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1. About MUNLawS

It is our great pleasure to welcome, after a year of absence, the delegates, head delegates, observers, and faculty advisors back to the festive city of Ljubljana to once again take on the pressing issues of the day at the 12th MUNLawS Model United Nations Conference.

As the prospects of this year's conference were discussed earlier in the year, it fell upon us to determine its scope and focus. Facing wide array of global challenges – each significant in its own right – our instinct times and again was to return to the fundamental yet enduring discussion on the construction of the global order and its respect for international law – the solemn commitment of one for all with no one left behind. Reaching, in good faith, Beyond Divisions, Ensuring Security for All.

The unfolding year spares no shortage of anniversaries. Eighty years ago, the deadliest war in human history came to an end, and the foundations of a bold new vision for global governance were laid. Today, complacency toward the binding rules of this international order is being tested, as a series of conflicts steadily erodes its very ideal, rekindling the specter of wider confrontation. Thirty years ago, in Srebrenica, former compatriots turned against their own, committing one of the most horrendous atrocities in modern European history. Today, echoes of such despair resonate in many parts of the world, reminding us that the struggle for justice and the protection of human life and dignity remains urgent.

At the same time, the year 2025 is the one of considerable achievements. With the recent ceasefire in Gaza, the seeming resolution of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict, the groundbreaking Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change and other significant developments, a trebling light on the horizon reminding us of the promise of tomorrow still shines brightly. As a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, the Republic of Slovenia devoted considerable effort to fulfilling its responsibilities. It is, therefore, a privilege to count the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia as our trusted partner in organizing this conference.

Furthermore, we extend our sincere gratitude to the European Parliament Liaison Office in Slovenia for their steadfast and invaluable support in bringing this conference to fruition. Representing a core institution of arguably the greatest peace project in human history, their involvement underscores the enduring importance of forging bridges in the pursuit of a cause far greater than ourselves. We are also deeply thankful to Tourism Ljubljana, which, together with the Liaison Office, made it possible to organise two incredible social events.

We sincerely hope you will delight in exploring this mosaic, forge meaningful new friendships, and cherish the experience of MUNLawS 2025. Let the festivities begin!

Yours truly,

Žiga Murn Lindič, Secretary-General of MUNLawS 2025

2. About the Chairs

Neja Lavrič Smrdel

Neja Lavrič Smrdel is a law student that cares deeply about the issue of gender equality and inclusivity. While new to the format of MUN, she has plenty of experience with debate, mainly in the WSDC format, in which she debated throughout high school. She is looking forward to hearing different views on both topics and is hoping for some creative conclusions.

Jurij Plej

Jurij Plej is a law student with a passion for international relations, legal studies, and public speaking. Having participated in several Model United Nations conferences as a delegate, he is stepping into his first role as a chair at MUNLawS, eager to foster engaging and constructive debate. Known for his communicative and reliable nature, Jurij enjoys exploring global political issues, traveling, and spending time in nature. An active triathlete, he views the sport as both a physical challenge and a way to develop discipline, focus, and resilience.

3. About the Committee

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) Session is the supreme governing body of the Olympic Movement, responsible for taking all major decisions regarding the Olympic Games and the interpretation of the *Olympic Charter*. It is composed of IOC Members, including representatives of National Olympic Committees (NOCs), International Federations (IFs), athletes, and distinguished individual members. In the context of MUNLawS 2025, the IOC Session will bring together 20 participants, ranging from national committees to international sport federations and prominent athletes, including:

- Algerian Olympic Committee;
- Chinese Olympic Committee;
- Fédération Internationale de Football Association – FIFA;
- Fédération Internationale de Ski et de Snowboard – FIS;
- French National Olympic and Sports Committee;
- HRH, The Princess Royal, Princess Anne;
- HRH, Prince Albert II of Monaco;
- Italian National Olympic Committee;
- Mr. Dennis Rodman (Athlete);
- Mr. Greg Louganis;
- Mr. Muhammad Ali (Athlete);
- Ms. Caster Semenya (Athlete);
- Ms. Martina Navratilova;
- National Olympic Committee of Iran;
- National Olympic Committee of Kenya;
- Olympic Committee of Slovenia;
- Olympic Federation of Ireland;
- Polish Olympic Committee;
- Union Cycliste Internationale – UCI;
- United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee.

The Session's authority includes:

- Amending the *Olympic Charter*;

- Electing the IOC President, Vice-Presidents, and Members;
- Selecting host cities for future Olympic Games;
- Approving or rejecting proposed sports for inclusion in the Games;
- Addressing urgent matters affecting the Olympic Movement and international sport governance.

Decisions are generally made by a simple majority of Members present and voting. However, certain decisions — such as amendments to the *Olympic Charter*, changes in membership, and the election of the President — require a two-thirds majority. Voting may take place by show of hands, electronic system, or secret ballot, depending on the nature of the decision and as determined by the President of the Session. The President chairs all debates, ensures adherence to procedural rules, and facilitates consensus whenever possible. For procedural rules at MUNLawS 2025, please refer to *Rules of Procedure for IOC*.

At MUNLawS 2025, the IOC will deliberate on two pressing issues:

- 1) Harnessing Sport Diplomacy for the Advancement of Democracy and Human Rights;
- 2) The Inclusion of Transgender, Intersex, and Non-Binary Athletes in Competitive Sport.

Delegates are expected to represent their assigned stakeholders faithfully, balancing national or organizational interests with the IOC's universal values of excellence, respect, and friendship. Through constructive debate, negotiation, and compromise, the Session aims to reach actionable resolutions that strengthen both the credibility of the Olympic Movement and its positive influence on the world.

The main goal of the Committee is to adopt a final document. Every delegate shall read the Rules of Procedure for Political Committees before the start of the MUNLawS Conference for a further detailed description of the procedure.

4. Objectives of the study guide

The purpose of this Study Guide is to equip delegates with the conceptual understanding and practical tools necessary to engage meaningfully in debate on this topic. It seeks to:

Clarify key concepts: Define sports diplomacy, distinguish it from related terms such as public diplomacy and soft power, and explore its intersections with human rights advocacy. For the second topic, it aims to clearly differentiate between sex and gender, as well as to explain what being transgender, non-binary and intersex means.

Provide historical and contemporary context: Outline major milestones in the evolution of sports diplomacy, from ancient Olympic truces to modern athlete-led activism. In the second part, it defines the circumstances of beginnings of female participation in the Olympics, as well as the implications of these circumstances as they are presented in how the female category is perceived nowadays.

Identify challenges and opportunities: Examine sportswashing, political manipulation, and neutrality dilemmas while also highlighting positive case studies and best practices. Under the second topic, it aims to critically evaluate the current system of dividing categories, and hence present arguments from both sides, as well as aim to seek alternative means of dividing sports.

