by relying on conservative Christian notions of a gender binary motivated by a similar strain of homophobia that animated previous efforts to prevent the legalization of same-sex marriage. Taken together, these three threads reveal that gender policing in women's sports is not and has never been about "fairness" but about preserving heteropatriarchal systems of power that position women as weak and inherently less athletic than men.

Keywords: women's sports; trans; non-binary; LGBTQ; Olympics; sex; gender; Christianity; homophobia

1. Introduction

Since 2020, the US has seen a wave of legislation, lawsuits, and court decisions trying to determine who is allowed to play women's sports. Republicans introduced a senate bill on 22 September 2020 that would withdraw federal funding from schools that allowed trans women to participate on their sports teams, claiming this was necessary to "protect women's sports". In the US House of Representatives, the Democratic Party presidential candidate Tulsi Gabbard introduced the "Protect Women's Sports Act of 2020", intending to restrict Title IX protections to only people assigned female at birth. These bills did not pass but were part of a larger legislative push to ban transgender people from sports. Seventeen US states put forth legislation on this issue. Idaho's proposed ban, later blocked in court, included "gender verification" for all women and girls in sports from high school and up (Moyer 2022).¹ In 2022, state legislatures introduced 150 anti-trans bills, up from 131 in 2021, as the issue of medical treatment, bathroom access, and sports participation of trans youth remained high on the Republican political agenda. This coincided with conservative Christian emphasis on gender as an unchangeable binary.² For example, Alabama governor Kay Ivey signed a ban on gender-affirming care, tweeting in April 2022, "We're going to go by how God made us: if the Good Lord made you a boy, you're a boy, and if he made you a girl, you're a girl. It's simple" (Ivey 2022).

One central narrative in this legislative and court case push is that women have fought hard for inclusion in athletic institutions, and allowing the participation of trans women and high-testosterone women would undermine these gains. Therefore, the category of "woman" must be protected in order to preserve women's sports. This paper will show that women's sports have always existed as a concession; sporting institutions police the boundaries of women's sports to keep sportswomen constrained in ways that men's sports and male athletes are not. Treating trans women and women with high testosterone as threats to women's sports scapegoats these people and obscures the broader structural sexism that continually positions women's sports as lesser than men's.



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Sex segregation in sports has such a long history that its validity can seem natural. While the racial integration of sports teams has become normative since the successes of the civil rights movement, and the inclusion of gay and lesbian athletes on sports teams has increased in the past decades, only recently have debates over the inclusion of trans athletes offered an opportunity to evaluate the long-standing norm of sex segregation in sports. This paper builds on the existing scholarship that critiques sporting institutions' treatment of trans, non-binary, and intersex athletes (Anderson and Travers 2017; Cunningham et al. 2021) to show that the current attention to trans women and women with high testosterone continues the sexism (discrimination against women) and homophobia (abhorrence of homosexuality) that have long restricted women's athletic options. In the US, this homophobia and sexism are tied to conservative Christianity and show up in conservative politics. And while targeting trans youth has become popular for Republican politicians in recent years, this may backfire in the same way that anti-gay statements and policies pushed youth away from both conservative Christianity and the Republican party over the 1990s–2010s. Engaging with the inclusion of trans and non-binary athletes may reveal that sex segregation is not the best way to ensure fairness in competition and may provide opportunities for a creative reworking of competitive athletics.³

I will begin by defining some key terms necessary to understand the policing of women's sports. Then, I will turn to three methods that sporting establishments have used to police and constrain women's sports and sportswomen. The first method was the exclusion of women and the creation of different rules for men's and women's sports. Examining historical examples of this shows that sex segregation in sports does not function as a mechanism for fairness, but as a way to limit women's athleticism and competition. The second method I will examine is international sporting administrations' policing of which women can compete in women's sports. Invoking the specter of "gender fraud"—a rare and perhaps non-existent practice of men masquerading as women in order to win—and later by focusing on high-testosterone women and women with intersexed variations, these institutions rely on the cultural assumption that men are simply better at sports than women and therefore women's sports are in danger of infiltration.⁴ Thirdly, I will explore the method of excluding trans women from sports that relies on conservative Christian notions of a gender binary motivated by a similar strain of homophobia that animated previous efforts to prevent the legalization of same-sex marriage. Taken together, these three threads reveal that gender policing in women's sports is not and has never been about "fairness" but about preserving heteropatriarchal systems of power that position women as weak and inherently less athletic than men.⁵

2. Key Terms

"Sex" is a person's biological designation as male or female. At birth, the American medical establishment identifies a baby as male or female and records this information on their birth certificate. This legal document establishes the sex of the individual, and authorities use birth certificates to determine legal rights, medical benefits, incarceration locations, and military service. In political scientist Paisley Currah's analysis of state documentation of sex, he concludes, "The only thing we can say for sure about what sex means is what a particular state actor says it means. . . state declarations of sex are backed by the force of law . . . sex is manufactured in and through regulations, formal and informal policies, judicial decisions, and legislative enactments" (Currah 2022, pp. 39–40). Sex is both a biological and a legal designation. Changing one's designation is a legal process that often requires medical treatment to alter one's sex organs as well as secondary sex characteristics like breasts or facial hair.

One's biological designation as either male or female carries with it social expectations. "Gender" is the way that we express and perform these expectations. For the most part, our culture tends to assume that being male and acting masculine go together and that being female and acting feminine go together. This has led many to assume that the terms sex and gender are interchangeable, but scholars like Judith Butler have shown that humans

experience cultural expectations and often unknowingly adjust their behaviors, thoughts, and desires to reflect these (Butler 1993). Therefore, rather than thinking of gender as something stemming from biology, it is helpful to think of gender as an outcome of social relationships. The performance of gender, the way a person acts masculine or feminine, pulls from existing cultural ideas about masculinity and femininity. These cultural ideas, in turn, allow people to evaluate each other's masculinity and femininity to assess how closely aligned the person's behaviors and self-presentation are with cultural expectations. Sex, gender, and sexuality go together because society tends to affiliate the expected gender expression of one's biological/legal designation (women acting feminine and men acting masculine) with heterosexuality. Boys who are "sissies" or girls who are "tomboys" contradict gender expectations and can arouse suspicions of homosexuality.

"Intersex" is a biological term for those who do not fit cleanly into a sex binary. One to four percent of the world's population is intersex (Tamale 2020, p. 119). Bodies that have atypical genitalia have always existed, but beginning in the 19th century, physicians developed surgical treatments to resolve genital ambiguity. Ambiguous bodies destabilized the heteropatriarchal order of society; heteropatriarchy maintains that men and women are biologically and categorically different, that men and women are naturally attracted to each other and are best suited to become couples and raise children, and that men are superior to women in multiple ways. Surgery was a method of reasserting the dominant order of male privilege and female submission by ensuring that a body born with atypical genitalia would fit into a sex and gender binary.

