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“The spectators ask, is it a boy or a girl? What is it?”: Cultural cisgenderism and trans men’s sporting experiences in Iran

Abstract

In this article, we draw on cultural cisgenderism to analyse the sporting experiences of trans men in Iran. Utilising semi-structured interviews with twelve trans men in different stages of transition, we consider their experiences of women’s sport environments, the extent to which cisnormativity is embedded into the culture, and whether their gender identities are accepted. We found that essentialist understandings of sex and gender are evident in sport environments, with gender presentation policed by others, and expectations this should align with ascribed biological sex. While some interviewees’ masculine expressions were valued, others were considered ‘too masculine’ to be eligible to participate in women’s sport spaces; this led to restrictions around appearance and clothing, alongside instances of compulsory hormone testing. Finally, for those who were ‘out’ about their gender identity, this often led to hostility from others, including coaches, teammates, and spectators. Overall, this paper provides a critical understanding of trans inclusion in sport spaces in Iran. However, the findings may be useful for anyone working to make sport more accessible, regardless of geographical location.

Keywords: Gender; transgender; cultural cisgenderism; masculinities; Iran

An individual's identity is influenced by several factors, including their gendered embodiment. While a person's biology and physiological characteristics typically assign them as male or female, confirming their biological sex, gender refers to the social and cultural norms surrounding masculinities and femininities and an individual's sense of their identity (Matsuno and Budge, 2017). Gender identities can be developed from an early age and are often assumed to be 'naturally' consistent with a person's biological sex (Schrock et al., 2009). To elaborate, the presumption that sex and gender are aligned is widespread; for instance, if a person is born female, it is a common belief they will identify as a girl/woman, and that their behaviours will align with societal constructions of femininities, and vice versa for boys and men (Phipps and Blackall, 2021). Thus, gender norms, although socially and culturally constructed, are matched with binary categories of ascribed biological sex.

When a person's gender, gender identity, and their ascribed biological sex align (e.g., female/woman or girl/femininities and male/man or boy/masculinities), that individual would be considered cisgender. However, when there is an inconsistency between a person's biological sex and gender identity, the individual would be considered transgender, or trans (Phipps and Blackall, 2021). Thus, the term trans is used to refer to people whose identity and gender expression are different from the traditional norms associated with their biological sex at birth (Coleman et al., 2012). As an example, some individuals may hold a persistent desire to belong to the 'opposite' sex and may experience excessive discomfort with the determined gender norms attributed to them. In this instance, the individual may seek to change their gender through physical appearance including gender-affirming hormones and/or surgery to better correspond with their desired identity (Vitale, 2010). However, it is important to note that not all trans people wish to undergo gender-affirming surgery or hormones (Gleaves and Lehrbach, 2016),

while other trans people's identities do not fit the binary system, such as those who are non-binary (Paechter et al., 2021).

Considering the circumstances in Iran specifically, the country formally accepts trans people who have undergone multiple stages of gender-affirming surgery to allow for a legal change of name and gender following medical approval (Saeidzadeh, 2020); however, there are no official statistics on how many trans people have undergone these stages, and different numbers are cited within various sources. Furthermore, the government does not keep track of the number of individuals with 'gender identity disorder', the legal definition used by the Iranian administration to describe the mismatch between a person's biological sex and gender identity (OutRight Action International, 2016). Nevertheless, Iran conceptualises gender as a binary and trans people through a medical lens, reinforcing the idea that they suffer from psychological and sexual disorders that can be 'fixed' through surgery. Thus, surgery is required to 'normalise' trans people and particular conditions must be met for this to be legally approved (OutRight Action International, 2016).

Consequently, trans people who do not wish to undergo gender affirming surgery, those who cannot afford this or who are not granted access, are not legally recognised under Iranian law. Therefore, these individuals would be required to act and dress in alignment with the sex they were assigned at birth and would not be eligible for a national identity card which reflects their true gender identity, due to the narrow definition of what it means to be trans (OutRight Action International, 2016). Regardless of their medical status, trans individuals are subject to violence, social rejection, and harassment in Iran, and are likely to face abuse and emotional isolation (Heidari et al., 2020). This is also heightened by strict gender-segregation in Iranian society, for example in schools, public transport systems, and within dress-codes, regulations linked to Sharia-based laws

(OutRight Action International, 2016). However, there is evidence to suggest that trans men are potentially less marginalised in Iran compared to trans women, due to factors such as the ability to participate more easily in society including securing employment (Saeidzadeh, 2020). Nonetheless, anecdotally, we (the researchers, four of whom are Iranian) are aware that being trans is generally not accepted in Iranian society and many trans people hide this element of their identity.

Conceptual framework: Cultural cisgenderism

This article employs the framework of cultural cisgenderism. This concept has previously been applied to a variety of settings including education (Neary and McBride, 2021; Phipps and Blackall, 2021), ageing and care (Ansara, 2015), the sports media (Knott-Fayle et al., 2021), hate crime (Rogers, 2017) and domestic abuse (Rogers, 2021), amongst other areas. According to Ansara and Hegarty (2011: 5), unlike transphobia, which refers to individual hostility towards trans people, ‘cisgenderism describes a prejudicial *ideology*...that is systemic, multi-level and reflected in authoritative cultural discourses.’ Cultural cisgenderism is a system of oppression operating at a structural level which invalidates someone’s own understanding of their gender and identity (Ansara, 2015), questioning the legitimacy of gender identities which are not based on sex assigned at birth (Martino and Cumming-Potvin, 2019). In other words, essentialist understandings of what it means to be male or female are promoted, while trans identities are erased, ‘othered,’ or considered disordered. Ultimately, this system considers gender as natural, fixed-at-birth, and based on binary categories, with the expectation that gender presentation and practices align with birth-assigned sex (Rogers, 2021).