Support debate preparation: Offer guiding questions, recommended readings, and insights into institutional frameworks (e.g., UN, IOC, EU) to aid delegates in drafting well-informed resolutions.

Ultimately, the guide aims to encourage a nuanced understanding: sports diplomacy is neither inherently good nor bad but a powerful tool whose impact depends on the actors and contexts in which it is employed. In the second topic, the guide aims to show the discussions around firstly gender, as one of the key criteria based on which sporting categories are divided, and secondly on how any individual, who does not fall under the binary sexes as they are most commonly perceived, should be enabled to participate in sporting events.

TOPIC 1: Harnessing sport diplomacy for the advancement of democracy and human rights

1. General introduction

1.1. Definition of sports diplomacy

Sports diplomacy refers to the use of sports, sporting events, and athletes to advance diplomatic objectives, foster cross-cultural understanding, and improve relations between states or communities. It is a form of “soft power” that leverages sport’s universal appeal to transcend political and cultural barriers, providing a neutral platform for dialogue.¹ Unlike traditional diplomacy, it often operates in informal contexts and draws on sport’s symbolic value rather than formal negotiations.²

Originally viewed as state-led—e.g., U.S.–China ping-pong diplomacy—sports diplomacy now increasingly involves non-state actors such as athletes, NGOs, and grassroots movements. These actors advance diplomatic and human rights agendas through public platforms, blurring lines between public diplomacy, activism, and the emerging concept of “sports diplomats”.³

1.2. Connection with democracy and human rights

Sport’s unifying nature has long been celebrated as a reflection of democratic ideals. Principles such as fair play, equality, inclusion, and open dialogue mirror the foundations of democratic governance.⁴ The Olympic Games, enshrined in the Olympic Charter as events promoting peace and mutual respect, create symbolic arenas where nations and individuals interact on relatively equal terms.⁵ By enabling participation across cultural, political, and social divides, sport diplomacy can strengthen democratic practices through fostering dialogue, tolerance, and representation.

¹ Murray & Pigman, 2014, pp. 1098–1118.

² IRIS, 2021.

³ Murray & Price, 2023, p. 27.

⁴ Sport & Development, n.d.

⁵International Olympic Committee, 2021.

At the same time, sports diplomacy has amplified struggles for human rights and democracy. Historical moments such as the 1968 Black Power salute or international boycotts against apartheid South Africa demonstrate how athletes and states have used sport to confront injustice.⁶ More recently, however, authoritarian regimes have engaged in “sportswashing,” using mega-events to project a modern and progressive image while deflecting attention from repression and rights violations.⁷ This duality highlights both the potential and the risk of sport as a platform for advancing democracy.

A legal dimension also emerges. As a private international body, the IOC has often been described as not *directly* bound by international human rights treaties.⁸ However, scholarship suggests that international organizations are at least indirectly bound and cannot disregard fundamental human rights norms. Scholars that while such bodies may not be parties to treaties in the same way as states, they are nevertheless constrained by customary international law and by general principles of international responsibility. This means that the IOC, as a private international organization, cannot simply claim complete detachment from human rights obligations. Instead, it is expected to exercise due diligence in its operations and to ensure that its decisions do not facilitate or condone violations, particularly when they affect athletes or host communities. Such reasoning reinforces the growing view that neutrality cannot justify passivity in the face of systemic rights abuses.⁹ Furthermore, the IOC has explicitly aligned itself with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and, in 2022, adopted the IOC Strategic Framework on Human Rights, thereby recognizing a duty of responsibility in this area. These commitments build on the principles already enshrined in the Olympic Charter, which affirms respect for human dignity, non-discrimination, and the promotion of peace through sport. Together, these documents establish that the IOC cannot disregard human rights considerations in its governance. This implies that the IOC bears an obligation to integrate human rights

⁶ Keys, 2013, p. 14.

⁷ Grix & Brannagan, 2016, pp. 251–272.

⁸ International Olympic Committee, 2021.

⁹ Engstrom, 2022, pp. 3-4.

protections into its decisions, including matters of eligibility, non-discrimination, and fair process.¹⁰

Debates over the “right to sport” further complicate this connection. The UNESCO International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport affirms access to sport as a fundamental right. Yet whether this right extends to elite international competition remains contested. Recent scholarship has argued that while access to recreational and grassroots sport is increasingly recognized as part of international human rights law, the extension of this right to elite and professional levels is far more ambiguous, raising questions of equality, resources, and states’ obligations.¹¹ Recent collective sanctions, such as the exclusion of Russian and Belarusian athletes from the Olympic movement, underline the tension between protecting universal human rights and responding to geopolitical or ethical imperatives. On the one hand, bans raise concerns about collective punishment and the individual’s right to participate; on the other hand, they are defended as necessary measures to safeguard the credibility of sport and uphold broader principles of justice.¹²

Overall, the relationship between sport, democracy, and human rights is neither straightforward nor static. It is shaped by the IOC’s role as a global regulator, the demands of international law, and the competing imperatives of inclusivity and political accountability.

1.3. IOC, sport diplomacy and the question of neutrality

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) plays a central role in sport diplomacy, serving as both a regulator of international sport and a platform for dialogue among states, athletes, and organizations. Through the Olympic Games, the IOC projects ideals of peace, respect, and solidarity, thereby engaging in diplomacy that extends beyond governments and into

¹⁰ International Olympic Committee, 2021.

¹¹ Jain, 2025, p. 13.

¹² International Olympic Committee, 2021.

civil society.¹³ Its symbolic authority allows it to influence global debates on democracy and human rights, even if indirectly.¹⁴

A central provision in this regard is Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter, which explicitly states that “no kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas.”¹⁵ While intended to preserve neutrality and unity during the Games, the rule has also raised questions about freedom of expression and the balance between neutrality and advocacy.¹⁶

From a legal perspective, the IOC operates as a private international association under Swiss law. It is not a state, nor a traditional intergovernmental organization, yet its global reach and quasi-public functions mean it faces growing scrutiny under international human rights frameworks. International organizations - even when not directly bound by treaties - can still carry indirect or functional human rights obligations.¹⁷ Basic issues of accountability emerge, particularly concerning non-discrimination, fair process, and the so-called “right to sport.” These dimensions frame the IOC’s dual role: as guardian of Olympic neutrality on the one hand, and as an actor expected to uphold fundamental human rights on the other.