Motivations for these surgeries reflect homophobia. According to historian of medical ethics Elizabeth Reis and social psychologist Suzanne Kessler, "Physicians believed that surgery was warranted in many cases of atypical genitalia, not necessarily for the health, comfort, or pleasure of the patient, but to preclude the undesirable potential for homosexual sex" (Reis and Kessler 2010, pp. 58–59). Homophobia is the dislike or abhorrence of same-sex attraction, same-sex intimacy, and/or same-sex romantic relationships. Homophobia can manifest individually in instances of bullying or violence or institutionally in legal restrictions, such as the legal definition that marriage must be between one man and one woman that was US law until the Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015 granted full legal recognition of same-sex couples (Anderson 2023).

"Trans" refers to a person who does not identify as the biological/legal designation they received at birth but as a different sex. "Non-binary" refers to individuals who identify as neither male nor female. The legal re-designation of one's preferred sex can be a complicated process and, like the medical correction of ambiguous genitalia, is connected to homophobia. For example, in 2005, New York City adopted a policy common to most jurisdictions; only those who proved they had genital surgery could reissue their birth certificates with sex reclassification. The city changed this policy in 2014 to allow people born in the city to change their sex classification on birth certificates with no requirement for surgery but still required a signed affidavit from a medical professional attesting to the change. The 2014 decision to remove the surgery requirement was likely linked to the 2011 legalization of same-sex marriage in New York State. A major concern prior to the legalization of same-sex marriage was that same-sex couples would use the reclassification of sex on birth certificates to fraudulently marry. When the surgery requirement was in place, about 20 people a year changed their birth certificate sex designation; from January 2015, when the new policy took effect, to March 2017, more than seven hundred people changed their birth certificates. In 2018, New York City added a non-binary category of "X" as allowable on birth certificates in addition to M or F (Currah 2022).

Trans and non-binary people are less likely to participate in sports than the general population. Many trans people describe their experiences with sports as humiliating or degrading (Greey 2021). A US survey of 17,000 youth aged 13–17 found that gender non-binary youth, trans boys, and trans girls participated in physical activity at rates of 25%, 19%, and 14%, respectively, compared to the 68% participation of youth not in these categories (Johnson et al. 2017).

Given these key terms, it is useful to map out competing perspectives on what sex “really is”. Paisley Currah helpfully provides four perspectives, showing that different understandings of what sex is correlate with different positions on sex classification and reclassification (Currah 2022). For those that hold that sex is determined at birth or conception and that sex is defined by reproductive capacity (social conservatives and those holding to “traditional common sense”), there is no way to reclassify gender regardless of surgery or hormonal treatments. For example, Texas’s 2016 blocking of the Obama administration’s rules that allowed students to use bathrooms that corresponded to their gender identity was based on the understanding that the word “sex” in Title IX refers to “the biological and anatomical differences between male and female students as determined at birth” (Korte 2016).

For those that hold that sex is defined by one’s genitals (dominant stance of the mid to late 20th century), evidence of gender-affirming surgery is grounds for reclassification. For those holding this position, legislation that would allow individuals to use locker rooms or bathrooms of their choice amounts to granting men access to women’s spaces. For example, Massachusetts Democrat Barney Frank stated in 1999, “Transgendered people want a law that mandates a person with a penis be allowed to shower with women” (quoted in Currah 2022, p. 43). Currah points out that while many transgender people are not interested in gender-affirming surgery, those that are interested may not have the financial resources to pursue such a course of action. In the 2020s, Medicaid, private health insurers, and those governed by the Affordable Care Act began to cover transition-related healthcare; before this, genital surgery would have been prohibitively expensive for many individuals.

For those who hold that sex is gender identity and can take the form of male, female, or non-binary (mainstream transgender activists and twenty-first-century medical experts), individuals declare their gender identity and should be recognized based on their declaration. This position became dominant among transgender advocates by the mid-1990s. A group of US transgender women drafted an “International Bill of Gender Rights” in the mid-1990s, expressing the position that each individual has the right to declare and express their own gender identity “regardless of chromosomal sex, genitalia, assigned birth sex, or initial gender role” (quoted in Currah 2022, p. 44). Currah summarized this position: “Penises and vaginas, beards and breasts, cannot be the basis for M and F classifications—they can be created or made to disappear, after all. . . . Individuals may want to modify their body to bring it into alignment with their conception of themselves, but what one thinks, not the body one has, is most fundamental and sets in motion any other changes that might follow” (Currah 2022, p. 45).

For those that hold that sex is an effect of gender norms (gender-radical trans advocates), gender classification of M/F/X should be ended for all persons. This is the most radical of positions and argues that since sex is an effect of gender, it should not be classified at all. These four perspectives represent competing ideas on how to legally designate sex and have differing consequences for understanding women’s sports. Turning to the historical exclusion of women from sports elucidates further the consequences of the first perspective that sex is determined at birth and cannot be changed.

3. Historical Exclusion and Regulation of Women’s Sports

Historically, sporting institutions excluded women or highly regulated women’s sports.⁶ By turning to the development of women’s basketball in the US and women’s Olympic competition, we can see institutional concerns that sports were bad for women, leading to restrictions on women’s sports participation.

Late-nineteenth-century American urbanization and industrialization shifted men’s careers, and some prominent Protestant leaders feared that white men’s bodies were becoming weak and effeminate. This brought Protestant attention to masculinity and how to foster it in boys and men. “Muscular Christianity” emerged as a Protestant solution to perceived feminization and weakness of men and boys. Protestant reformers blamed schools and churches for being overly bookish, failing to provide outdoor activities, and

hiring women educators to oversee boys. Much of muscular Christianity focused on what Protestant leaders referred to as “the boy problem”. According to these leaders, boys were too sedentary and spent too much time indoors and around women to develop properly. The solution to this was an embrace of the “strenuous life”, a phrase coined by Theodore Roosevelt referring to a combination of athleticism, outdoor survivalism, and masculinity (Putney 2003).

The Young Man’s Christian Association (YMCA) was a muscular Christian institution that took on the project of developing more sports for men and boys to play.⁷ One of these was basketball, invented in 1893 by James Naismith at the YMCA training facility in Springfield, Massachusetts. Within two weeks of Naismith’s fledgling basketball competitions, women expressed interest in the sport. At the time, socially acceptable sports for women included tennis, cycling, and golf. According to Naismith’s 1941 reflection on basketball, some women at the YMCA facility approached him to ask if women could play basketball, and, having no objection, he set up a time for women to use the gym (Naismith [1941] 1996). Over the next several years, basketball spread in popularity among men and women.

