



Briefing Document on Trans Participation in Sport for Joint Oireachtas Committee on Arts, Media, Communications, Culture and Sport

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Transgender participation in sport has garnered significant attention in the media, in politics, and in social discourse in recent years. Within media reporting, public and political discourse, there is significant misinformation regarding transgender people, transgender participation in sport, and the realities of being transgender (in Ireland and elsewhere). This briefing document establishes some context for our conversation.

Being Trans in Ireland

There are no population-level studies of how common it is to be trans in Ireland. Other countries that have included questions about gender identity in censuses or related tools have found 1% (US), 0.44% (Scotland), and 0.33% (Canada). While there are extreme limitations in census data on LGBTQ+ people, we can assume that transgender people represent an extreme minority, and that it is to be expected that there may only be a handful of transgender players in any given sport.

The legal rights of trans people are enshrined in the Gender Recognition Act 2015, the Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 and Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015, the Criminal Justice (Hate Offences) Act 2024, and others as relevant. The Gender Recognition Act 2015 (Section 18) provides a mechanism for the State to recognise a change in a person's gender, such that their new gender is recognised as their sex and gender for all purposes.

In Ireland, transgender people report worse mental and physical health outcomes than cisgender people, and the Irish healthcare system is failing to adequately meet the needs of our community, particularly in relation to access to gender-affirming care (Higgins et al, 2024). Large-scale studies in comparative populations have found that trans people experience significant general, mental and physical health disparities in the US (Azagba et al, 2026) and in the UK (Saunders et al, 2023).

Research Background

There have been three major systematic reviews of research relating to trans participation in sport:

- Jones, B.A., Arcelus, J., Bouman, W.P. and Haycraft, E., Sport and transgender people: a systematic review of the literature relating to sport participation and competitive sport policies, *Sports Medicine*, 2017, 47, pp. 701-716.
- E-Alliance, *Transgender women athletes and elite sport: A scientific review*. Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, 2022.
- Mendes Sieczkowska S., Caruso Mazzolani B., Reis Coimbra D., et al, Body composition and physical fitness in transgender vs cisgender individuals: a systematic review with meta-analysis, *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 2026, 60, pp. 198-210.

The 2017 review found that:

- There is no direct and consistent research to suggest that either transgender women or transgender men have an athletic advantage in sport;
- The majority of sport policies are discriminatory against transgender people;

Transgender Equality Network Ireland CLG, Directors: Caoimhe O'Brien, Alec Baker, Dearbhla Doherty, Philip Gavin, Nick Woodards, Juracy Junyor, Caitriona Nic Aodha

RCN: 20206772 CHY: 23245



- The majority of transgender people have a negative experience when engaging in competitive sports and physical activity.

The 2022 review found that:

- Research in this area emphasises biological differences between transgender people and cisgender people (see below);
- Research in this area gives little to no recognition of the differing sociocultural factors for transgender people (see below);
- Research in this area is frequently methodologically flawed, as studies struggle to recruit participants who are both transgender and athletes, with some studies substituting cisgender men for transgender women in comparison with cisgender women, and many studies do not control for factors such as height or lean body mass, and most studies on testosterone involve cisgender people using performance-enhancing drugs;
- Sports policy has typically operated to exclude or restrict transgender people's access to sport.

The 2026 review found that:

- After 1-3 years of hormone therapy, transgender women's physical fitness is comparable to that of cisgender women;
- Transgender women have significantly greater amounts of body fat than cisgender men, and comparable amounts to cisgender women;
- While transgender women might have more muscle mass than cisgender women, there are no observable differences in upper or lower body strength, or in oxygen consumption, between transgender women and cisgender women;
- Studies in this area are limited by the scarce number of transgender athletes;
- Few studies controlled or adjusted for factors such as training history, diet, baseline fitness, or physical activity, which will all influence athletic performance.

Biomedical Differences

Generally, men outperform women in most sports in which the outcome is affected by physical size, strength, speed or endurance. It is therefore a common perception that someone assigned male at birth who produces testosterone will inherently have a competitive advantage over others who do not - however, this has not been borne out in research.