The principle of political neutrality, codified for example in Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter, aims to preserve sport as a universal meeting ground free from political, religious, or racial propaganda.¹⁸ Proponents argue that this separation prevents ideological divisions from undermining the unifying purpose of sport and point to historical cases where politicization led to boycotts or conflict.¹⁹

However, critics contend that neutrality can function as a shield for the status quo, muting advocacy for democracy and human rights.²⁰ Athlete activism has played a transformative role in sport’s history: Tommie Smith and John Carlos’s Black Power salute in 1968 highlighted racial injustice,²¹ Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling protest in the NFL reignited

¹³ Keys, 2013, p. 13.

¹⁴ Grix & Brannagan, 2016, pp. 251–272.

¹⁵ International Olympic Committee, 2021.

¹⁶ James & Osborn, 2024, pp. 205–208.

¹⁷ Engstrom, 2022, pp. 3–4.

¹⁸ International Olympic Committee, 2021.

¹⁹ Allison & Monnington, 2002, pp. 106–134.

²⁰ Murray & Price, 2023, p. 27.

²¹ Hartmann, 2019, p. 3.

debates on systemic racism, and Megan Rapinoe's advocacy for gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights demonstrated the global reach of athlete-led campaigns. These examples challenge the notion that sport can—or should—be entirely insulated from broader social struggles.²²

The real tension lies in selective enforcement. Sporting bodies have permitted some political gestures - such as the unified Korean flag at PyeongChang 2018²³ - while penalizing others, leading to accusations of inconsistency.²⁴ This pattern suggests the debate is less about whether politics belongs in sport, and more about who decides which causes are legitimate.²⁵ For sports diplomacy, finding a balance between protecting the integrity of competition and safeguarding athletes' rights to peaceful expression is essential.²⁶

2. Historical Background

2.1. Origins of sports diplomacy

Sports diplomacy can be traced to the ancient Greek Olympic Truce (*ekecheiria*), which paused hostilities to allow safe travel for athletes and spectators, reflecting sport's early peacebuilding role.²⁷ Similar traditions existed elsewhere, using athletic contests to ease tensions or forge alliances.

In modern times, Pierre de Coubertin's revival of the Olympic Games in 1896 promoted ideals of peace and internationalism, though nationalism often remained embedded in the events.²⁸ The U.S.-China "ping-pong diplomacy" of the 1970s became one of the most iconic examples of sport overcoming political divides. At the height of the Cold War and after decades of hostility between Washington and Beijing, an unexpected exchange between American and Chinese table tennis players opened the door to dialogue. This seemingly small sporting encounter broke the ice for diplomatic rapprochement, culminating in

²² Coombs & Cassilo, 2017, pp. 425–444.

²³ Lee, 2022, p. 13.

²⁴ Xu, 2022, pp. 47–54.

²⁵ Grix & Brannagan, 2016, pp. 251–272.

²⁶ Slatič, 2021, pp. 32–38.

²⁷ Pandey, 2023.

²⁸ Guttmann, 2002.

President Nixon's historic 1972 visit to China and the normalization of bilateral relations.²⁹ It demonstrated sport's capacity to re-establish dialogue in tense geopolitical contexts.

2.2. Historical impact of sports diplomacy on human rights

The 1936 Berlin Olympics illustrated sport's dual capacity for propaganda and resistance. While the Nazi regime sought to present the Games as a showcase of Aryan supremacy, Jesse Owens' four gold medals symbolically undermined this narrative and highlighted contradictions in U.S. race relations.³⁰ The 1968 Black Power salute by Tommie Smith and John Carlos further demonstrated how athletes could transform the Olympic stage into a platform for human rights advocacy, becoming part of the broader "revolt of the Black athlete" that reshaped debates on race and equality.³¹ Boycotts, such as the U.S.-led 1980 Moscow and Soviet-led 1984 Los Angeles Games, revealed sport's potential as a diplomatic sanction. The 1980 boycott was a response to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, with over 60 countries joining the protest to pressure the USSR to withdraw. In retaliation, the Soviet Union and several of its allies boycotted the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, citing security concerns and alleged anti-Soviet sentiment, although the move was widely viewed as politically motivated. While these boycotts carried strong symbolic weight and demonstrated the intertwining of sport and global politics, they largely punished athletes by depriving them of their opportunity to compete, thus limiting the effectiveness and moral clarity of the political message.³² By contrast, the international sporting boycott of apartheid South Africa was a coordinated response to demands for racial equality and the end of institutionalised segregation. Championed by African nations and supported by the UN and major sports bodies, the boycott aimed to isolate South Africa from global sport and apply pressure on its apartheid regime. South Africa was banned from events like the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup, turning sport into a powerful tool of moral and political protest. had a more tangible influence, isolating the regime and contributing to pressure for change.³³ Taken together, these cases highlight how sports diplomacy has historically

²⁹ Murray & Pigman, 2014, pp. 1098–1118.

³⁰ Guttmann, 2002.

³¹ Hartmann, 2019, pp. 64–68.

³² Boykoff, 2016, pp. 84.

³³ Booth, 1998.

intersected with human rights struggles, producing both powerful symbols and practical consequences.

2.3. Evolution of athletes as diplomats/activists

2.3.1. Athletes as activists

Historically, athletes were expected to act as “neutral ambassadors”, embodying values such as fair play, international friendship, and political neutrality. This expectation was rooted in the belief, promoted by organisations like the International Olympic Committee (IOC), that sport should transcend politics and serve as a unifying global force. To preserve this idealised image, the Olympic Charter codified political neutrality through Rule 50, which prohibits athletes from engaging in political demonstrations during the Games.³⁴

The 1960s and 1970s marked a turning point. At the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, Tommie Smith and John Carlos’ Black Power salute spotlighted racial injustice, embedding human rights into Olympic history despite the severe backlash they faced.³⁵ Although they were expelled from the Games, they could not be formally sanctioned under Rule 50, as the rule had not yet been introduced - it was only added to the Olympic Charter in 1975 to formalize political neutrality.³⁶ Muhammad Ali’s refusal to be drafted into the Vietnam War, his subsequent suspension from boxing, and his later use of international travel to engage with political leaders in countries such as Iraq and the Soviet Union exemplify the intersection of athlete activism and informal diplomacy, demonstrating how high-profile athletes can influence global political discourse.³⁷

In the 21st century, social media has amplified athlete activism. Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling against police brutality and Naomi Osaka’s masks at the 2020 U.S. Open with the names of a Black American who was a victim of racial injustice or police violence exemplify how athletes now use global platforms to advocate for democracy and human rights.³⁸ Yet activism can also serve repression. In 2022, Russian gymnast Ivan Kuliak wore the pro-war

³⁴ Grix & James, 2024, pp. 3–4.

³⁵ Hartmann, 2019, pp. 64–68.

³⁶ International Olympic Committee, 2023.

³⁷ Harrison, 2001, pp. 461–488.

³⁸ Wertheim, 2020.