By 1898, the sport had become so popular for women that a group met to develop a different set of rules for the women’s game that would decrease the exertion required to play. According to the Protestant sportspeople developing women’s rules, having one set of rules for both men’s and women’s competitions was dangerous for women who become “exhausted quickly” by running up and down the court (Naismith [1941] 1996, p. 166). The new rules for the women’s game included the following: players were restricted to one-third of the court, rather than running the full court; no stealing the ball from the player that is holding it; players must pass or shoot within three seconds of gaining the ball; and no “overguarding” a player during these three seconds. For a defensive player, overguarding entailed moving one’s arms to try to prevent successful passing or shooting. A player could hold her arms out to the sides but could not move them up and down. Naismith was in favor of rule modifications for women’s play. Even as he praised the development of sports for women, he continued to see women’s play as necessarily restricted to protect “the welfare of the girls” (Naismith [1941] 1996, p. 170). Muscular Christians believed that strenuous physical activity would turn boys into men.⁸ This certainty meant that they were unsure what would happen to girls engaging in strenuous physical activity and developed restrictions on women’s sports to preserve femininity.

This trend is also evident in women’s participation in the Olympic Games. Women did not compete in the first modern Olympics in 1896. The Olympic Games slowly added women’s sports, such as swimming, in 1912, but Olympic officials balked at the idea of adding women’s events like track and field because they saw track and field as particularly masculine and as the heart of the Olympic Games.⁹ The Olympic Games eventually added women’s events in 1928 after women lobbied Olympic officials and even formed a separate Women’s Olympic Games in 1922. However, after some competitors allegedly fainted at the finish line at the 1928 Games, the Olympic Games discontinued women’s track and field events that were 800 meters or longer.

Sport organizers highly policed women’s sports because, from the outset, they perceived sports as dangerous to women and against women’s nature. As major international sporting events developed over the late nineteenth century, organizers used concerns of physical display, modesty, muscularity, strenuousness, and risk of sterility to exclude women and relegate them to sex-segregated events. In the history of sports regulation, we see the anxiety that women’s participation in sports will masculinize them and lead to lesbianism, infertility, hysteria, and other conditions historically deemed as “sexual disorders” (Cahn 2015). Sex segregation was not a method to ensure fairness in competition; it was a method of regulating women’s sports to a constrained lesser category.

4. The Specter of Gender Fraud

Current concerns about trans women competing in sports harken back to the concerns of “gender fraud” in the Olympic Games. Since the 1940s, the International Olympic

Committee (IOC) has attempted to verify the gender of sportswomen in a number of ways, despite the fact that there has been only one instance of a man competing as a woman, and even this instance is likely more complicated than the historical narrative surrounding it. The story goes that Heinrich Ratjen was so loyal to Hitler Youth that he bound his genitals and competed as a woman under the name of Dora in the 1936 Olympics. Historians have since revised this account to note that Ratjen's gender ambiguity was not discovered because of sporting participation but was due to a German police officer's ID card challenge at a train station years after the competition. Historian of science and medicine Vanessa Heggie points out, "Although the story of a deliberate Nazi fraud makes better headlines, Ratjen's story is probably a more homely and familiar one of medical error, gender uncertainty, and embarrassed silences" (Heggie 2010, p. 163).

Also, at the 1936 Olympics, in the 100 meter race, American Helen Stephens and Polish Stella Walsh finished first and second, respectively. The Polish press accused Stephens of being a man, and the American press responded that Walsh was a man. Avery Brundage, who would later chair the IOC, was Helen Stephens's team coach, and shortly after she experienced accusations that she was a man, he began to call for systematic sex testing. This led officials to "check" in an unspecified manner and declare that both were, in fact, women. In 1980, Walsh died in a violent department store robbery by gunshot, and her autopsy made public Walsh's "ambiguous" sexual features. In response to demands that the IOC revoke Walsh's medals, the IOC released a statement that Walsh had competed in good faith and had not broken the rules of the day. Despite this, Walsh and Ratjen have become centerpieces of the canon of gender frauds.¹⁰ They fit the conventional narrative that the IOC implemented sex testing because, otherwise, communist countries would disguise their male athletes as women in order to win more medals. However, neither of these athletes had any impact on the implementation of sex testing. The public became aware of their gender ambiguities decades after they competed and after systematic sex testing was already underway in international sports.

The second world war disrupted international sporting competitions, but by the mid-1940s, organizations were taking up the issue of sex verification. By 1946, the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF) required sportswomen to bring a medical certificate of eligibility, and the 1948 Olympics in London required sportswomen to comply with this IAAF requirement. The IOC and the IAAF accepted certificates from home nations and did not define a standard for "woman". This changed in the 1960s.

In the 1960s, Cold War fears of communist cheating led to the implementation of at-event, standardized sex verification for sportswomen, stemming from the idea that the IOC and IAAF could not trust certificates that home countries provided. Sex testing in the 1960s was invasive: the 1966 European Athletics Championship in Budapest required that sportswomen submit to a visual examination of genitals and breasts carried out by a panel of three female doctors; that same year at the Commonwealth Games in Jamaica, sportswomen underwent manual physical exams of their bodies. The 1967 Pan-American Games in Winnipeg instigated what some athletes referred to as a "naked parade", wherein athletes had to enter a room of doctors, reveal their breasts and genitalia to the doctors, and await judgment. American shot putter Maren Sidler recalled her experience of seeing another competitor be disqualified: "While I was in line I remember one of the sprinters, a tiny, skinny girl, came out shaking her head back and forth saying, 'Well, I failed, I didn't have enough on top. They say I can't run and I have to go home because I'm not 'big' enough'" (Larned 1976, p. 8).

