

The Paradox of Being a Sport Feminist. A Response to Cahn’s “Testing Sex, Attributing Gender: What Caster Semenya Means to Women’s Sports”

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I want to thank the NCAA Scholarly Conference organizers for asking me to respond to Susan’s paper. I have always admired her writing, but we have never met. I am grateful for the opportunity to, not only meet Susan, but to tell her how much I appreciate her work and how much it has informed my own thinking.

In the 1970s when I was swim coach at the University of Massachusetts, I was deeply involved in the fight for equality for women’s sports. The women coaches at UMass plotted and planned together, spoke out, organized petition drives and confronted the Men’s Athletic Director to point out the many ways women athletes and coaches on our campus were second class citizens. We were united in a cause we saw as just and our assumption that we knew who we were talking about when we spoke on behalf of “women’s” equality in sport.

Little did any of us understand then how complicated the fight for women’s sports equality would be 40 years later. Back then, we felt pretty confident in our assumption that biology and gender identity were related in consistent and predictable ways. Now, we find the ground under us shifting as we struggle to live up to our social justice ideals in the face of challenges to our assumptions of whom we mean when we talk about women athletes.

In her paper, Susan invites us to dig into this complicated question, which is at the heart of how we move forward from this point in the on-going quest for women’s equality in sport. She asks us to think about how we approach the question of sex difference and how we organize sport. “Do we accept some notion of either natural or social sex/gender difference and work with a two-gender model in sports, or do we argue that all differences are artificial and endeavor to create alternatives to sex segregated sports?”

She also invites to consider how it is that, despite the astounding increase in the acceptance and sheer numbers of girls and women in sports over the last four decades, both academic studies and casual viewership indicate that many women athletes believe *other people* still question their femininity and sexual identity—jeopardizing their status as a “normal” woman.

Susan ties these two questions together by arguing that the problems of everyday women with regard to sexist and homophobic assumptions about women athletes have everything to do with the torment of athletes like Caster Semenya and the strategic dilemma of how feminism tries to liberate women's bodies of all kinds.

Clearly, the sex/gender binary needs to be challenged. The binary is a child of sexism. Homophobia/heterosexism and genderism are its cousins. Trying to force ourselves (and our athletes) into two separate, impermeable gender boxes defies the spectrum of sex and gender diversity we know exists in real life.

But should we abandon the sex/gender binary in sport? Should we throw open the gym doors to anyone who wants to try out for any team without regard for what kind of body they have, how they identify their gender, how they express their gender, who they have sex with? Or should we fortify the gender/sex borders to guard against unauthorized intruders? Let's explore these options.

Defending Traditional Sex/Gender Binary Divisions of Women's and Men's Sports

Sex testing is the primary border defense of the sex/gender divisions in sport and it has been a complete and utter failure. No scientifically sound basis justifies where to draw the sex/gender line separating women and men. As Susan points out in her paper, Nature is a slob, but many of us want simple, neat and easily defended gender/sex boundaries. Drawing a hard and fast line is inherently discriminatory, arbitrary and often results in serious public humiliation and psychological trauma for the women who are targeted by the gender police in sport. All we have to do is look at the shameful media circus and ignorance surrounding the challenge to Caster Semenya's eligibility to compete in women's running events to see how this is so.

The problematic nature of the sex/gender binary is also highlighted by the wide variations in athletic performance *among* women and the broad overlap in athletic performance *between* women and men. This broad spectrum of athletic performance and its refusal to fit neatly into separate sex categories challenges the gender binary rather than reinforces it.

Moreover, a rigid, impermeable sex/gender boundary is the foundation of sexism conferring privilege on men, particular white, straight, middle-class able-bodied men. Homophobia acts as a gender watchdog patrolling the gender border, keeping everyone—men and women and girls and boys—in their assigned gender. Anyone who transgresses this sex/gender border in gender expression, gender identity or sexual orientation is subject to punishment and exclusion. So what are we to do?

Eliminate Sex/Gender as Criteria for Sport Team Participation

This option has been proposed by some transgender and feminist activists, legal experts and advocates. Eliminating sex-separated sports and sex and gender as participation criteria has a legalistic appeal. How can we rule out separate but equal in one setting, but say it is acceptable in another? Gender-neutral sports would certainly eliminate the need to twist ourselves into philosophical pretzels trying to justify

a sports system based on a problematic gender/sex binary. Gender-neutral sports would open the way for transgender athletes and athletes with differences of sexual development to play without any need to certify their eligibility or pass a sex test.

Those who take this position believe that sex segregation in sport limits the potential of women athletes and even inscribes sex inequality even as it claims to promote equality. The result, these critics claim, is that women athletes on sex-segregated sports teams will always be second class citizens; the junior varsity to the men's varsity.

However, appealing these arguments may be, I believe it is important to consider other consequences of gender-neutral sports. We need to ask, as we always do in a world where privilege and access to resources are at issue: Who benefits from this way of organizing sport competition? Who benefits from a sport participation system in which sex and gender are deemed irrelevant?

Despite the progress we have made challenging sexism and heterosexism in sport, the intertwined effects of these two social systems of injustice permeate every sports team and every policy decision that athletic administrators and coaches make. What makes us believe that eliminating sex segregated sports would benefit anyone other than those who are already privileged in sport: Men (especially bio, heterosexual, white, traditionally masculine men). Given the pervasive nature of sexism and heterosexism in sport, is it reasonable to believe that making sport teams gender-neutral would benefit girls and women, including transgender women, lesbians and women with differences of sexual development?