“Z” symbol on the podium, sparking international condemnation. The letter “Z”, originally painted on Russian military vehicles during the invasion of Ukraine, became a nationalist emblem used to express support for the war and the Kremlin’s actions.³⁹

These expressions, however, often raise questions about where the line lies between advocacy and political interference. Within the Olympic Movement, such tensions are formally addressed through Rule 50, which prohibits political gestures during Olympic events—raising concerns about selective enforcement and freedom of expression.⁴⁰

Today, athletes are not merely competitors but political actors whose actions can advance justice—or entrench propaganda—raising enduring questions about their role and responsibility.

2.3.2. Athletes in official diplomatic roles

Beyond activism, some athletes have taken on formal diplomatic or humanitarian positions. Many have served as UN Goodwill Ambassadors, supporting causes from education to gender equality and leveraging their credibility as intermediaries between civil society and political institutions. Others participate in structured bodies such as the IOC Athletes’ Commission or similar committees in federations like the International Biathlon Union, where athletes contribute directly to decision-making processes that shape sport governance.⁴¹

However, diplomatic roles are not always universally positive: authoritarian states have at times instrumentalized athletes and sporting events to legitimize political agendas — a practice known as state-sponsored diplomacy. For example, Russia and China have both used Olympic mega-events to project soft power and enhance regime legitimacy, despite widespread concerns about internal repression.⁴² Still, the transition from symbolic representation to formal engagement illustrates the diversification of sports diplomacy, with athletes today navigating between activism, institutional diplomacy, and humanitarianism.

³⁹ The Guardian, 2022.

⁴⁰ International Olympic Committee, 2023.

⁴¹ International Olympic Committee, 2021.

⁴² Grix & James, 2024, p. 6.

3. Current situation

3.1. Role of international organizations

International organizations have been central to shaping sports diplomacy as a tool for advancing democratic values and human rights. Their roles range from norm-setting—establishing standards and principles that govern global sport—to program implementation and advocacy, often mediating between governments, civil society, and private stakeholders. Four key actors dominate this landscape: the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

3.1.1. The international Olympic Committee (IOC)

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) is arguably the most influential institution in modern sports diplomacy and is the very body this committee represents. Established in 1894, the IOC oversees the Olympic Games and sets the guiding framework through the Olympic Charter, which enshrines principles of non-discrimination, fair play, and respect for human dignity.⁴³ A notable milestone in its history was the adoption of the Strategic Framework on Human Rights in 2022, which aligned Olympic governance with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.⁴⁴

A particularly important provision in this regard is Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter, which prohibits “any kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda” in Olympic venues. The rule is designed to preserve the political neutrality of the Games and ensure that the focus remains on sport itself. However, it has generated controversy, as critics argue that it restricts athletes’ freedom of expression, particularly in relation to human rights advocacy. Debates around Rule 50 intensified in the lead-up to Tokyo 2020, when the IOC relaxed enforcement to permit certain expressions in mixed zones or during pre-competition introductions, while still banning protests on the medal podium. This

⁴³ International Olympic Committee, 2021.

⁴⁴ International Olympic Committee, 2022.

illustrates the tension between safeguarding Olympic unity and recognizing athletes' growing role as advocates for democracy and human rights.⁴⁵

In recent years, the IOC has deepened its collaboration with the United Nations through a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed in 2014 and renewed in 2020, which institutionalizes joint efforts in areas such as sustainable development, peacebuilding, and humanitarian aid.⁴⁶ This partnership is operationalized through cooperation with UN agencies including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), notably in initiatives like the Refugee Olympic Team and Olympic Truce campaigns.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the IOC's policies increasingly align with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 16 (promoting peaceful and inclusive societies) and SDG 5 (achieving gender equality), through programs such as the Women in Sport Commission and its global gender equality review.⁴⁸ These linkages demonstrate how the IOC's mandate has expanded beyond organizing the Games toward contributing to broader human rights and development agendas.

For delegates in this committee, understanding the IOC's dual legacy is essential. On one hand, initiatives such as the Refugee Olympic Team (introduced in 2016) demonstrate the IOC's potential to promote inclusion and global solidarity.⁴⁹ On the other hand, the IOC has faced criticism for hosting Games in countries accused of human rights violations—such as Sochi (2014) and Beijing (2008, 2022)—which raised concerns about sportswashing and the limits of the IOC's neutrality.⁵⁰

3.1.2. The United Nations (UN)

The UN has positioned sport as a vehicle for peace and development since the early 2000s, formally recognizing it in multiple General Assembly resolutions. The Office on Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP), although closed in 2017, laid the foundation for current

⁴⁵ International Olympic Committee, 2021.

⁴⁶ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2020.

⁴⁷ International Olympic Committee, 2022.

⁴⁸ International Olympic Committee, 2021.

⁴⁹ Boykoff, 2016, p. 87.

⁵⁰ Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018, pp. 1133–1151.

UN initiatives that integrate sport into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁵¹ Key milestones include the revival of the Olympic Truce tradition, adopted by the General Assembly before each Olympic Games, and the establishment of the International Day of Sport for Development and Peace (April 6).

Beyond symbolic measures, the UN collaborates with sports federations and NGOs to address specific human rights concerns, such as gender equality, inclusion of refugees, and the prevention of child labor in sports supply chains.⁵² The UN's normative influence extends into soft law frameworks, encouraging—but not enforcing—compliance with human rights principles among sporting bodies.

3.1.3. The European Union (EU)

The EU, while lacking direct control over sports governance, uses its competencies in cultural and external relations to promote sports diplomacy. The EU Work Plan for Sport (2017–2020) explicitly identified sport as a “soft power tool” for external action and fostered initiatives to integrate human rights and good governance in European sporting policy.⁵³ The EU has also supported academic and civil society networks, such as the Erasmus+ Sport program, which funds cross-border projects on inclusion, anti-discrimination, and youth empowerment.⁵⁴

The EU's added value lies in its regional diplomacy: coordinating member states to adopt common positions on global sporting controversies (e.g., boycotts of events in Russia) and promoting European standards of transparency and accountability within international federations.

3.1.4. Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs)

A growing number of NGOs act as watchdogs and advocates in the field of sports and human rights. Organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have exposed abuses linked to mega-events, notably the exploitation of migrant workers during

⁵¹ United Nations, 2017.

⁵² Kidd, 2008, pp. 370–380.

⁵³ European Commission, 2017.

⁵⁴ Grix & Houlihan, 2014, pp. 572–596.

preparations for the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup.⁵⁵ The Centre for Sport and Human Rights provides frameworks (e.g., the *Sporting Chance Principles*) for integrating human rights into event planning and corporate governance.⁵⁶

NGOs contribute by bridging gaps between civil society, athletes, and policy makers, amplifying marginalized voices and ensuring accountability where intergovernmental institutions may fall short. Their reports and campaigns often catalyze reforms within organizations like FIFA and the IOC.