While visual and physical sex testing was crude and unpleasant, it was not grounds to disqualify an athlete. Those who failed the visual test usually underwent further tests. The first athlete to be disqualified on the grounds of sex was Ewa Klobukowska of Poland. Klobukowska passed the sex test in Budapest in 1966 but raised suspicions at the 1967 European Cup Track and Field Event in Kiev. Upon failing a visual test of her genitals, she underwent a chromosomal test, which she also failed. This chromosomal test is called the Barr body test, and the IOC adopted it for sex verification in 1967 and implemented

it at the 1968 Winter Games in Grenoble. The Barr body test involves collecting a genetic sample from inside the mouth, on the cheek. Testers then stain and examine the sample under a microscope for a Barr body, an inactive X chromosome. Humans require one X chromosome for biological function, so the test looks for an inactive X chromosome to prove that the person has two X chromosomes. Despite criticisms that this test does not actually test for physiological or phenotypic sex, which are the only kinds of sexual identity that would provide an athletic advantage, and the test fails to account for chromosomal variations like XXY or XO, IOC used the test throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Sex testing in all its forms presumes that a singular marker of sex (such as genitalia or chromosomes) can categorize people into a two-sex system. In reality, bodies are much more complicated. IOC's and IAAF's subsequent shift from chromosomal testing to a focus on testosterone reveals the complexities present in regulating women's sports. (These same complexities are likely present in men's sports but remain hidden since institutions do not require male athletes to verify their sex).

The case of Spanish Olympic hurdler Maria José Martínez-Patiño was instrumental in shifting the focus to testosterone as the determining factor in sex designation for international sports. The IOC disqualified Martínez-Patiño in the mid-1980s because she had XY chromosomes. Martínez-Patiño was able to overturn this disqualification by showing that she had complete androgen insensitivity syndrome, characterized by a 46, XY karyotype and high levels of circulating testosterone, but her tissues were unable to respond to testosterone or other androgens. She was able to argue that her insensitivity to testosterone should be the deciding factor in allowing her competition, and both the IAAF (in 1992) and the IOC (in 2000) cited her case as a key determinant in their decisions to discontinue sex testing.¹¹

Caster Semenya has become the face of the IAAF's and IOC's focus on testosterone levels. She told the Associated Press in 2010, "I have been subjected to unwarranted and invasive scrutiny of the most intimate and private details of my being" (quoted in [Tamale 2020](#), p. 2). Semenya naturally produces high levels of testosterone, and this led sports administrators, media outlets, and other athletes to accuse her of having an unfair advantage. As cultural anthropologist Katrina Karkazis and science studies scholar Rebecca M. Jordan-Young put it in their research on the focus on testosterone in women's sports, "Observers have attributed her athleticism to a single molecule—testosterone—as though it alone earned her gold, undermining at once her skill, preparation, and achievement" ([Karkazis and Jordan-Young 2018](#), p. 3).

Karkazis and Jordan-Young note that the focus on testosterone comes from both the IAAF's and the IOC's assertion that high testosterone is a male trait and is the main reason that men generally outperform women in tests of strength or speed ([Karkazis and Jordan-Young 2018](#)). These organizations argue that a sportswoman with high testosterone (whom they call "hyperandrogenic") must reduce her testosterone via surgery or drugs or forego competition.

Indian sprinter Dutee Chand challenged this policy in 2015, and the world's highest sport adjudication authority, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), ruled in her favor, stating that the IAAF had not provided sufficient evidence that high testosterone provided a performance advantage over her peers comparable to the 10–12 percent average that elite male athletes typically have over elite sportswomen. On the eve of Semenya's competition in the 2016 Olympic 800 meter finals, IAAF president Sebastian Coe announced that the IAAF would challenge the CAS ruling that high testosterone in women does not require regulation, casting doubt on Semenya's right to compete. She won the gold medal in the event.

Testosterone levels have become the new stand-in for sex testing. Sporting regulators in the 2010s and early 2020s consistently refer to testosterone as "the male sex hormone", and this leads to inaccurate assumptions. For example, coding testosterone as male elides the fact that women also produce testosterone and need it for healthy functioning. Coding testosterone as a sex hormone presents it as only impacting sex organs and sexual function,

but testosterone plays a role in a wide range of bodily functions unrelated to sex, such as liver function. Karkazis and Jordan-Young call the focus on testosterone “T talk” and argue that T talk reinforces the myth that testosterone makes men athletically superior to women, despite the fact that millions of men have vastly more testosterone than elite sportswomen yet are not as fast or as strong as those women (Karkazis and Jordan-Young 2018).

T talk makes it difficult for scientific evidence on testosterone to matter in sports regulation decision making. For example, studies in sport science have shown that testosterone levels are not determinative of athletic ability: “T levels cannot predict athletic performance; better-performing athletes do not have higher T levels (baseline or pre-competition); individual variability in response to T is enormous” (Karkazis and Jordan-Young 2018, p. 8). Therefore, testosterone is not a good proxy for athleticism, despite the outsized weight sports regulators put on testosterone levels.

Gender sociologist Madeleine Pape has argued that the IAAF’s focus on testosterone as a marker of athletic ability is an example of “ignorance as ideology”. IAAF ignores scientific data that contradict their assertions, including the case described above of Martínez-Patiño who was insensitive to testosterone yet able to perform as a top athlete. As Pape describes it, for the IAAF, “Maintaining an ideological commitment to testosterone as the basis of athletic ability and binary sex categories emerged as a more urgent priority than supporting the pursuit of a more balanced and open scientific process” (Pape 2019, p. 234). Despite scientific evidence that testosterone cannot distinguish men’s and women’s athletic abilities, the IAAF and others maintain T talk in order to authorize their continued policing of sportswomen’s bodies.

Ugandan scholar and human rights activist Sylvia Tamale offers an illuminating comparison of media coverage of Olympic champions Caster Semenya and Michael Phelps to show the differences between the portrayals of men and women with genetic conditions that contribute to their athletic success (Tamale 2020). Media portrayals of Phelps and Semenya describe them both as “freaks of nature”. For example, Tamale points to an article from *Men’s Journal* that describes Phelps: “Michael Phelps, on the other hand, is a genetic freak. He is 6’4”, but more to the point he has the wingspan of a prehistoric bird. His unusually lengthy torso (it’s the right size for a man 6’8”) affords him more flat surface area to which to surf the top of the water. And he’s got hyperflexible knees and ankles that give his kick more snap, and big hands and feet that push a lot of water. But according to sports scientists, his physique tells only part of the story. Whereas most elite swimmers measure blood lactate levels of 10 to 15 millimoles per liter after a race, Phelps measures as low as five. In other words, he’s able to go faster calling on far less lactic acid-producing anaerobic energy reserves than his opponents” (Hooper 2017).

Media portrayals of Semenya also use the language of “freak” but present her as an abnormal version of a person, rather than exalting her genetics as is the case with portrayals of Phelps. As Tamale points out, “there are no suggestions from the public that [Phelps] should undergo corrective surgery or administer medication to ‘normalize’ his lactic acid levels”, while there have been calls for Semenya to medically suppress her high testosterone levels. (Tamale 2020, p. 111).