In the context of the aged-care sector, Ansara (2015) outlines a range of cisgenderist practices, which include various cultural and structural barriers. Here, it is

argued that treating gender diversity as ‘abnormal’ or as a mental disorder, as well as the promotion of binary activities which serve to invalidate trans identities, are examples of cultural cisgenderism in action. In addition, purposeful misgendering and a failure to acknowledge self-identification of gender are evidence of a cisgenderist culture. Importantly, Ansara (2015) note that while certain individuals may reject this ideology, they may still operate in a broader cultural context which perpetuates cultural cisgenderism and can even contribute to this system unintentionally. This demonstrates how the framework can be used to engage with – and critique – the systems and cultures which trans people navigate, moving away from solely analysing individual attitudes (Ansara and Hegarty, 2011).

In another context, physical education, Neary and McBride (2021) argue this is a cisgenderist space which reinforces a normative gender order, thereby privileging cisgender identities. To demonstrate this, they highlight the intensively policed gender binary in physical education, alongside gender stereotypical activities offered to girls and boys, and the regulation of gendered clothing in this space. This is supported by Devís-Devís (2018) and Fuentes-Miguel et al., (2022), who suggest there is unquestionable support for the binary sex/gender system within this space, with limited opportunities to develop gender identities away from the boy/girl binarism. To navigate this binary and cisnormative system, trans pupils either dropped out of physical education altogether – demonstrating trans erasure – or were individually accommodated. Individualistic action has limited impact in disrupting the cisgenderist structure of an institution which is oppressive for those whose identities and bodies do not align with the gender binary (Neary and McBride, 2021; Phipps and Blackall, 2021). This illustrates cultural cisgenderism as a prejudicial ideology creating a hierarchy where cisgender people are privileged (Rogers, 2017). While Neary and McBride (2021) analysed the cisgenderist

physical education environment, they emphasise how many of these aspects are mirrored in the sport context. Therefore, in the next section of this paper, we consider the academic literature on trans men's experiences of sport using the framework of cultural cisgenderism.

Cultural cisgenderism and trans men's experiences of sport

Sport is a space which perpetuates gendered ideologies, including the socialisation of males and females into separate 'gender-appropriate' sports, alongside beliefs around dichotomous sex differences leading to segregated spaces (Pieper, 2016). Thus, sport has traditionally been organised around the binary sex-based categories of male and female, an over-simplified – and clearly cisgenderist - approach to categorising sex and gender, which encourages gender surveillance and ignores those who do not neatly 'fit' into binary categories (Phipps, 2021). Although requirements across sports may differ, trans inclusion policies (usually) reify the gender binary, a cisnormative practice whereby identities are required to exist within the confines of the two-gender system. For instance, according to Phipps (2022), in their analysis of trans inclusion policies in university sport spaces, regulations suggest trans men who are not taking gender-affirming hormones can participate in either male or female competition, while those taking gender-affirming hormones (for example, testosterone) are immediately excluded from female competition. Although policies may differ across various sports and nations, some trans men who have not yet begun a medical transition may therefore continue to play sport in the female category, aligning to their birth-assigned sex. This demonstrates the exclusionary effects of gender-segregated sport whereby an identity compromise may be required (Neary and McBride 2021).

An emerging body of literature has explored trans men's experiences in women's sport, including how the binary structure and organisation of sport may impact the extent to which trans men feel welcome. For instance, in research by Caudwell (2014), two young trans men discuss the gendered normativities attached to their sport experiences. Alongside issues with gendered changing rooms and kit, the binary nature of sport teams impacted their self-esteem, identity, and feelings of belonging within sport. In this research, one of the trans men had been asked to re-consider his place on a women's football team despite not taking gender-affirming hormones; this also demonstrates the rigidity of the women's category in sport, highlighted by Knott-Fayle et al., (2021). A similar finding was apparent in a study by Phipps (2021) who explored trans inclusion in the UK university sport context, particularly the experiences of one trans man who had socially but not yet medically transitioned. Here, it was found potential harassment and 'gossip' in women's sport teams may impact trans men to remove themselves from these spaces. Therefore, perceptions of who 'belongs' in women's sport may cause some trans men to socialise out of sport entirely (Caudwell, 2014), demonstrating a cisgenderist system which erases trans identities and validates only those who conform to binary gender (Rogers, 2017).