3.2. Contemporary examples of sports diplomacy

While historical examples laid the groundwork for understanding sport's diplomatic potential and recent events illustrate both the potential and the contradictions of sports diplomacy.

3.2.1. Unified Korean Olympic Team (2018 Winter Olympics)

At the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics, North and South Korea marched together under a single flag and fielded a unified women's ice hockey team - symbolic gestures that eased tensions and reopened channels for diplomatic dialogue despite deep political divides.⁵⁷ These initiatives were celebrated globally as rare moments of unity on the Korean Peninsula, demonstrating how carefully crafted sporting cooperation can create space for broader political engagement, even when formal negotiations remain stalled. Media coverage and academic commentary framed these gestures as powerful acts of soft diplomacy, fostering optimism and symbolic reconciliation despite deep-rooted tensions.⁵⁸

3.2.2. Anti-discrimination campaigns in football

Football, as the world's most popular sport, has become a central arena for campaigns against racism and discrimination. Initiatives such as FIFA's "No Room for Racism" and UEFA's "Respect" campaign aim to promote inclusion and diversity on and off the pitch.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Amnesty International, 2022.

⁵⁶ Centre for Sport and Human Rights, 2021.

⁵⁷ IOC News, 2018.

⁵⁸ Lee, 2022, p. 14.

⁵⁹ UEFA, 2021.

These campaigns gained renewed urgency following high-profile incidents of racial abuse directed at players—both in stadiums and on social media—during tournaments like UEFA Euro 2020.

While such initiatives have raised awareness and encouraged federations to adopt stricter sanctions against discriminatory behavior, their impact is visible in measures such as UEFA's minimum 10-match ban for racist conduct and FIFA's disciplinary protocols that enable teams to abandon matches in the event of serious abuse.⁶⁰ Critics argue that campaigns are often symbolic, lacking enforcement mechanisms and failing to address structural inequalities within football governance.⁶¹ Nevertheless, they illustrate how sporting institutions can influence public discourse and set normative expectations, even as they grapple with internal contradictions (e.g., hosting events in countries with restrictive human rights records).

3.2.3. Refugee Olympic team

The Refugee Olympic Team, introduced by the IOC at the 2016 Rio Games and continued in Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024, represents a landmark in the intersection of sport, diplomacy, and human rights. Composed of athletes displaced by conflict and persecution, the team competes under the Olympic flag and anthem, sending a powerful message of solidarity and inclusion.⁶²

The initiative reflects both humanitarian and diplomatic objectives: highlighting the global refugee crisis, challenging stereotypes, and promoting empathy through personal narratives of athletes.⁶³ It also aligns with the IOC's broader commitment to the Olympic ideal of universality—that sport can transcend borders and foster unity among nations.⁶⁴

While widely celebrated, the Refugee Team also faces challenges: limited resources, uncertain training conditions, and the symbolic nature of participation without pathways to national representation.⁶⁵ Yet in 2024, the team achieved a historic milestone when boxer

⁶⁰ UEFA, 2021.

⁶¹ Cleland & Cashmore, 2021, pp. 945–961.

⁶² International Olympic Committee, 2016.

⁶³ Boykoff, 2016, p. 87.

⁶⁴ International Olympic Committee, 2022.

⁶⁵ International Olympic Committee, 2016.

Cindy Ngamba won a bronze medal - the first ever for the IOC Refugee Olympic Team - demonstrating its growing competitiveness on the world stage.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, it exemplifies how sports diplomacy can amplify marginalized voices and inspire policy debates on refugee inclusion.

3.2.4. Olympic truce violations

The Olympic Truce, a centuries-old ideal revived today through UN resolutions, is meant to pause conflicts during the Games and promote peace.⁶⁷ Yet recent history illustrates its symbolic fragility. In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia during the opening of the Beijing Summer Olympics; in 2014, it annexed Crimea within days of the Sochi Winter Olympics;⁶⁸ and again in 2022, launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine shortly after the Beijing Winter Games.⁶⁹ These actions signal that geopolitical tensions frequently eclipse the truce's intention to foster diplomatic space through sport.⁷⁰ This discrepancy underscores a key challenge: without enforcement mechanisms, the Olympic Truce often serves more as aspirational rhetoric than a tool of peace—its diplomatic value persists in symbol if not in substance.⁷¹

3.2.5. Neutral athletes and eligibility controversies

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the IOC suspended team entries but allowed some Russian and Belarusian athletes to compete as "neutral," subject to *individual screening*. Criteria required proof of no support for the war and no links to the military or state propaganda.⁷² In practice, enforcement has been inconsistent. Reports showed that several Russian athletes maintained close ties with state institutions, raising doubts about neutrality.⁷³ The International Fencing Federation (FIE) controversially reinstated Russian athletes under a neutral flag for Olympic qualifiers, despite strong opposition from national

⁶⁶ International Olympic Committee, 2024.

⁶⁷ United Nations, 2023.

⁶⁸ UkraineWorld, 2023.

⁶⁹ Middle East Institute, n.d.

⁷⁰ Pandey, 2023.

⁷¹ Schubert, 2024.

⁷² PISM, 2024.

⁷³ UkraineWorld, 2023.

federations and athlete unions.⁷⁴ The IOC even urged the FIE to exclude certain athletes with military affiliations.⁷⁵

These controversies expose a deeper dilemma: the principle of “apolitical sport” is undermined when neutrality depends on federation discretion rather than clear, uniform standards.⁷⁶

3.3. Evolving Trends, Political Dynamics in Sports Diplomacy

While institutional frameworks and notable case studies illustrate the current landscape of sports diplomacy, several broader trends are redefining its practice. These developments reflect the growing agency of athletes, the contested nature of institutional neutrality, and the transformative impact of digital media. Together, they shape the political context in which sports diplomacy operates today.

3.3.1. Athlete activism and its political implications

Athlete activism has re-emerged as a powerful force in the 21st century, challenging the traditional notion that sports should remain separate from politics. Movements such as *Black Lives Matter* (BLM)⁷⁷ have mobilized athletes across sports and continents to use their platforms for advocating racial justice and systemic reform.⁷⁸ Iconic acts—such as NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem in 2016—have sparked global debates about patriotism, free expression, and the role of sport in social change.⁷⁹

Internationally, activism has extended beyond race to encompass gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and freedom of expression. For example, Iranian female football fans and athletes have campaigned for their right to attend matches, culminating in limited reforms following international pressure and FIFA intervention.⁸⁰ These movements demonstrate that athletes

⁷⁴ The Inquisitor Magazine, 2025.