Tamale suggests that Phelps’s male-ness, whiteness, and heterosexuality position him differently than Semenya and protect him from experiencing the same sorts of public questioning of the fairness of his competition. Semenya, a black woman from a poor community and in a lesbian relationship, is vulnerable to criticism in multiple ways. Tamale notes, “She found herself at the intersection of genderphobia, homophobia, racism, and classism” (Tamale 2020, p. 113).¹²

Sex testing and T talk are problematic for a number of reasons. One is that women who excel at sports are likely to have more masculine physiques because sporting success tends to favor those with stronger musculature and other advantages such as height and large lung capacity. According to Heggie, “What the sex test effectively does, therefore, is provide an upper limit for women’s sporting performance; there is a point at which your masculine-style body is declared ‘too masculine’, and you are disqualified, regardless

of your personal gender identity” (Heggie 2010, p. 158). For men, there is no equivalent upper limit to participation. While there are hundreds of genetic variations which could be classified as “unfair advantage”, sports administrators have only used those associated with sex to exclude or disqualify athletes.

By examining the history of sex testing in international sports, we can see that the institutional scrutiny of women’s bodies emerged to solve a problem that did not exist. There were no men pretending to be women in order to win Olympic medals, and the assumption that a man masquerading as a woman would automatically win does not bear out in the only history of gender fraud that might have fit that pattern.¹³ Heinrich Ratjen finished fourth in the women’s high jump in the 1936 Olympics. Rather, sporting officials have established an upper limit to women’s capacity to compete in sports and kept women’s sports constrained, regulated, and lesser than men’s sports.

One assumption undergirding sex testing and the policing of women’s sport is that sport constitutes a level playing field and that institutions have an obligation to protect the fairness of sport. The wave of proposed legislation across the US from 2020 to 2023 tends to use the language of “fairness” to justify the exclusion of trans women and girls from participating in sports. However, sport sociologists have long noted that sport is not and cannot constitute a level playing field given genetic variation among athletes and social and cultural factors that influence athletes’ access to success, like racism, socio-economic class, homophobia, and transphobia. As Cheryl Cooky and Shari Dworkin put it in their analysis of sport as inherently unequal, “Indeed, sport celebrates those individuals who exist on the extreme end of the biological, physical, and genetic spectrum of human diversity” (Cooky and Dworkin 2018, p. 46). As the above analysis comparing the institutional treatment of Semenya and Phelps shows, sporting institutions are not interested in limiting genetic variations that create an “unfair advantage” for male athletes, revealing deep hypocrisy in the system. It is only sportswomen that are subject to demands that they medically intervene in their biology in order to compete.

5. Christian Homophobia and the Recent Targeting of Trans Youth

The recent wave of proposed legislation that would exclude trans athletes across all age groups from participating in sports that do not match their sex assigned at birth is remarkably similar to conservative Christian activism against gay marriage. The American cultural shift towards the acceptance of gay and lesbian relationships has taken the teeth out of conservative Christian and Republican efforts to rally support via homophobia, but the issue of trans participation in sports has emerged as an effective political issue for this same population (Nagourney and Peters 2023). In comparing conservative Christian anti-gay and anti-trans viewpoints, we can trace a pattern of how the right lost the culture war on homophobia and consider whether the same trajectory may hold for anti-trans claims.

From 2004 to 2017, American public opinion on the legalization of gay marriage shifted significantly. In 2004, nearly two-thirds of Americans opposed gay marriage; in 2017, nearly two-thirds supported it (Pew Research Center 2019b). Most major religious traditions in the US saw an increase in acceptance of gay marriage over this time period, including white evangelicals whose acceptance of gay marriage increased from thirteen percent in favor in 2001 to thirty-five percent in favor in 2017 (Pew Research Center 2019a). Younger Americans demonstrate the highest levels of acceptance of gay marriage. Gen Z (those born after 1996) and millennials (those born from 1981 to 1996) are almost twice as likely as Baby Boomers (those born from 1946 to 1964) to say that gay marriage is good for American society (Parker et al. 2019).

Sociologists Robert Putnam and David Campbell have argued that conservative Christianity’s focus on excluding gay men and lesbians from marriage in the 1980s and 1990s led to more and more young people identifying as “not religious” as a shorthand for “not homophobic” (Putnam and Campbell 2010). The number of people who identify as “not religious” in the US has grown significantly over the past several decades. The Pew Research Center reports that the number of religiously unaffiliated Americans has

grown from eight percent in 1987 to twelve percent in 2006 (Rosentiel 2007). Since then, the number of unaffiliated Americans has continued to increase sharply. From 2007 to 2021, the population of “not religious” Americans grew from sixteen percent to twenty-nine percent, coinciding with a shrinkage in the number of Americans who identify as “Christian” from seventy-eight percent to sixty-three percent (Smith 2021).

A distinguishing feature of those unaffiliated with religion is their liberal stance on homosexuality. Putnam and Campbell point to a number of cultural events and changes that may have contributed to the increased acceptance of homosexuality. First, public attention to the AIDS crisis in the 1990s increased sympathy from the American public. Second, as more people openly identified as gay and lesbian, more straight people interacted with openly gay people and came to see them as normal. Third, television shows and movies normalized homosexuality, with popular shows like *Will and Grace* (1998–2006; 2017–2020) showcasing gay characters (Putnam and Campbell 2010, pp. 128–29).

A conservative Christian practice that emerged in the 1970s in response to wider public acceptance of homosexuality was conversion therapy.¹⁴ Conversion therapy promises that Christian commitment can alter one’s sexual desires and erase same-sex attraction so that a gay person who desires to be straight can do so. A prominent conversion therapy provider was Exodus International. Exodus relied on the culturally established ideas of masculinity and femininity to teach wayward Christians gendered behaviors in order to “cure” them of homosexuality.

Exodus’s tactics included enacting traditional gender norms. For example, they recommended a friendly football game to connect men to masculinity or a makeover party to connect women to femininity. Since “sports are just a natural way for guys to connect” and since lesbians “will stay away from skirts, makeup, and jewelry”, these tactics taught the participants that they were not different from straight men and women and should embrace their gender roles. According to their website, “It’s not really about the points at the end of the game or the style of a person’s hair; the goal is to change our distorted perceptions of ourselves and heal inner wounds” (Exodus International 2008). For Exodus, homosexuality was an affliction that could be healed through Christianity, and that healing could be put into effect by conforming to gender expectations. Those who claimed that God changed them through their participation in organizations like Exodus identify as “ex-gay” and often showcase their straight marriages and biological children as evidence of God’s power over sexuality. Organizations like Exodus prey on the idea that homosexuality is bad and that gay people can change and become straight through faith and Christian dedication.