Previous themes of exclusion – and in some cases inclusion – are evident in research by Travers and Deri (2010), who investigated trans participation in lesbian softball leagues in the USA. While some trans men discussed positive experiences, including teammates respecting their preferred names and pronouns, four of the eight interviewees experienced hostility to their presence, alongside gendered language and purposeful mis-gendering, previously highlighted as cisgenderist practices (Ansara, 2015). The perception that trans men should not be allowed into women-only spaces also prevailed (Travers and Deri, 2010). In some instances, the fear of hostility may cause

trans men to self-exclude from sport and exercise entirely (Hargie et al., 2017), particularly problematic as sport may be a good reliever of stress and anxiety. Harassment of those who do not visually conform to a dominant, cultural norm of gender in cisgenderist spaces has previously been highlighted by Rogers (2017: 11), with anyone outside of the ‘two valid genders’ open to ridicule and hate.

It is important that sport environments are inclusive to all, especially considering the mental and physical health benefits of physical activity; however, research to date suggests that sport is a cisgenderist environment which does not always welcome trans people, and our research aims to explore this further. Building from past literature, this has at times conflated the experiences of trans people with wider LGBT+ communities, leading to the erasure of trans voices (Russell et al., 2022). At present, out of the studies exploring trans voices, there is only a small body of research analysing the experiences of trans men. An even smaller body of research investigates trans men’s experiences participating in sports environments aligning with their birth-assigned sex, and the extent to which cisnormative sport environments may impact the extent they are socially stigmatised or accepted. Finally, most of the research conducted is western centric, and to our knowledge, there are no socio-cultural studies on the experiences of trans sportsmen in Iran at present. Therefore, this study provides a better understanding of the complexity of sport participation in Iran amongst trans men in women’s sport spaces, focusing solely on trans voices, and is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of Iranian trans men in women’s sport spaces?
2. To what extent is cisnormativity embedded into the sport culture in Iran?
3. Are trans men’s ‘non-normative’ identities accepted within women’s sport environments in Iran?

Methodology

Participants and setting

Research on trans athletes in countries such as Iran has difficulties. Anecdotally, we are aware that some Iranian people hide their trans identity entirely or are reluctant to announce it publicly, due to the risk of severe societal prejudice. Due to this, there is a lack of research on the lived experiences of trans people in Iran, particularly when considering their sport participation. Two participants were initially sourced through convenience sampling and were contacted by us, the researchers. These participants received messages from us regarding the research and - through the snowball sampling method - a further ten participants were contacted, creating a total sample size of twelve. All participants were Iranian athletes (of differing levels), identified as trans men (assigned female at birth), participated in women's sport spaces and teams, and ranged in age from 17 to 30 years. Table one provides demographic information about these participants.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of research participants

	Pseudonym	Age	Sport experience (years)	Type of sport	Stage of transition
1	Matin	19	6	Futsal	Intends to have gender-affirming surgery and hormones; conditions not yet met for approval

2	Kambiz	30	20	Football; Sepak Takraw (a form of kick volleyball)	Does not intend to have gender- affirming surgery or hormones
3	Aria	19	8	Equestrianism	Approved for gender-affirming surgery; currently taking gender- affirming hormones
4	Samuel	21	6	Bodybuilding	Approved for gender-affirming surgery; currently taking gender- affirming hormones
5	Arman	17	8	Basketball	Does not intend to have gender- affirming surgery or hormones
6	Sepehr	24	11	Tennis	Does not intend to have gender- affirming surgery or hormones
7	Artin	18	5	Football; Volleyball	Intends to have gender-affirming surgery and hormones; conditions not yet met for approval
8	Sam	22	13	Handball	Approved for gender-affirming surgery; currently taking gender- affirming hormones
9	Daniel	22	13	Handball	Approved for gender-affirming surgery; currently taking gender- affirming hormones
10	Rayan	20	5	Bodybuilding	Does not intend to have gender- affirming surgery or hormones

11	Nima	20	14	Taekwondo	Intends to have gender-affirming surgery and hormones; conditions not yet met for approval
12	Dayan	17	3	Bodybuilding	Intends to have gender-affirming surgery and hormones; conditions not yet met for approval

Data collection

A qualitative approach was utilised, using semi-structured life-history interviews. Life-history interviews are useful as they are wide ranging and can cover various aspects of a person's life, while also focusing on the present (Edwards and Holland, 2013). In the interviews, participants were therefore asked to share aspects of their earlier life, alongside their current experiences and the extent their identities are accepted, using open-ended questions to allow for a rich understanding. The interviews were conducted from late 2020, with two of the researchers involved in the interview process (AM and ZAA). Before the start of the interviews, the participants were fully aware of the research aims, were given the opportunity to ask any questions, and were reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason. Due to Covid-19 restrictions in Iran, all interviews were conducted by phone and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The interviewees were assured that their names and details would be kept confidential between the researchers, and anonymity was guaranteed by using pseudonyms in the article. All other ethical guidance was followed, including gaining verbal (as opposed to written) consent, as signing and putting one's name on paper is culturally associated with risk in Iran (Saeidzadeh, 2020). All conversations were

conducted, recorded, and transcribed in Persian, before being translated to English by one of the researchers.

Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019) was used to analyse the data, a method used to identify, analyse, and report themes within a data set. This form of analysis is a flexible method used to give a rich and detailed account of data to reflect participants' realities and experiences. Although there are no concrete rules for reflexive thematic analysis, the general guidance provided by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used. This firstly included familiarisation with the data corpus, where the transcripts were read and re-read while making initial notes with potential codes and ideas. Next, the codes were created, which involved extracting any data considered relevant to the study into a table and giving each excerpt a name which captured its meaning. To provide examples, some of these initial codes included 'gendered appearance norms', 'gender stereotypes family' and 'hormone testing sport'. Codes considered to be linked or related were then grouped together into broader themes, which were named and refined. For instance, these themes initially included 'essentialist understandings of sex/gender' and 'cisgenderist/cisnormative understandings of sport', amongst others. To elaborate, six themes were developed from the data set initially, with various codes incorporated into each of them. Some codes were considered miscellaneous, due to our perception there was not enough data to constitute a broader theme, and that these codes did not fit clearly elsewhere. After reading and checking the analysis and decisions made, it was decided that two themes could be combined, due to their alignment and comparability, leaving a total of five overall themes. During the process, the themes were developed and interpreted for their broader meanings and implications, as well as their underlying assumptions and ideas, using a latent and inductive approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Importantly, reflexive thematic analysis acknowledges the researchers' subjectivities and their role in knowledge production (Braun and Clarke, 2019). In this regard, it is important to note that two of the researchers were involved in the data analysis process (CP and AA) and conducted the analysis together to arrive at the created themes. A positionality statement is also vital, as researchers are central to theme generation, as well as earlier stages of the research process such as research design and execution (Holmes, 2020). To expand, the research team consists of one English and four Iranian academics, all of whom are cisgender and supportive of inclusion and diversity. While we may be classed as 'outsiders' in relation to our sample in terms of gender identity, we were often 'insiders' in terms of our sport participation, with both 'insider' and 'outsider' positions having advantages and disadvantages (Holmes, 2020). While we aimed to sufficiently 'detach' ourselves from the data to analyse it with minimal bias, we appreciate our position, theoretical leanings and past research in this topic area will have influenced the research process and shaped the created themes. We use the next section of this paper to outline three of the generated themes, which reveal several aspects of the lived sporting experiences of trans men in Iran.

Findings and discussion

The context: Essentialist understandings of sex and gender in Iran

Gender norms and practices exist globally; for instance, it is generally accepted that, through socialisation, children internalise specific behaviours corresponding to gender-related societal expectations. Gender stereotypes then become evident through attributes such as physical appearance and particular personality traits (Jakubowska and Byczkowska-Owczarek, 2018). Thus, gender is not something an individual *is*, but instead is performed and recreated through behaviours and rules (Devís-Devís, 2018).

However, gender norms may differ between cultures, a product of specific social, cultural, and religious factors. In Iran, dominant gender norms are deeply entrenched in society, with traditional gender practices enforced, including gendered Islamic dress codes (Saeidzadeh, 2020). As all the participants were born female and had experienced gender socialisation aligned with femininities, many had been aware from an early age that they were different. For instance, Nima (taekwondo) stated how ‘from the fifth grade, I realised I was very different from others who are the same sex as me.’ Some interviewees also outlined their defiance of arbitrary gender norms such as haircuts and clothing, with Daniel (handball) stating:

‘As far as I can recall, I’ve been like this all the time. I never played with girls when I was a child. Besides, I had a short haircut all the time. Even when I started to ride the bike, I was with boys all the time, not any girls. For example, when my mom used to put me in girlish clothes, I always took them off. I’ve always been like this for as long as I can remember’

The participants often drew on stereotypical views of masculinities and femininities in the interviews, with overly simplistic ideas of what makes someone a boy or a girl. However, this is contextualised by the fixed ideas around manhood and womanhood which are often evident in Iranian society (Saeidzadeh, 2020). This demonstrates cultural cisgenderism, whereby essentialist understandings of sex and gender are promoted, with the expectation that gender presentation (such as clothing and haircuts) aligns with ascribed biological sex (Rogers, 2021). These ideas were critiqued by Artin (football/volleyball) who stated, ‘many people still don’t know what trans is and any girl seen with short hair is considered as trans.’ This quote demonstrates how

masculine bodily representations in women and girls are often linked to transgenderism in Iran, contrasting with wider (often Western) literature whereby masculinities in women are aligned with lesbianism, due to gender and sexuality being co-constructed (Bridges, 2014). As an example, in wider literature it is suggested the 'lesbian label' may be evident for women who engage in masculine activities (Tredway, 2014). The heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990) is a useful way to conceptualise how performances of gender link to sexuality, whereby a particular sexuality is assumed based on gender performance. While this is the case in much of the literature, homosexuality is illegal in Iran (OutRight International, 2022). Therefore, assuming or accusing an individual of lesbianism could lead to arrest, as this is criminalised. This may lead women and girls who embody masculinities to be automatically labelled as trans as opposed to lesbian.