⁷⁵ PISM, 2024.

⁷⁶ Schubert, 2024, pp. 32–38.

⁷⁷ Kaufman & Wolff, 2010, pp. 154–175.

⁷⁸ Keddie, 2021, pp. 561–577.

⁷⁹ Coombs & Cassilo, 2017, pp. 425–444.

⁸⁰ Tofighi, 2020, pp. 456–473.

can function as both symbolic and practical agents of diplomacy—using global visibility to raise issues that traditional diplomatic channels may neglect.⁸¹

Examples of humanitarian engagement are equally diverse. Mikaela Shiffrin’s “Share Winter” initiative promotes youth access to winter sports, while Eva Pinkelnig raised funds for Slovenian flood relief. In 2023, Tunisian tennis star Ons Jabeur donated her prize money to support victims of the war in Gaza.⁸² These actions show how athletes, beyond symbolic activism, often channel their influence into philanthropy and solidarity campaigns.

However, activism also creates tensions with sporting federations that enforce political neutrality through regulations such as the IOC’s Rule 50, which restricts protests and demonstrations during Olympic events.⁸³ This tension underscores an unresolved question: to what extent should athletes be free to act as political agents while representing their sport or nation on the global stage?

3.3.2. Institutional neutrality vs. political reality

Sporting bodies often claim neutrality to protect the universality of competition, yet their decisions inevitably intersect with politics. The IOC’s approach to Russian and Belarusian athletes following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine - permitting some to compete under a “neutral” designation - has been criticized as inconsistent and politically motivated.⁸⁴ Similarly, federations such as the International Fencing Federation (FIE) have faced backlash for allowing Russian athletes to participate in Olympic qualifiers despite explicit IOC recommendations against it, highlighting governance fragmentation and the limits of enforcement.⁸⁵

These examples echo broader historical patterns in which neutrality is selectively applied, often influenced by geopolitical alliances, economic considerations, or media pressure.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Chatziefstathiou & Henry, 2012.

⁸² Al Jazeera, 2023.

⁸³ Girginov, 2020.

⁸⁴ Schubert, 2024.

⁸⁵ PISM, 2024.

⁸⁶ Boykoff, 2016, p. 88.

Critics have further highlighted hypocrisy in how these standards are applied: while Russian athletes remain barred from full participation, Israel continues to compete despite allegations of human rights violations during the Gaza conflict.⁸⁷ The discrepancy between declared apolitical principles and the political implications of eligibility decisions erodes public trust and challenges the credibility of international sport as a diplomatic arena.⁸⁸ In September 2025, United Nations human rights experts publicly called for FIFA and UEFA to suspend Israel from international football, citing massive human rights violations and the destruction of Palestinian sports infrastructure, including stadiums and training facilities. Despite this, major international sports federations have so far resisted sanctioning Israel, reinforcing claims of selective enforcement and undermining sport's perceived neutrality. The contrast between the swift, unified response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the lack of comparable action toward Israel has intensified accusations of geopolitical double standards in global sport governance.⁸⁹

For sports diplomacy to maintain legitimacy, institutions may need to develop more transparent criteria for political engagement and clearer mechanisms for reconciling human rights obligations with the principle of inclusivity.

3.3.3. The role of social media in shaping sports diplomacy

Digital platforms have transformed the speed, reach, and nature of sports diplomacy. Athletes now bypass traditional media to communicate directly with global audiences, enabling rapid mobilization around causes and amplifying political messages.⁹⁰ Campaigns such as Marcus Rashford's advocacy for free school meals in the UK or Naomi Osaka's use of face masks bearing the names of victims of racial violence during the 2020 US Open illustrate how social media can merge personal activism with diplomatic impact. Rashford used his platform to pressure the UK government into extending food support for vulnerable children, successfully sparking national policy change.⁹¹ Osaka, meanwhile, used her visibility during one of tennis's biggest tournaments to honour victims of racial injustice,

⁸⁷ Irish Times, 2024.

⁸⁸ Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018, pp. 1133–1151.

⁸⁹ United Nations Human Rights Council, 2025.

⁹⁰ Hutchins & Rowe, 2012.

⁹¹ SOFII, 2020.

turning each match into a statement that resonated far beyond the court.⁹² Both cases show how athletes can influence public discourse and political agendas by combining global reach with personal conviction.

Social media also enables transnational solidarity among athletes and fans, fostering a global public sphere for discussing human rights issues in sport.⁹³ However, it presents challenges, including the spread of misinformation, online abuse targeting activist athletes, and the politicization of sports discourse in highly polarized digital environments.⁹⁴ For instance, in 2024 World Athletics announced AI-based protection for 25 athletes after they had been subject to extensive cyberbullying campaigns, underscoring the scale of online abuse targeting activist athletes.⁹⁵ Similarly, misinformation proliferates on platforms such as X, where fake accounts like “Ballsack Sports” have published fabricated quotes that were mistakenly picked up by mainstream media outlets, showing how quickly false narratives can shape public debates in sport.⁹⁶

In this sense, social media functions as both a tool and a battleground in contemporary sports diplomacy—empowering marginalized voices while also amplifying divisions.

4. Main challenges

4.1. Sportswashing

Sportswashing refers to the strategic use of sporting events, sponsorships, and high-profile athlete endorsements by states—often authoritarian regimes—to improve their international image, distract from human rights abuses, and project soft power.⁹⁷ Through this practice, governments aim to associate themselves with the positive values of sport—fair play, unity, excellence—while simultaneously downplaying or obscuring political repression, censorship, or systemic discrimination. Sportswashing poses a direct challenge to the role of sports diplomacy in advancing democracy and human rights, as it risks turning sport into a tool for legitimizing undemocratic regimes rather than promoting reform.

⁹² Time, 2020.

⁹³ Toffoletti & Mewett, 2012.

⁹⁴ Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014, pp. 295–314.

⁹⁵ Reuters, 2024.

⁹⁶ Front Office Sports, 2024.

⁹⁷ Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018, pp. 1133–1151.