The (limited) research comparing cisgender and transgender women's physicality has found that transgender women with adequately suppressed testosterone have no clear biological advantages over cisgender women in elite sport. Even if transgender women retain height and size advantages after hormone therapy, there is no evidence that this translates to any performance advantage as compared to elite cisgender women athletes of similar size and height.

Sociocultural Differences

Alongside physical and biological factors, social, cultural and economic contexts often function as key metrics of success in sport. Access to training and infrastructure, nutrition, time to train, acceptance and inclusion within club culture, the presence or absence of violence, discrimination and



harassment, quality of training opportunities, and absence of other duties such as caring, also contribute to an individual's participation and success within sport. Other key social factors include the undervaluation of women's sports relative to men's, resource allocation to given sports and to categories within given sports, and differing social and cultural value placed on different sports in Ireland.

Both the 2017 and the 2022 systematic reviews confirm that transgender people experience significant and often hidden barriers to participating in sport, including exclusionary policies, transphobic culture within clubs, and discrimination and harassment from team members, opponents and the public. While many policies around trans participation in sport focus on protecting the health and safety of cisgender athletes competing or training with transgender athletes, few policies consider the risks posed to the health and safety of trans athletes. The largest study of trans people to date found that transgender people are typically less likely to participate in sport, less likely to continue in sport, and are more likely to face harassment and bullying from others within a given sport (James et al, 2016).

Policy Landscape

Many sports bodies, nationally and internationally, and indeed many States, are restricting or banning the participation of trans people in gendered categories in their sports.

In order to do this, sports clubs or bodies attempt to identify the birth sex of athletes through genetic and/or hormone testing, physical examinations, requirements to show proof of birth sex, or self-reporting. There are significant issues with all of these methods of identifying birth sex.

Medical sex testing has been widely condemned by human rights experts, medical experts, and sports experts including the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN Women, the World Medical Association, the American Medical Association, a group of independent UN experts, and jointly by ILGA World, the Sport and Rights Alliance and Humans of Sport.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights noted that sex testing is a "suspicion-driven testing of women athletes based on their physical appearance... [there is] no single marker [that] is determinative of male or female sex." (UNHCHR, 2020) The World Medical Association advised physicians worldwide to take no part in genetic sex testing of female athletes (WMA, 2019).

In 2022, World Athletics introduced hormone level testing for athletes wishing to compete in the women's category, and suppression of testosterone for transgender or intersex athletes. Responding to this, the American Medical Association said "World Athletics relied heavily on a 2017 study in developing eligibility criteria that has since been deemed flawed. Despite the authors of the study acknowledging that a causal relationship could not be established between elevated testosterone levels and performance advantages for elite female athletes, World Athletics has not modified its eligibility requirements... Unnecessary medical interventions to change natural hormone variations as a prerequisite for athletic competition must not be forced on physicians to artificially alter the natural ability of transgender athletes and athletes with differences in sexual development." (AMA, 2022).



Despite this, the International Olympics Committee introduced genetic testing for all female athletes in 2026. In response, UN experts said “blanket bans on the participation of transgender women in the female category raise serious concerns. Such measures presume uniform advantage without adequate evidence, rely on categorical exclusions rather than individualised assessment, and risk imposing disproportionate burdens on a small and already marginalised group. Mandatory genetic sex testing likewise raises concerns in relation to privacy, bodily integrity, informed consent and data protection, particularly where athletes are compelled to undergo testing under threat of ineligibility.” (Reid et al, 2026).

There is clear consensus across the medical community that there is no single marker to determine biological sex, and no clear athletic advantage held or retained by trans people through medical transition. There is equally clear consensus across pre-eminent international human rights organisations that attempts to do so undermine and jeopardise the rights and bodily integrity of all athletes.

Further TENI Resources

TENI Sports Inclusion Digital Toolkit - <https://teni.ie/resources/sports/>.

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