While all participants described an internal sense of self which did not align with their biology, none of the participants could initially name their experience of this. For instance, Arman (basketball) explained:

'Since I was a child, I knew that I was different. Even when I was a kid, I used to say that you should call me Reza [*a male name in Persian*]. In recent times, I haven't worn girls' clothes at all because of my style, except a few times when I was forced by my family. I asked myself why exactly am I different and what is the reason behind this? That's why I was surfing the internet to collect data to figure out what's wrong with me? And I eventually realised there is a whole world behind this. Searching each of them, I finally found out about being trans'

Similar findings have been apparent in past research; for example, many trans youth feel insecure and confused about their identity, but do not have the words to express this due to the lack of education around gender identity and expression (McBride and Neary, 2021). This demonstrates cultural cisgenderism, as the erasure of trans-related knowledge and vocabulary is a significant way in which this ideology is exercised (Kennedy, 2018). For many of the participants, access to information through the internet helped counter this erasure, enabling them to later name and understand their experiences of gender nonconformity. Nonetheless, the realisation of being trans and the continual deviation from gender norms had caused problems for many of the interviewees. This was evident for Martin (futsal) and Daniel (handball) in the school context:

‘The principal of our school was bothering me so much. For instance, I was being watched over by a person who was supposed to inform the principal if I walk like the boys’ (Martin)

‘When I was studying at one of the best primary schools which was for talented students, the principal said you have to let your hair grow, otherwise you have to leave’ (Daniel)

While the enactment of cultural cisgenderism can be unintentional (Rogers, 2021), in these examples, binary gender is intensively policed by others, with diverse gender expression highly restricted, demonstrating similarities to past research in different cultural contexts (McBride and Neary, 2021). This is evidence of institutionalised cisnormativity in the school context, whereby any action outside of the gendered cultural norm is ‘othered’ or erased entirely. This is also heightened in Iranian

society, a country which operates on a strict gender binary, and whereby Matin's and Daniel's trans identities are not legally recognised without surgical intervention. Therefore, they were expected to behave and present with a feminine style, matching their biological sex but not their gender identities.

Hairstyles in particular are a powerful symbol of our individual and collective identities, and the length of hair (alongside the style, colour, or absence of it altogether) forms a significant part of gender identification and expression (Biddle-Perry, 2008). Although normative gender expression through hair is evident worldwide, the consequences for breaching the rules – particularly apparent in Daniel's quote – suggests Iranian culture strongly promotes and celebrates a conformity to gender norms, evidence of cisnormativity (Omercajic and Martino, 2020). The production and reproduction of cisnormative regimes in Iran had also impacted the participants' ability and confidence in 'coming out.' Several interviewees outlined familial rejection indicating an overall lack of acceptance of gender diversity. For example, Rayan (bodybuilding) and Samuel (bodybuilding) explained:

'Most families are traditional like mine and that's why one decides to not open up about their tendencies. The thing is, this makes them pretend to be something they are not and wear clothes they don't prefer. I personally cannot say anything to my family, and I must work hard constantly to try to become independent and separate from my family' (Rayan)

'I didn't include my family in this process because they are 100 percent against this issue, and I have seen their reaction before when I said this. I come out of the house in girl's clothes, and I have boy's clothes in my

backpack. When I go out of the house, I wear them and feel comfortable in these clothes' (Samuel)

The idea of parental and familial rejection of trans people has been previously outlined in the report by OutRight Action International (2016), and is reflective of a prejudicial cisgenderist ideology, whereby those who do not meet cisnormative expectations may be ridiculed or considered 'odd' and different (Phipps and Blackall, 2021). Significantly, rejection can have a significant impact on the individual, with Matin (futsal) revealing he had 'even attempted suicide several times.' The assumption that gender identity can be changed or reversed was also apparent in Nima's (taekwondo) experience:

'My sister had gone shopping one day and bought a manto [*a long coat women wear in Iran*] for me. The other one had bought a nail polish for me. I even can recall the time when it was either girl's day or student's day and my dad bought me lipstick. They felt that they could change me, even though, eventually after several months, they realised this didn't work. You know, my mother keeps saying I would like you to be a girl and I will pay an enormous amount of money to purchase lots of mantos and cosmetics for you! But unfortunately, such a thing is not feasible at all'

In Nima's quote, it is evident that societal constructions of femininities (including make-up and clothing) are considered the markers of female identity and were used as a means of persuading Nima to identify as a woman. Nima's family therefore invalidates

the legitimacy of Nima's identity, reflecting cisnormative ideas around the immutability of gender (Ansara, 2015). It also demonstrates purposeful misgendering, a form of cultural cisgenderism which is intentional (Rogers, 2021). Throughout this section, it is apparent that interviewees faced repercussions from others in cisgenderist environments due to their gender expression and identities as trans men. The extent to which this is evident in the sports context is outlined in the following section.

Sporting experiences: Cultural cisgenderism in a traditionally gendered space

It is evident a cisgenderist culture led to an expected compliance with feminine norms for the interviewees, in terms of clothing, hairstyles, and behaviours exhibited, despite all interviewees identifying as men. This was also apparent in the sport context. Sport has historically been considered a masculine area of social life and in most societies is still dominated by men. Even though women have entered sport environments, societies still typify sports according to gender (Jakubowska and Byczkowska-Owczarek, 2018), and the mobilisation of these binary understandings of gender reflect cisgenderist practices (Rogers, 2021). For instance, football, due to its level of contact, has traditionally been considered a masculine sport. This had caused issues for Artin (football/volleyball), who outlined familial opposition to his involvement in the sport:

‘Ever since I wanted to start playing football, the family objected that football is for boys, why should you go and play football, it's not an appropriate thing in public eyes... My parents opposed me, and they had the image in their minds that if I continued to play football, I would look more like the opposite sex and my masculinity would increase...Insisting on this a lot, I eventually made it. After I took part in football, I saw that

everyone says that all trans people or girls with a short haircut come to football'