4.1.1. Key examples of sportswashing

4.1.1.1. Qatar 2022 FIFA World cup

Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup illustrates how mega-events can serve as instruments of state-led image management. While the tournament was framed as a milestone for the Middle East, it also drew unprecedented scrutiny for the treatment of migrant workers under the kafala system, restrictions on freedom of expression, and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people.⁹⁸ Labour reforms announced by the Qatari government, such as introducing a minimum wage and easing mobility restrictions, were seen by some observers as direct responses to international pressure, but implementation gaps persisted.⁹⁹

Despite reforms, reports by NGOs and international institutions revealed continuing exploitation. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch highlighted that many workers still faced late or unpaid wages, unsafe working conditions, and retaliation for speaking out.¹⁰⁰ The International Labour Organization acknowledged progress but noted that enforcement mechanisms remained weak and abuses widespread.¹⁰¹ Scholars argue that these reforms were more about mitigating reputational damage than genuinely transforming labour practices, raising questions about whether the improvements would endure beyond the World Cup.¹⁰² Yet despite ongoing concerns, Qatar is set to host the Men's basketball world championship in 2027, signaling that the international sports community remains willing to award major events even amid unresolved human rights issues.¹⁰³

4.1.1.2. Beijing 2008 & 2022 Olympic Games

Both Beijing Olympics were leveraged by the Chinese government to showcase economic and organizational prowess, but they were accompanied by accusations of severe human rights abuses—ranging from the suppression of dissent ahead of the 2008 Games to ongoing

⁹⁸ Amnesty International, 2022.

⁹⁹ Human Rights Watch, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Amnesty International, 2022.

¹⁰¹ International Labour Organization, 2022.

¹⁰² Baker, 2023, pp. 321–339.

¹⁰³ FIBA, 2023.

allegations of mass detention and cultural repression of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang during the 2022 Games.¹⁰⁴ Diplomatic boycotts by several states in 2022 sought to challenge China's narrative, but the IOC maintained that political neutrality prevented it from taking a stance on the host's domestic policies.

4.1.1.3. Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics

Russia used the Sochi Games to present itself as a modern, dynamic power, yet the event coincided with increased repression of political opposition, restrictions on LGBTQ+ rights, and, shortly after the closing ceremony, the annexation of Crimea.¹⁰⁵ Critics argued that the international spotlight provided by the Games helped legitimize President Putin's domestic and foreign policy agendas.

4.1.1.4. Saudi Arabia's sporting portfolio

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has invested billions into global sports—hosting Formula 1 Grand Prix races, founding the LIV Golf league, and bidding for future mega-events. While these efforts have boosted the country's visibility, they have also been interpreted as attempts to overshadow criticism of its human rights record, including the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and repression of women's rights activists.¹⁰⁶

4.1.2. Responses and limitations

Reactions to sportswashing vary across actors. NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch frequently use mega-events as opportunities to highlight human rights abuses, mobilizing campaigns that pressure hosts and governing bodies to adopt reforms. Some states engage in diplomatic boycotts, as seen with the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, while others rely on conditional participation to maintain influence from within. Sporting federations, however, often remain reluctant to confront host nations directly, citing the principles of neutrality and universality.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Xu, 2022, pp. 47–54.

¹⁰⁵ Müller, 2015, pp. 627–642.

¹⁰⁶ Reiche & Al-Thani, 2021.

¹⁰⁷ Boykoff, 2016, p. 90.

The IOC and FIFA have introduced human rights frameworks—such as the IOC’s Strategic Framework on Human Rights 2022¹⁰⁸ and FIFA’s Human Rights Policy¹⁰⁹ but enforcement remains inconsistent. Commercial interests, coupled with the complex logistics of relocating mega-events, often outweigh ethical concerns, limiting the effectiveness of these measures.

4.1.3. Challenges for sports diplomacy

The persistence of sportswashing highlights an inherent tension in sports diplomacy: while mega-events offer unparalleled opportunities for dialogue and visibility, they can equally be exploited to legitimize authoritarian governance. This tension underscores the importance for diplomats, policymakers, and sporting institutions to develop strategies that maximize the democratic and human rights benefits of international sport while minimizing its potential misuse. For this committee, the challenge lies in proposing mechanisms—such as independent human rights assessments, transparent bidding processes, and stronger sanctions—that can mitigate sportswashing without undermining the unifying potential of sport.

4.2. Political manipulation and restrictions on athletes

Political manipulation of sport occurs when governments or political actors use their authority to control, censor, or punish athletes in ways that advance political objectives but undermine freedoms of expression, association, or movement. While sports diplomacy ideally functions as a platform for dialogue and inclusion, such manipulation can weaponize sport as an instrument of coercion and propaganda.¹¹⁰

4.2.1. Forms of manipulations

One common mechanism is state-imposed restrictions on athlete participation. During the Cold War, the Olympic boycotts of 1980 (Moscow) and 1984 (Los Angeles) were emblematic of how governments denied athletes the chance to compete in order to send geopolitical

¹⁰⁸ International Olympic Committee, 2022.

¹⁰⁹ FIFA, 2017.

¹¹⁰ Allison & Monnington, 2002, pp. 106–134.

signals.¹¹¹ In more recent years, collective bans—such as the exclusion of Russian and Belarusian athletes following the invasion of Ukraine—have been justified on grounds of upholding the integrity of sport but have also raised questions about collective punishment and due process.¹¹²

Another form involves reprisals against athletes who speak out. Chinese tennis player Peng Shuai's disappearance from public life after accusing a senior official of sexual assault in 2021 underscored the risks faced by athletes in authoritarian contexts.¹¹³ Similarly, Iranian weightlifter Kianoush Rostami faced sanctions for showing solidarity with protest movements, while Belarusian sprinter Krystsina Tsimanouskaya sought asylum during the Tokyo 2020 Olympics after publicly criticizing her coaches—a situation widely interpreted as politically motivated retaliation.¹¹⁴

4.2.2. Implications for sports diplomacy

Such manipulation erodes trust in the neutrality of sporting institutions and reduces the capacity of sport to act as a genuine diplomatic bridge. When athletes are silenced or punished for their political views, the credibility of sport as a platform for open exchange is diminished. Moreover, reprisals against politically active athletes risk deterring others from engaging in activism, perpetuating a climate of self-censorship.¹¹⁵

For policymakers, the challenge is to balance legitimate measures—such as sanctions aimed at upholding international law—with the protection of individual athletes' rights. This may require clearer guidelines from organizations like the IOC on permissible grounds for exclusion, as well as stronger mechanisms to shield athletes from reprisals by their governments.

5. Possible solutions and recommendations

5.1. Strengthening institutional frameworks

¹¹¹ Keys, 2013, p. 13.

¹¹² Slatič, 2021, pp. 32–38.

¹¹³ Xu, 2022, pp. 47–54.

¹¹⁴ BBC, 2021.

¹¹⁵ Murray, 2023, p. 27.

One of the most pressing challenges in aligning sports diplomacy with the advancement of democracy and human rights lies in the governance structures of international sport. While organizations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) wield significant global influence, they have historically operated with limited transparency and accountability.¹¹⁶ Strengthening these frameworks is essential for ensuring that hosting and organizing events meet human rights standards.