As a long-time women's sports athlete, coach, advocate and fan, I have a recurring nightmare about gender-neutral sports teams. In the nightmare, the basketball team for "State University" takes the floor for the opening tip. All the starters are bio men. Of the players on the bench, maybe two or three are women. One of these bench players is Maya Moore, the standout player from UConn. I look at the team pictures for all of the sports teams at State University and see the same pattern over and over: The main players are men with a few outstanding women playing back up roles.

I also worry about schools eliminating the second team (formerly the women's team) to concentrate resources and financial support for one team in each sport. I see fewer sport opportunities for girls and women in a so-called gender-neutral sport system. I see fewer girls trying out for teams because they believe the odds of making the team are against them. As a result their younger sisters see fewer women athletes. They see even fewer women coaches. Given the dismal statistics on the numbers of women coaching women's teams, let alone men's teams, who here believes that any significant number of women would be coaching these gender-neutral teams? In my nightmare, I see us slipping back further and further to pre-Title IX participation numbers for girls and women in sport. I fear that what we might achieve in eliminating men's and women's teams in favor of gender-neutral teams is a loss of participation opportunities for the vast majority of girls and women, including transgender women and women with differences of sexual development. At this point, in the development of women athletes, only the best women would compete successfully for a place on these gender-neutral teams. Would this change increase respect for women athletes? Would gender-neutral teams eliminate discrimination against lesbians or gay men in sport? Would heterosexism, sexism or genderism among the coaches and athletes on gender-neutral teams be eliminated? I think not.

I fear that women, all women, have more to lose in a sports system that purports to be gender-neutral than we have to gain. That is my nightmare.

So, what are we to do? Unquestionably, we must enable transgender student-athletes and athletes with differences of sexual development to play on school sports teams. It is the right thing to do and, increasingly, we are required to do so by laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sex.

There are no easy answers, certainly none that will make everyone happy or comfortable. Here is where the paradox becomes clear for me as a sport feminist who is uncomfortable drawing arbitrary sex/gender boundaries AND who is committed to affording the best opportunities for sport participation for girls and women: Exactly the contradiction that Susan raises in her paper.

I ask the question: Can we challenge the arbitrariness of sex/gender divisions in sport and live up to our ideals of social justice and equality in sport without dismantling a sport system that, though not perfect, has enabled so many girls and women to make huge strides forward in sport participation, achievement and entitlement?

Maintain Women's and Men's Sports Teams and Subvert the Sex/Gender Binary

Is it possible to both operate within the existing sex-segregated sport structure AND subvert the sex/gender binary to afford all women, including transgender women and women with differences of sexual development, equal opportunities in sport? I think it affords us with the best route to challenging sexism, heterosexism and genderism in sport and protecting and expanding participation opportunities for the greatest numbers of girls and women.

The paradox of all identity-based social justice movements is that we need them for the base of support and empowerment they provide to challenge our oppression, but as we succeed, we also undermine the stability of those same identities on which we base our movement.

What does it mean to subvert the sex/gender binary in sex-segregated sport? Basically it means blurring the gender boundary line. It means making it more permeable to expand the categories of "woman" and "man." That means including transgender women, women with differences of sexual development, genderqueer women and lesbians and bi women on women's teams. It means enabling transgender men who have not transitioned to play on a women's team, as the George Washington University women's basketball team has. It means including transgender men on men's teams whether they have transitioned or not.

It means freeing women athletes (and male athletes) to express their gender and sexuality in ways that are consistent with their own identities rather than someone else's dependence on a gender or sexual binary that insists on femininity (or masculinity) and heterosexuality in return for approval and acceptance.

Susan, citing both research and casual observation, reminds us that young women athletes still feel caught between their joy in being athletes and challenges to their femininity and sexuality. Susan tells us that she would never have given up playing football with the boys on her block, but neither could she stop the hurt when kids teased her. She says, "That women athletes still feel these hurts and pressures to conform 40 years later, despite the fantastic opportunities afforded them, is sadly disturbing."

I get discouraged when I hear women sports advocates celebrating as progress a “new freedom” among women athletes to express their femininity and heterosexiness and liberation from the “old” stereotype of the masculine dyke jock. Isn’t that just more of the same apology and defensiveness with which we are all too familiar?

UConn women’s basketball coach Geno Auriemma, in a recent interview with *Newsweek*, said he did not want “girly girls” or “sissy girls” on his team. I had a couple of reactions to his comment. One, because of sexism and heterosexism, a woman coach could never have made this comment publicly without jeopardizing her ability to recruit high school athletes and their parents. Two, how refreshing it is to hear a coach, male or female, challenge the notion that women athletes need to compensate for their athleticism by accenting their “girly girlness.”

Like Susan, it pains me deeply to think that girls and women athletes are still internalizing this uncertainty and insecurity about how they enact and embody being a woman even as they assert their right to play sports. I long for the day when we can each claim the right to be a woman in whatever ways make sense to us, not in the way that others try to force upon us: Ponytails or buzz cuts; butch or fem; loving women, men or both; hair ribbons or rainbow pins; big or small bodies; beer or Diet Coke; born male-bodied, female-bodied or something in between—we should each get to define ourselves and be respected for that definition.

Sojourner Truth, the Black Feminist Abolitionist, asked the question, “Ain’t I A Woman?” at a feminist conference in 1851. Can’t we, 160 years later, answer this question in ways that empower all women to live their identities in ways that challenge the intersecting systems of oppression that have diminished and denied each of us for too long? Can we take Susan’s challenge to find ways to answer this question in sport so that all athletes can compete according to their own self-definitions in a system that protects and maximizes opportunities for all women?