The 2021 Netflix documentary *Pray Away* investigated Christian ex-gay ministries, including Exodus, by following those who founded and led the ex-gay movement as, one by one, they came to realize that what they were preaching (that a person could stop experiencing same-sex sexual desires through a commitment to Christianity) was not true for themselves and caused significant harm to those who tried to follow the path they proposed (Stolakis 2021). A central character in the documentary was Julie Rodgers. Rodgers, born in the mid-1980s, grew up in a conservative Christian household, and when she came out to her parents as a lesbian at age 16, they enrolled her in programming through Living Hope Ministries, an affiliate of Exodus. Ricky Chelette, the leader of Living Hope, taught young people that same-sex attraction was a result of a poor relationship with parents or trauma. When Rodgers told Chelette that she had a great relationship with her parents and that she had never experienced abuse, Chelette suggested that Rodgers had suppressed her experiences of abuse and could no longer remember them.¹⁵

Over the course of high school and college, Rodgers participated in programming at Living Hope several days a week. In consultation with Chelette, her parents withdrew Rodgers from the softball team and decided that she would attend a Christian college so that she would not be gay. As Rodgers put it, “They were asking, ‘What does Julie have to do to not be gay?’ It was a lot” (quoted in Stolakis 2021). Rodgers’s parents’ decision to remove her from sports participation reflects fears that sports for women can lead to same-sex attraction. For women playing sports, engaging in the traditionally masculine activity

of intense sporting competition can raise suspicions regarding sexuality. As coach and LGBTQ advocate Pat Griffin put it, “Women in sport have a tradition of assuring ourselves and others that sport participation is consistent with traditional notions of femininity and that women are not masculinized by sport experiences. . . . Femininity, however, is a code word for heterosexuality. . . . This intense blend of homophobic and sexist standards of feminine attractiveness remind women in sport that to be acceptable, we must monitor our behavior and appearance at all times” (Griffin 2002, p. 196). Griffin and others have noted that labeling sportswomen as lesbians can be a tool to repress and monitor behavior.

In 2013, *Our America with Lisa Ling*, a television show on the Oprah Winfrey Network, invited leaders from Exodus, including founder Alan Chambers and spokesperson Julie Rodgers, to hear from those who had left the ex-gay ministry. Face to face with individuals who described the harm they experienced from Exodus’s message that something was wrong with them that they could fix through Christian dedication, the leaders of Exodus confronted the negative consequences of their teachings. Survivors of ex-gay ministries described deep feelings of shame, a fear that they were toxic to others, the crumbling of relationships with their family (including straight spouses and children), depression, and suicidal thoughts. One survivor delivered this ultimatum to the leaders of Exodus, “As long as your message is that we are sinners by loving the same gender, you are continuing to do harm to my gay brothers and my lesbian sisters, and that is not acceptable. It needs to stop, it needs to stop. It is harming people, and it needs to stop” (Our America With Lisa Ling 2013).


At the national Exodus conference in June 2013, founder Alan Chambers apologized to those who had experienced hurt or shame at the hands of the organization. Chambers and the board announced the dissolution of Exodus International after thirty-seven years of pursuing a mission of sexual reorientation. Chambers apologized for stigmatizing parents, causing heartbreak, and heaping shame and guilt on persons who continued to experience same-sex attraction, including himself. “[My ongoing same-sex attractions] brought me tremendous shame and I hid them in the hopes they would go away. Looking back, it seems so odd that I thought I could do something to make them stop. Today, however, I accept these feelings as parts of my life that will likely always be there”. Though he announced his acceptance of same-sex attraction in himself and in others, Chambers equivocated with statements that affirmed traditional, conservative stances. He said, “Our journey hasn’t been about denying the power of Christ to do anything—obviously he is God and can do anything. . . . I cannot apologize for my deeply held biblical beliefs about the boundaries I see in scripture surrounding sex. . . .” (Chambers 2013). Chambers’s acceptance of the feelings of same-sex attraction did not mean that he supported acting on those feelings. On the contrary, his solution remained to try to be straight or to be celibate.

Though Exodus disbanded, ex-gay ministries have continued. Restored Hope Network (RHN) is one active organization that continues the teachings of Exodus. RHN posts testimonies on their website of men and women who once were gay and became straight through a commitment to Christianity. These testimonials showcase assumptions about sports: sports are natural for men and showcase masculinity, and sports are unnatural for women and undermine femininity. For example, Jim Venice described his childhood roots of same-sex attraction as lacking the affirming masculinity of sports: “I became ‘a mama’s boy’ and somewhat of a ‘sissy’. I was never affirmed in my masculinity. . . . I didn’t know anything about sports. When I was forced to play teamed sport games, I was always one of the last ones picked” (Venice 2002). In a parallel testimony, Barbara Swallow tells of her childhood interest in developing physical strength as a piece of her journey to developing an attraction to women: “I played with my brother and his friends, and I found some acceptance—or at least some attention—from my father whenever I showed any masculinity. He called me ‘Bob’ and I worked hard to develop my strength” (Swallow 2016). In these examples, RHN showcases reflections on childhood that use sports to support the traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity. The harm of this message is two-fold: first, it fosters shame and depression among Christians who experience same-sex

attraction or seek same-sex intimacy, and second, it sends the message that sports are a purely masculine domain, natural for male participation but dangerous for women and girls. As shown previously, this perspective on sports can lead to high levels of policing of women's sports with no corollary in men's sports.

While the RHN network and ministers like Ricky Chelette continue the message of ex-gay ministries, other ex-gay ministries have followed the pattern of Exodus and disbanded. For example, Jeffrey McCall identified as ex-trans and ex-gay when he founded Freedom March in 2021, a march in D.C. to promote Christianity as a way to not be gay and not be trans. Following the release of *Pray Away*, which featured McCall's organization, McCall posted on Facebook a confession that he had gay encounters with multiple men from 2020 to 2021, including during the Freedom March weekend in D.C. He described praying to heal from these "falls" and feeling the redemptive power of God.

Truth Wins Out is a non-profit organization fighting to eliminate anti-LGBTQ prejudice and discrimination. Its executive director, Wayne Besen, issued a statement in response to McCall's post: "It seems that the real message of the Freedom March is that copious amounts of closeted gay sex is okay, as long as you feel bad about it and pray after each encounter. This is a tragic, pathological, toxic group that spews dangerous lies into our society" (quoted in [Marr 2021](#)).