The link between specific sports and activities with social constructions of masculinities was also outlined by Matin (futsal):

'My family became so sensitive in the last year. When they knew I was addicted to the gym, they wouldn't let me go to there for a week or two. They said since you go to the gym, you cut your hair and you have a boyish stereotype'

The notion that parents may discourage their children from participating in gender atypical sports/activities has been explored in previous studies, with gendered bodies constructed through socialisation processes. For instance, parents may link participation in football or certain gym activities with the production of a masculine body, including sweating, bruises, and aggression (Jakubowska and Byczkowska-Owczarek, 2018). These activities may therefore be discouraged for those perceived to be girls or women in favour of more 'gender appropriate' activities, based on essentialist notions of gender and dichotomous sex differences. Interestingly, several interviewees also reinforced these binary and hierarchical understandings of gender in their interviews, emphasising their perceived superiority to women and girls. For instance, Nima (taekwondo) stated:

'They always told me that your male style has made your shots in sport very powerful. Whenever something was heavy and the girls couldn't do it, they asked who can do it? Everyone answered Nima...I had a special

feeling about myself in sports since I felt that I was very strong and skilled compared to the others! Well, most of them were thin-skinned. They would cry for an hour when something hit their eyes, hands, or feet. The only person whom my coach has never seen cry is me! He is always telling me that you have a hundred lives and I think one of the important differences is that I've always felt I am much stronger than the girls'

These ideas reinforce essentialist views of femininities, including the overly simplified idea that women are naturally more delicate and sensitive than men (Saeidzadeh, 2020). This demonstrates deeply rooted, binary ideas around male superiority and female inferiority, with characteristics and qualities assigned to each sex. However, they also highlight some of the positive experiences that trans men may face in the women's sport context, where they may be considered the better, tougher players due to their masculine expressions, with coaches considering these expressions as more desirable. Conversely, these ideas also resulted in negative connotations for many of the interviewees. For example, Arman (basketball), whose goal is 'to play in the WNBA' and become 'a professional player as soon as possible' had no intention of having gender-affirming surgery or hormones to medically transition to male; however, he came under suspicion for his appearance which was considered 'too masculine' to be eligible to compete in women's sport, stating:

'When I was in the Super League competitions, I was asked to take a hormone test and my deep voice was criticised. They said that it may marginalise the team and cause moral problems in the team. At that time, the team's criticism demoralised me'

In 1998, Halberstam critiqued the ‘bathroom problem’, with bathrooms considered spaces which sustain gender norms. For instance, women who fail to live up to the expectations of femininities may be challenged for being in the ‘wrong’ bathrooms (Halberstam, 1998). A similar issue is evident in women’s sport, whereby athletes may need to prove their right to be in this space, particularly if someone’s sex or gender is considered ambiguous, often justified to maintain the principles of ‘fair play’ (Jakubowska, 2013). Sex testing may be used in women’s sport when there is suspicion around an individual’s masculine appearance and physique, calling into question who is classed as female and the decisions that are made when someone does not neatly fit the definition of ‘femaleness’ (Krech, 2017; Farham, 2019). This was the case for Caster Semenya, an intersex athlete who initially came under suspicion in sport due to her ‘unfeminine’ appearance (Jakubowska, 2013). It was also apparent for Arman in his quote above, providing the example of a deep voice, a trait often associated with men.

The practice of ‘proving’ biological sex is argued to be unethical and a form of surveillance placed on athletes’ bodies (Jakubowska, 2013). The practice has been heavily criticised due to the inaccurate assumption there are two mutually exclusive sexes with distinct behaviours, appearances, and styles, reflecting gender essentialism. To expand, Knott-Fayle et al., (2021) suggest sex testing has derived from cisgenderist ideologies including the disciplining of non-normatively sexed/gendered athletes and medicalised understandings of gender. Therefore, individuals in women’s sport who are perceived to have ‘male-like’ qualities or are considered to have a sporting advantage may be suspected of being a ‘male intruder,’ reinforcing the rigidity of women’s sport and that cisgender women are the only individuals welcome (Knott-Fayle et al., 2021). Our findings, however, are unique as an exploration of trans men (who are female-bodied

and have not begun a medical transition) being requested to undergo sex verification has not been sufficiently investigated in the current literature.

The exclusion and hostility towards masculinities in women's sport was again outlined by Arman (basketball) and Aria (equestrian), this time regarding appearance restrictions:

'We have different rules in our teams for official matches. For example, we do not have the right to cut our hair too short or we will be marginalised. Our coach always said that cutting hair is forbidden!'
(Arman)

'Before the competitions I go with the same boyish style, but in the competition, because it is for the federation, I have to go with the official competition appearance' (Aria)

Although the restriction around length of hair is an 'unwritten' rule in basketball, and therefore not officially enforced, this nevertheless demonstrates a strict enactment of the gender binary, particularly around appearance expectations. Likewise, although Aria does not fully outline the 'official competition appearance' in equestrian, presumably this involves a more feminine look in contrast to his usual 'boyish style.' Thus, these examples provide evidence for the regulation of femininities in women's sport and the identity compromises trans men must endure to play sport in single-sex fields, emphasising the exclusionary effects of sport for trans people (Neary and McBride, 2021). In line with a cisgenderist culture, these regulations also dictate that gender must be performed in a recognisable way (Rogers, 2017). However, the transition to men's sport was also

considered unattainable for many of the participants, at least at present. For instance, Daniel (handball) explained:

