

Statement on Transgender Sport Participation Bills

■ Approved by the NIRSA Board of Directors on May 17, 2021

NIRSA, along with the undersigned organizations, unequivocally supports the rights of transgender individuals. Specifically, in response to the [current bills regarding transgender sport participation](#), we believe **inclusive access to sport is an important part of building healthy people and healthy communities**. Inclusive access must include people of all gender identities.

Physical activity — especially through sport — engenders a multitude of benefits, including physical health, academic success, leadership development, engagement and belonging, and mental and social wellbeing ([Value of Campus Recreation](#); [Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans](#); [Global Advocacy Council](#); [Neighmond, 2015](#); [Project Play](#)). As the [NIRSA Championship Series](#) has long asserted — playing sport is so much more than competition. Furthermore, given what we know about the importance of [upstream approaches to wellbeing](#), it is incumbent upon us to help ensure these opportunities are not impeded for anyone. In fact, the onus is on us to actively work to foster these opportunities for everyone.

In that vein, it is critical to note that while many of the bills carry titles such as “Save Women’s Sport,” they are actually primed to have the opposite effect. If transgender women are not allowed to participate on a women’s sports team, this opens each and every sporting event — from kindergarten to college — to ask questions about what makes a woman ([Strangio & Arkles, 2020](#)). Embedded in these bills is the question of who ‘belongs’ on women’s sports teams — and who gets to decide.

How good is a female athlete allowed to be before others — spectators in the bleachers, opposing players, coaching staff, or referees — can openly question if she’s too good? How strong, how fast, how physical is the definition of womanhood allowed to be in the court of public opinion? What about girls and young women who don’t fit squarely into the gender binary? What if she seems just a bit too tall? Or her shoulders seem a bit too wide? How much visible muscle mass is she allowed? How deep can her voice sound? How short can her hair be? What factors are enough to move from whispers in the stands to that athlete being pulled from participating until she can provide proof of her sex? ([Kliegman, 2021](#); [Strangio & Arkles, 2020](#); [Sharrow, 2021](#))

Accusing women of stepping outside the societally-determined gender boundaries as a means of power and control has been a highly effective tool wielded throughout history — it’s just not usually aimed at children too.

While the proposed bills may reference transgender participants broadly, the reality is that they are being discussed almost exclusively in the context of transwomen's sport participation. In doing so, transwomen are disproportionately affected, and Black transwomen are especially harmed. This is a group already targeted by oppression at the intersections of racism, sexism, and transphobia — to such a degree that the American Medical Association has declared violence against this group to be an epidemic ([Paz & Astor, 2020](#)). Black women have long fought to be seen as equal on the athletic field — “the politicization of black women's bodies that began in slavery has yielded in our day portrayals of black female athletes as alternately mannish or overly sexualized” ([Jones, 2018](#)) — and the disproportionate impact of these bills on this group must be called out.

“Additionally, history and modern experiences show how [anti-trans law] will disproportionately harm Black and Brown women and girls. Black and Brown women and girls are routinely targeted, shamed, and dehumanized for not conforming to society's expectations of femininity ... By allowing coaches, administrators, and other athletes to become the arbiters of who “looks like” a girl or a woman, [this law] will rely on and perpetuate racist and sexist stereotypes.” ([National Women's Law Center](#))

Despite the real, meaningful inequities that do exist in women's sport from youth to professional levels ([Women's Sports Foundation](#)), which we would welcome national energy be poured into addressing, the bills in question are poised to bring further harm to many to address an issue more based in fear than reality ([Sharrow, 2021](#)). There are minimal documented cases where transwomen's sport participation has caused any issue — to the point that legislators in states proposing these bills often cannot cite a single example from their own state ([Crary & Whitehurst, 2021](#)). Perhaps most tellingly, sport organizations that oversee competitions have allowed transwomen to compete in accordance with their gender identity for years. These organizations, including the International Olympic Committee, the NCAA, and the NIRSA Championship Series, have not seen women's sports fundamentally changed as a result ([Hecox v Little - Carroll Declaration](#)).

Sport competition has always involved inherent advantages to some, and those advantages are never equally distributed. Some advantages may be physical (e.g., height differentials between two competing basketball centers), and some may be socioeconomic (e.g., wealthy parents who can afford elite travel teams and private coaching for their children). Part of sports has always been navigating these variances.

There is significant socio-cultural assumption about the supposed inherent abilities of males compared to females; that assumption is projected onto transwomen as well. However, there is little empirical evidence to support such an assumption, particularly in non-elite levels of competition ([Jones et al., 2017](#); [Ermyas & Wakeam, 2021](#); [Brutsaert & Parra, 2006](#)). While there might be reasons to have more

guidance for elite competitions, **there is no empirically sound reason to have such restrictions for youth and/or recreational sports.** Finally, there is little evidence of significant, holistic biological advantage before puberty, which many trans youth opt to significantly delay through medical interventions, further calling into question the bills aimed at trans youth's participation in sport.

Yet there is significant evidence that forcing someone to live under a label incongruent with their identity — in sport or otherwise — is both inherently not inclusive *and* dangerous. Transgender and gender nonbinary individuals experience higher rates of mental health challenges with anxiety and depression experienced at nearly 10 times the rate of their cisgender peers ([Becerra-Culqui et al., 2018](#)). Supportive environmental policies and practices, which confirm one's gender identity and authentic self at each turn, are strongly correlated with reducing these mental health challenges, including suicidal behaviors. ([The Trevor Project, 2019](#); [Turban, 2020](#); [Buzuvis, 2016](#)).

As outlined above, there *are* problems facing both transgender and gender non-binary individuals and women's sport — but allowing transgirls' and transwomen's inclusive participation in youth, high school, and collegiate recreational sport is not among them.



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ACHA: American College
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ACPA: College Student
Educators International



ACUHO-I: Association of College & University
Housing Officers - International



ACUI: Association of College
Unions International



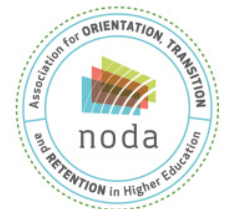
ASCA: Association for Student
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NACA: National Association for Campus Activities



NIRSA: Leaders in Collegiate Recreation



NODA: Association for Orientation, Transition and
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