

WRIT 3102W

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Media Portrayal of Transgender Women in Organized Athletics

The 21st century has seen vast increases in the rights and visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals in the media landscape with landmark legislation such as the passing of *Oberfell v. Hodges* and the inclusion of new legal protections for transgender individuals concerning hate crimes. There has also been an increase in LGBTQ+ individuals in pop culture with transgender actors, singers, writers, and models being recognized for their work and contributions to their respective fields. With this increased visibility has come increased scrutiny of the LGBTQ+ community, this is particularly true for transgender individuals. Legislation limiting the rights of transgender people has become a hallmark of right-wing politics within the last decade, with dozens of states passing legislation that restricts transgender people's access to gender-affirming care. As right-wing politicians continue to put up barriers to preventing the inclusion and advancement of transgender individuals, media institutions continue to portray transgender individuals in a negative light, this is particularly true regarding transgender women in sports. Despite the number of transgender women participating in sports being incredibly small, their participation is hotly debated in the media. The modern depiction of transgender people within the right-wing media landscape is attempting to pose transgender women as intruding on women's spaces within sports to perpetuate transphobic ideas amongst the public and encourage further alienation of transgender people within both social and judicial systems.

In January of 2024, Forbes writer Donna Lopiano published her article “Listen To The Voices of Female Athletes,” in which Lopiano makes arguments against allowing transgender individuals, particularly transgender women, to play competitive sports at any level and

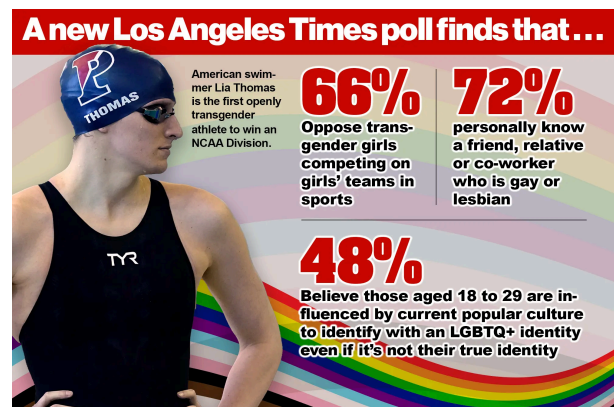
disparages the LGBTQ+ organizations that advocate for them. Lopiano accomplishes this goal through her incredibly strategic verbiage. Lopiano attempts to diminish the fact that there are very few transgender athletes competing in women's sports by stating that their participation has a “multiplier effect in which hundreds of males taking part in women's sports, are actually affecting tens of thousands of women and girls.” This phrase does a lot of work for Lopiano, not only does it amplify the perceived impact of transgender women in athletics, it denies them recognition as women. Referring to transgender women as males early in the article, Lopiano encourages audiences to view them as such. Lopiano goes on to distinguish the differences between sex and gender later in the article. However, it does little to balance the picture Lopiano is painting of transgender women and prevents readers from considering any nuances.

Another element of Lopiano’s strategic use of language is her framing of biological masculinity. Lopiano states that, when competing against transgender women, cisgender women “are competing against male bodies whose superior strength, speed, and other performance advantages are unmitigated by hormones or surgery.” This statement operates under the assumption that all male bodies are physically stronger and faster than all female bodies. Not only is this factually inaccurate and dismissive of an athlete's training, but it also suggests to readers that cisgender women need to be protected from transgender women. This statement exploits societal ideas of gender that suggest that males pose a physical threat to women; males are strong, and females are weak and therefore must be protected. This perception places transgender women in a difficult intersection between transphobia and feminism. By fostering the idea that transgender women pose a physical threat to cisgender women, Lopiano and others encourage their audience to discriminate against transgender women in the name of feminism. Now that this attitude towards transgender individuals has been established, it is easier for

audiences to apply that attitude to other areas of life. This ideology of excluding transgender women under the guise of protecting cisgender women is commonplace in arguments against allowing transgender women to participate in organized athletics.

In the 2024 article for the New York Post, “66% of US adults oppose transgender girls competing on female sports teams, new survey reveals,” author Chris Nesi details a University of Chicago study regarding the public opinion on transgender women in organized athletics. In discussing the results of the study, the authors created an image to communicate specific statistics. The framing of this information can inform the audience of the creators' intentions. The statistics chosen for this image are not the only ones presented in the article, so their inclusion here is notable. They were selected to tell a story.

The combination of statistics in this image was chosen to convince an audience that does not hold negative attitudes towards transgender women that they are a threat to cisgender women in athletics. The statistic refers to individuals



who “personally know a friend, relative or co-worker who is gay or lesbian.” The inclusion of this statistic suggests that Nesi is attempting to convince those who do not consider themselves homophobic or hostile to the LGBTQ+ community. By separating transgender rights from the rights of other members of the LGBTQ+ community, it permits the reader to have hostile feelings towards transgender individuals without having to feel as though they are harming other queer people they have in their lives.

The combination of the alienation from other members of the LGBTQ+ community and the paternalistic urge to protect cisgender women has culminated in legislation that limits the

rights of transgender women. After his second election to office, President Donald Trump signed a number of executive orders, including the February 5th executive order entitled, “Keeping Men out of Women’s Sports.” This executive order details a plan to ensure “women and girls the equal opportunity and excel in competitive sports,” by threatening to defund organizations that allow transgender women to participate in their organizations. The order goes on to explain that this order is being issued as an attempt to adhere to Title IX and prevent “the endangerment, humiliation, and silencing of women and girls.” This is reminiscent of the attitude fostered in Lopiano’s Forbes article, that cisgender women must be protected from transgender women. The executive order also does not include any mention of transgender men or other members of the LGBTQ+ community which is consistent with the New York Post’s strategy of alienating transgender women from the rest of the queer community. Again, this strategy prevents readers, and in this case the American public, from considering the precedent set by this executive order and how it may impact other members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Each of these examples works to portray transgender women in athletics as harmful to their cisgender competitors and advocates for their removal from women’s athletic organizations. While more transgender women are competing in organized athletics than ever, they still only make up a small percentage of participants. This is not to say that the attacks on the rights of transgender people in the United States are the direct result of Lopiano and Nesi’s articles, but the result of the culture they perpetuated. The public needs to recognize the strategic use of language by media organizations and politicians when speaking about transgender individuals is not done to protect cisgender women or ensure equity in athletics; it is done to alienate transgender women and ensure the survival of transphobic attitudes in an era of advancement for all members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Citations

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