‘Now I have given up sports. I wasn’t allowed to take part in last year's league because of hormone therapy. But my birth certificate still has my previous name. When my birth name changes, I will be allowed to play. Not with women anymore of course, because of hormone therapy’

As previously discussed, state regulations in Iran require a lengthy process to be legally recognised as the ‘opposite’ sex, whereby those with ‘gender identity disorder’ are ‘corrected’ through surgery and hormones (OutRight Action International, 2016). This demonstrates cultural cisgenderism in action, as being trans is considered ‘abnormal’ and is medicalised in Iran; the requirement for surgery also reflects the cisgenderist sentiment that gender identity is always a sex-based denomination (Knott-Fayle et al., 2021). Daniel had begun this process, but was in limbo, unable to participate in either women’s or men’s sport at the time of the interviews, a clear barrier in a space where all people’s identities are required to neatly fit within the confines of the gender binary. For four participants in total (see table one), medical and hormonal intervention was not desired at all, partly due to the fear of being unable to play sport. For instance, Arman (basketball) explained ‘If I change my gender, I will have no place in women’s basketball because of my gender reassignment.’ Arman’s quote also highlights the restrictions trans people face in cisnormative sport environments; the incompatibility between sport participation and a medical/hormonal transition is clear. Despite potentially desiring this transition, Arman prioritises his success in women’s basketball, presumably a

complicated and difficult decision which requires a compromise of one of his identities (Neary and McBride, 2021).

Revealing or hiding identities: Cultural cisgenderism and hostility from others in the sport context

In women's sport spaces, some participants were 'out' about their gender identities, while others such as Kambiz (football/sepak takraw) had attempted to keep this hidden, despite suspicion from others:

'When they [*teammates*] realised that I was different from the rest of the team, they asked me if I wanted to change my gender. I was hiding this, and I said no, why are you saying this to me? I have kept this issue of being trans completely secret to continue my training in peace'

The potential for backlash played a role in Kambiz's decision to keep his identity hidden. This is not unfounded, as past studies have indicated trans men's inclusion into women's sport spaces can lead to hostility and confusion around their continued participation (Travers and Deri, 2010), and to consider their place in women's sport even before the use of gender-affirming hormones (Caudwell, 2014). Although levels of inclusion may vary between different environments, concealment strategies in a bid to avoid abuse have also been noted elsewhere (Elling-Machartzki, 2017). While concealment may aid in avoiding reprisal, it also limits representation of trans identities in women's sport; these trans men may instead have been regarded by others as 'masculine women,' in turn erasing their trans visibility, reflecting a cisgenderist culture with little space for gender affirmation (Rogers, 2021).

In this study, interviewees who had revealed their gender identity recalled widespread abuse and hostility from others. Exclusionary practices and attitudes were mostly received from coaches and spectators, with Sepehr (tennis), Sam (handball) and Nima (taekwondo) discussing how their gender expression had impacted them:

‘It happened when I was younger, for example, in basketball class when we wanted to go to competitions and tournaments, they tried their best to get my name crossed out’ (Sepehr)

‘She would come and say that I don't allow boyish players in the team, these players have moral issues! Some other coaches also say although he has a high-quality performance, I don't want him as he is like this. One of the sports teams didn't accept me because of my type and style’ (Sam)

‘Whenever I take part in a competition, the mothers and the spectators ask, is it a boy or a girl? What is it?’ (Nima)

While cisnormativity can operate in more subtle ways (Neary and McBride, 2021), the extracts above suggest very explicit biases were apparent for the interviewees, with others outlining similar situations of being targeted, excluded, and marginalised. As outlined in both previous findings sections of this paper and in the quotes above, gender presentation was considered a key problem for many of the trans men, whereby their masculinities were not accepted within women's sport spaces. According to Rogers (2017), in environments underpinned by cisgenderism, individuals may harass others when they are confused around their gender presentation. Furthermore, the essentialist

idea that there are only two valid genders corresponding with biological sex may result in hatred towards those who are trans, with less validity attached to their identities. This was also a problem for Dayan (bodybuilding) whose mother had to insist he was a girl – despite suspicion - for him to be accepted into the women’s training environment. He said:

‘When I went to the club for the first time, they said this is a boy. “She is a girl, and she just wears binder to flatten her breast” my mom said. She wanted trainers to train me’

The workings of cultural cisgenderism often do not allow those who are trans to live their lives undetected as simply ‘men’ or ‘women’ (Ansara, 2015); instead, these men were visible and identified as *trans men* in binary-gendered spaces, unable to express their gender in the way they desire without hostility or confusion from others. For those who had initially chosen to hide their trans identity and present as women in their sport environments, this similarly did not guarantee a safe space. For example, Aria (equestrian) discussed being ‘outed’ as trans to the wider equestrian environment, resulting in his isolation from others:

‘Vienna and Kiana and I were very close friends. After Vienna's dad found out that I was different from the others, he told his daughter not to have contact with me anymore because I was having a bad effect on her. Then Vienna talked to me and asked if I really wanted to change my gender and I said yes. Then I realised that her dad had spread the issue of me being

trans in the whole equestrian community and everyone looked at me differently’