About six months later, McCall posted on Facebook as Scarlett McCall, letting followers know that McCall would be returning to life as a woman. In Scarlett's post from 7 April 2022, she wrote: "I wanted to post here before some people found out other ways. I have went back to my life as Scarlett. I never intended to hurt or disappoint anyone. I felt like no matter what I chose someone would get hurt. That's a horrible spot to be in. felt like I tried to fight for so long. I tried to help many in ministry for so long. Please remember I'm just a human being and didn't ask for any of things that I have went through. I didn't ask to feel this way. Please show me compassion as a human being just as I have always tried to show everyone else compassion and understanding  " ([McCall 2022](#)). The post drew more than 2000 comments ranging from supportive to sad to angry.

Following McCall's announcement, Truth Wins Out Executive Director Besen stated the following, "The Freedom March started with a lie and ended with Scarlett. Jeffrey McCall is the latest failed face of the ex-gay industry and indicative of how these programs never work. It's time the entire ex-gay industry disbands and stops peddling the poison that people can change their sexual orientation or gender identity" (quoted in [Riley 2022](#)).

The dissolution of organizations like Exodus and Freedom March coincided with increased acceptance of homosexuality across American culture, and this trend may extend to acceptance of trans and non-binary individuals following the pattern that Putnam and Campbell identified: a crisis that brings sympathetic attention, more personal contact with a trans or non-binary individual, and access to stories of trans and non-binary people in popular media.

A significant crisis regarding LGBTQ youth is the high rates of depression and suicide. The Trevor Project, a non-profit organization formed in 1998 focused on suicide prevention efforts for LGBTQ youth, conducted a nationwide survey in 2022 among LGBTQ youth aged 13–24. The survey found that trans and non-binary youths considered suicide and attempted suicide at rates higher than gay and lesbian youths. Those who experienced physical harm (37% percent of trans and non-binary youth), discrimination (71% of trans and non-binary youth), and those threatened or subjected to conversion therapy (20% of trans and non-binary youth) were more likely to consider or attempt suicide than LGBTQ youth who do not experience these things ([Trevor Project 2022](#)).

While state legislatures continue to consider bills that significantly impact the opportunities of trans youth, there is evidence that lawmakers and governors are aware of the negative impact of these policies. For example, when the governor of Louisiana, John Bel Edwards, vetoed the "Fairness in Women's Sports Act" in 2021 (a law that would require that sports in K-12 schools require students to play on teams that match their sex assigned at birth), he released this statement: "This bill will not be signed into law because it is

targeted, unfairly, at children. This legislation will make life more difficult for children who are going through unique challenges gaining acceptance into their schools, communities, and sometimes even their own families. It should be our role, as leaders in this state, to reach out to and lift up these children, rather than to ostracize them. Moreover, the effect of this bill is not so much about how it would affect athletic events, . . . the real harm of this bill is that it would set as the policy of the State of Louisiana that there is something wrong with these children and that they should be treated differently from whom they really are” (Edwards 2021). The unfair targeting of trans youth may carry a similar impact as the AIDS crisis in bringing public attention to the impact of discrimination.

As more trans and non-binary people come out, more Americans know a trans or non-binary person than ever before. Those who identify as trans or non-binary are more likely to be younger, with about 5% of ages 18–29 identifying with these categories, up from 1.6% of 30–49 year-olds and 0.3% of those over 50. A Pew Research Center survey from 2022 shows that forty-four percent of adults in the US know someone who is transgender (up from 37% percent in 2017), and twenty percent know someone who is non-binary. These percentages are higher for younger people: for ages 18–29, fifty-two percent know a trans person, and thirty-seven percent know a non-binary person (Brown 2022).

Some personal stories of trans athletes have emerged in recent years. For example, Hulu released *Changing the Game* in 2019, a documentary profiling the challenges of three transgender teenagers as they navigated playing sports in their home states of Texas, Connecticut, and New Hampshire. The athletes’ experiences were constrained by the laws of their states. Mack Beggs, a transgender man and competitive wrestler in Texas, competed against women because state laws prevented him from wrestling in the men’s division. When the film showed Mack’s wrestling competitions, there were adults in the audience screaming at him to quit wrestling because he did not belong on the women’s team. Similarly, Andraya Yearwood, a trans woman from Connecticut, competed on her high school women’s track team and experienced verbal abuse from adults attending her events (Barnett 2019).

As more stories like this surface and more Americans interact with trans and non-binary people in their everyday lives, perhaps the political issue of depriving trans people of medical care, bathroom privileges, and sports participation will follow the trajectory of homophobic denials of marriage to gay and lesbian adults. If so, the movement toward acceptance of trans individuals is likely to be generational and secular as younger and religiously unaffiliated people are more likely to know trans people and express sympathy for trans discrimination.

In a Pew Research survey published in 2022, researchers found significant differences between religious people and non-religious people on transgender issues. The survey showed that a majority of white evangelical protestants say society has gone too far in accepting transgender people, whereas religiously unaffiliated Americans are more likely to say that society has not gone far enough. Overall, the percentage of Americans who say that whether a person is a man or a woman is assigned at birth and cannot be changed has increased from fifty-four percent in 2017 to sixty percent in 2022. While atheists and agnostics have remained relatively steady on this question at around seventy-five percent and sixty-seven percent, respectively, stating that gender can be different from the sex assigned at birth, those who identify as “nothing in particular” have become more likely to say that gender is determined by the sex assigned at birth, increasing from forty-three percent in 2017 to forty-nine percent in 2022 (Lipka and Tevington 2022). One possible explanation for this increase is that the Republican wave of proposed legislation on limiting healthcare for trans individuals as well as limiting sports participation to the sex assigned at birth that began in 2020 has provoked people to develop stances on this issue who maybe had not given it much thought previously.

Pew researchers asked specifically about policies regarding transgender individuals, including requiring individuals to use bathrooms that match the sex they were assigned at birth, making it illegal to teach about gender identity in elementary schools, and requiring

that athletes compete on sports teams that match the sex they were assigned at birth. On these issues, white evangelicals demonstrated the highest support for these policies, and atheists demonstrated the lowest support.

The issue of sports competition stood out from the other two policies. While all groups surveyed (white evangelical, white non-evangelical, black Protestant, Catholic, atheist, agnostic, and nothing in particular) were consistent in their approaches to the policies regarding bathroom use and elementary school education on gender, every group demonstrated significantly more support for requiring sports teams to adhere to the sex assigned at birth. The percentage of white evangelicals that strongly favor bathroom regulation and regulation of elementary education on gender was sixty-eight percent and sixty-nine percent, respectively; this jumped to eighty-two percent who strongly favor gender regulation of sports.

This trend held for all groups. Atheists and agnostics, the least likely to favor these policies, still demonstrated a significant difference when it came to the question of sports. On bathroom regulations, only seventeen percent of atheists and sixteen percent of agnostics strongly favored this policy. On making it illegal to teach about gender identity in elementary schools, thirteen percent of atheists and twenty-one percent of agnostics strongly favored this policy. Both groups demonstrated a significant jump regarding gender policing of sports: thirty-four percent of atheists and forty percent of agnostics strongly favored limiting sports participation based on sex assigned at birth (Lipka and Tevington 2022).

Given this survey data, the debate over trans sports participation is likely to continue. As shown in the history of policing the boundaries of women's sports, sports administrators are invested in containing women's sports (and women's bodies) in ways that preserve assumptions of male athletic dominance. Trans and non-binary individuals disrupt the heteropatriarchal underpinnings of sports by showcasing the complexities of sex and gender. Conservative Christians and the Republican party have increasingly focused on anti-trans policies as a provocative wedge issue that functions similarly to their anti-gay marriage stance. While we may see an eventual increased acceptance of trans and non-binary individuals along the same trajectory as acceptance of gay marriage, it is likely that the focus on trans women and girls participating in sports will loom large in the immediate future of American politics.

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Notes

¹ For further exploration of these bills, see (ACLU 2023).

² In this article, I use the term "conservative Christianity" to refer to those who hold a narrow definition of salvation (only those who adhere to their version of Christianity have access to heaven after death) and use their sense of access to ultimate truth to develop positions of moral superiority. This group includes most white evangelicals, but could also include some Catholics, some black evangelicals, Mormons, and fundamentalist Protestants. For analyses of how these groups became politically aligned see (Smith 1998; Harding 2001; Butler et al. 2003).

³ The common justification for sex segregation of sports is that allowing girls and boys or women and men to compete together or against each other would put girls and women at a disadvantage. This perspective does not take into account the variety of bodies in terms of height, musculature, and quickness that exist within each sex category. It would not be "fair" to pit a WNBA player against an average male amateur basketball player. One option to achieve something closer to fairness in sports would be dividing athletes based on ability, rather than sex, or requiring mixed team sports. For example, the newly invented sport of Quadball (based on the fictional sport of Quiddich in the Harry Potter book series) has gender inclusion as a core value of the sport. In their rule document, Title 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ (wordplay connecting Title IX and "platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ " used to access Hogwarts in the Harry Potter series), US Quadball states, "A team may not have more than four players who identify as the same gender in play at any point during the game. ... The gender that a player identifies as is considered to be that player's gender", and provide this justification for the rule, "This gender maximum rule ensures that teams are working to recruit and to field a team that has

diversity; the rule is also written in such a way that it does not exclude individuals who do not identify with the gender binary” (Title 9³/₄ 2023).

- 4 In using the language of “women with high testosterone” or “women with intersex variations”, I follow the practice of women, gender, and sexuality scholar Valerie Moyer. She notes that this language is imperfect, but is the “most respectful way to refer to women athletes who have been non-consensually revealed to have intersex traits, yet identify as women, not as intersex” (Moyer 2022, p. 96n1).
- 5 Mariah Burton Nelson notes in her book *The Stronger Women Get, the More Men Love Football*, men routinely treat football as evidence of male superiority in debates over co-ed sports. “In no sport are all men better than all women, I point out, and in many sports, women routinely defeat men. ... So it intrigues me that in response to my discussion of women’s athleticism, men change the subject to football. ... Because ‘women could never play football,’ they imply, men are physically, naturally, biologically superior” (Nelson 1994, pp. 53–54).
- 6 Women’s participation in sport has varied across societies and eras. For an overview of this variation see (Guttmann 1991).
- 7 John Donald Gustav-Wrathall, in his history of gay cruising at the YMCA, argues that, ironically, the YMCA’s increased emphasis on the male physique led to men looking on other men’s bodies with desire. Additionally, the YMCA was one of safest places to pursue homosexual encounters because of its Christian reputation made it much less likely to be raided by the police. Gustav-Wrathall’s history shows that YMCAs were spaces for gay sexual encounters from at least the 1880s through the height of gay cruising in the 1940s to the 1960s. As the YMCA shifted its mission to families instead of men and relocated from cities to the suburbs in the 1970s, gay cruising declined. Additionally, after the riots outside the Stonewall gay club in New York City in 1969, it became much harder for police to justify raids on places where gay people congregated (Gustav-Wrathall 1998).
- 8 For analysis of how nineteenth-century fears of boys becoming soft and effeminate connects to homophobia and hypermasculinity, see (Anderson et al. 2016, particularly chap. 2).
- 9 Because track and field was a relatively affordable sport that was more accessible to black and working class women, this contributed to the idea that track and field was improperly feminine or even masculinizing (Moyer 2022).
- 10 For analysis of athletes in the 1936 Olympics who competed as men and later medically changed sex to female, see (Tebutt 2015). Tebutt points to the 1936 Olympics as a period of severe anxiety over determining who was officially male and female.
- 11 According to Heggie’s analysis of the discontinuation of the Barr body test, “The IAAF argued that these were no longer necessary because doping regulations required athletes to pass urine in front of witnesses, and that modern sportswear was so revealing that it seemed unfeasible that a man could masquerade as a woman” (Heggie 2010, p. 160).
- 12 For further intersectional analyses of Caster Semenya’s media coverage and institutional treatment, see (Dworkin et al. 2013; Cooky and Dworkin 2018).
- 13 The case of American tennis player Renée Richards was not a case of gender fraud, but is useful to reference here as well. Richards competed as a man in professional tennis events in the 1950s to the 1970s before medically and socially transitioning to a woman. When she attempted to compete in the US Open as a women, the US Tennis Association instituted the Barr body test to restrict competition based on chromosomal make up. Richards sued the organization, won, and was able to compete in the 1977 US Open, a landmark case for trans athletes. In the competition, Richards lost in the first round of singles and lost in the final round of doubles. I highlight Richards’ losses here to combat the misunderstanding underlying sex testing: trans women have an unfair advantage and will win because they are “really” men.
- 14 While medical and psychological treatments to “cure” homosexuality date to the nineteenth century, Christian conversion therapy emerged at the same time as the larger medical and psychological establishment was reevaluating the necessity and effectiveness of these treatments. There is no empirical evidence that conversion therapy is effective and ample evidence that conversion therapy practices cause significant harm to individuals including serious mental health concerns and increased likelihood of suicide attempts (Haldeman 2022).
- 15 This is reminiscent of how evangelicals understood sexual abuse in the 1980s “satanic panic”. See (Goodwin 2020).

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