Although this may be considered an individual, transphobic attitude towards Aria, it also reflects a cisgenderist culture whereby those who do not comply with cisnormative expectations are targeted and ‘othered’, demonstrating similarities to previous studies (Phipps and Blackall, 2021). The idea of being ‘outed’ can also cause trans people to avoid sport entirely or to restrict their participation to only individual activities, with trans people’s fear of their identity being revealed apparent in previous research (Elling-Machartzki, 2017). Resilience was clearly a key part of many of their characters, as most of the interviewees continued to participate in their respective sports, despite being overtly discriminated against. Rather than altering the culture and structure of sport environments which currently imposes privilege for cisgender people, it was instead up to the interviewees to adapt their situations, accept their inferior treatment, or in some instance, quit sport. For instance, Artin (football/volleyball) stated ‘I had to get used to it since I was a big fan of sport’ and Aria’s (equestrian) explained how his coach forced him to:

‘Work alone. I practiced riding on my own, and after a year I went to a competition, and everyone was surprised and said you're back and I said yes. I practiced alone; I did not give up riding. But this incident affected my spirit’

To summarise, while the interviewees identified as men and exhibited masculine expressions, all complied with the cisgenderist dichotomy of organised sport and were

involved in women's spaces¹. While several participants hid their identities as men – a concealment strategy resulting in a lack of trans visibility in sport – others' identities were seen and consequently 'othered.' Throughout this findings section, overt abuse and hostility of trans identities has been evident, with gender affirmation - the ability to express gender freely and with support from others - not attained within sport environments. It has been suggested that an individual's feelings of safety in a community are a determining factor in how inclusive that setting is (Storr and Richards, 2022). In the sport setting, interconnected networks of trust from teammates, coaches, and spectators, amongst others, are therefore important; however, it is evident here that this was not the case. Consequently, there is an expectation that trans individuals modify and adjust their expressions and behaviours, as opposed to a transformation of sports environments away from cisnormativity. Finally, it is important to note that these themes were common across the interviews; while previous research suggests various sports may differ in their levels of inclusion, the interviewees in this study were united in their (negative) sport experiences as trans men.

Conclusion

This article aimed to explore the experiences of Iranian trans men in women's sport spaces, the extent to which cisnormativity is embedded into the culture, and if trans men's gender identities are accepted within their sporting communities. Utilising the conceptual framework of cultural cisgenderism, we found largely negative experiences of sport, often due to essentialist understandings of sex and gender and the policing of gender expressions which do not align with biological sex. For instance, masculine identities were restricted, including appearance regulations to align with societal constructions of femininities. This led to the invalidation and erasure of identities outside of the cisgender norm, in sporting environments which operate using strict binary

understandings of gender. Cultural cisgenderism is therefore embedded into the culture as gender is expected to be performed in a recognisable way. The consequences for not meeting cisnormative expectations include familial rejection, hostility from others, hormone testing for those considered ‘suspicious’, as well as exclusion of those whose identities do not neatly fit the binary, such as those who had begun a medical transition.

This study has furthered research on the sport experiences of trans men, particularly focusing on their inclusion in women’s spaces. To our knowledge, it is the first study to consider this topic in the Iranian context, adding new insights to this area, developing culturally diverse understandings, and moving away from solely western-centric perspectives. The experience of trans people in sport is an emerging research area, and further studies are required to gain a more in-depth understanding of this complex and multi-faceted subject. For example, the experiences of different groups categorised under the trans ‘umbrella’ are likely to differ. In addition, trans people’s experiences may vary depending on whether they participate in men’s sport, women’s sport, or mixed-gender spaces. These differences and complexities could be further investigated. While we recognise the difficulties of conducting sensitive and complex research in places such as the Middle East, more global, culturally diverse perspectives are needed, and we would encourage more research in the Global South. Finally, our study failed to consider the transition from women’s to men’s sport for those trans men who chose to medically transition, and we would encourage future studies to further address this gap, adding to research such as Klein et al., (2019).

Despite the limitations of our study, we believe the research has several implications for those working to make sport spaces more inclusive, in Iran and more widely. However, driving cultural change in societies is complex, and is unlikely to be achieved rapidly or through simple and straightforward recommendations for change.

Nonetheless, we attempt to provide some suggestions as a starting point. Firstly, the narrow definition of the term 'transgender' is problematic for those who do not wish to or cannot afford to medically transition, as well as those not approved for it. For some participants in this study, they had made the decision not to go through this process due to fears this would limit their sport participation, and those who had begun the transition process were (at least temporarily) excluded from sport. We would urge governments worldwide, where necessary, to consider and expand their understanding of what it means to be trans and cease to consider it a medical condition where surgery is an essential requirement. Overly simplistic interpretations should also be avoided; for example, those who present in a gender atypical way should not be automatically assumed as trans. Although we acknowledge trans people's sport experiences are impacted by a variety of agents, we particularly recommend further training for coaches who have considerable influence on the acceptance of trans people in sport, and who should be encouraged to create inclusive environments for all.

¹ The only exceptions to this are the participants who had begun the medical transition and were therefore no longer eligible to participate in women's sport spaces. However, no participants had experienced men's sport at the time of the interviews.

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