5.1.1. Embedding human rights into governance

A key reform involves the systematic integration of human rights obligations into the statutes and operational guidelines of sporting bodies. In 2017, FIFA adopted a Human Rights Policy aligned with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, committing to prevent and address human rights abuses connected to its activities.¹¹⁷ The IOC followed suit in 2022 with its Strategic Framework on Human Rights, which sets out commitments to non-discrimination, freedom of expression, and athlete welfare.¹¹⁸ However, both organizations face criticism for weak enforcement and selective application.¹¹⁹

Mandatory independent human rights audits for mega-event hosts could strengthen compliance. These audits would assess labor rights, freedom of the press, and protections for vulnerable groups, with public reporting to ensure accountability.¹²⁰

5.1.2. Democratizing decision-making

Reforms should also address representation in decision-making bodies. Research shows that international sport governance remains dominated by a small network of political and business elites, often detached from athlete and civil society perspectives.¹²¹ Expanding

¹¹⁶ Chappelet, 2016.

¹¹⁷ FIFA, 2017.

¹¹⁸ International Olympic Committee, 2022.

¹¹⁹ Geeraert, 2021.

¹²⁰ Hobbs, 2022, pp. 567–584.

¹²¹ Forster, 2006, pp. 72–83.

voting rights to include athlete commissions, human rights experts, and independent NGOs could enhance legitimacy and balance commercial interests with ethical imperatives.

5.1.3. Sanctions and compliance mechanisms

Finally, sports bodies must move beyond symbolic declarations by adopting clear sanctioning mechanisms for host states and member federations that violate agreed human rights standards. These could include the suspension of hosting rights, fines, or exclusion from bidding processes, thereby ensuring that values are not negotiable in exchange for commercial gains.¹²²

5.2. Best practices and policy suggestions

While institutional reform is necessary, practical measures and existing best practices provide a roadmap for leveraging sports diplomacy responsibly.

5.2.1. Human rights clauses and hosting agreements

One promising development is the inclusion of human rights clauses in event bidding and hosting contracts. Since 2017, FIFA's bidding documents for the 2026 World Cup have required candidate countries to submit detailed human rights strategies and demonstrate stakeholder consultation.¹²³ The Commonwealth Games Federation has adopted similar clauses, linking them to independent monitoring.¹²⁴

5.2.2. Athlete protection mechanisms

Establishing athlete ombudsperson offices at the international and national level can protect athletes from reprisals and provide confidential reporting channels for abuses.¹²⁵ The World Players Association's "Universal Declaration of Player Rights" offers a blueprint, recognizing freedoms of expression, movement, and association for athletes globally.¹²⁶

5.2.3. Partnership with civil society

¹²² Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018, pp. 1133–1151.

¹²³ FIFA, 2017.

¹²⁴ McGillivray & McPherson, 2020, pp. 165–180.

¹²⁵ Henry & Lee, 2004, pp. 1–24.

¹²⁶ World Players Association, 2017.

Collaborations between sports bodies, NGOs, and intergovernmental organizations can enhance monitoring and advocacy. For example, the Centre for Sport and Human Rights, established in 2018, works with stakeholders to provide guidance on integrating human rights into sport governance and event planning.¹²⁷ Such partnerships help bridge the gap between high-level policy and on-the-ground realities.

5.2.4. Transparency and public engagement

Regular publication of impact assessments—covering social, economic, and human rights outcomes—can improve accountability and foster informed public debate. Digital platforms that allow public reporting of violations during mega-events can also increase transparency and empower citizens to hold organizers accountable.¹²⁸

6. Conclusion

Sports diplomacy continues to represent a unique intersection between international relations, cultural exchange, and the pursuit of peace. Rooted in historical traditions yet responsive to contemporary challenges, it possesses the capacity to unite nations, amplify marginalized voices, and open channels for dialogue where conventional diplomacy may falter. Nevertheless, its potential is not without risk, as political actors may employ sport as a vehicle for image management or to divert attention from pressing human rights concerns. The international community must therefore remain vigilant, ensuring that the values of fairness, inclusivity, and respect underpin all sporting engagements. Only by coupling symbolic acts with concrete commitments can sports diplomacy truly serve as a force for mutual understanding, cooperation, and lasting progress.

7. Further reading

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2. International Olympic Committee. (2021). *Olympic Charter*. IOC. <https://olympics.com/ioc/olympic-charter>

¹²⁷ Centre for Sport and Human Rights, 2019.

¹²⁸ Gauthier, 2021, pp. 1565–1582.

3. United Nations. (2017). *Sport for development and peace: Towards achieving the SDGs*. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/what-we-do/sport-for-development-and-peace.html>
4. UN Human Rights Council. (2025). *UN Experts Call for Suspension of Israel from International Football Amid Unfolding Gaza Crisis*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/09/un-experts-call-suspension-israel-international-football-amid-unfolding>

8. Issues to consider

- This article analyzes the tension between the Olympic principle of political neutrality and the growing expectation that international sport take a stand on human rights.

Schubert, M. (2024). *Neutrality of the Olympic Movement against recent conflicts*. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/384902254>

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- This report presents an institutional perspective on the integration of human rights into the governance of sport. It provides a framework for thinking about current mechanisms within the IOC and proposes standards for accountability.

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TOPIC 2: The inclusion of transgender, intersex and non-binary athletes in competitive sport

1. General introduction

1.1. Relevant definitions and positions of transgender, intersex and non-binary individuals in current society

The key distinction one must understand to be able to discuss the issue of transgender individuals, is the distinction between sex and gender. As per World health organization, sex refers to an individual's biological characteristics, specifically to one's hormones, chromosomes and reproductive organs.¹²⁹ It is, however, important to note, that there are abnormalities to how we define sex; for example, females with three X chromosomes (as opposed to the usual two) can still 'appear normal physically and mentally and are fertile'.¹³⁰ More on persons whose reproductive or sexual anatomy does not align with their biological sex to follow when discussing the concept of intersex individuals, this intermezzo is mainly intended to prove that even sex, as a 'rigid' category is not as clearly defined as it might appear at first.

Now onto what *gender* stands for. WHO defines it as '[referring to] the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time'.¹³¹ Whereas sources, focused mainly on gender advocacy are more likely to perceive and define gender (or gender identity) as more individual and abstract of an idea. *Advocates for trans equality* for example define gender identity as one's internal knowledge of their gender.¹³² On that note, in order to be as clear in all discussions as possible, as well as mindful and respectful, the use of the phrase 'assigned sex (at birth)' is used when referring to one's biological predispositions, as opposed to using sex or even gender.

¹²⁹ World Health Organization. *Gender and health*.

¹³⁰ Powell-Hamilton, 2025.

¹³¹ World Health Organization. *Gender and health*.

¹³² *About Transgender People*. Advocates for Trans Equality.

With the distinction between *sex* and *gender* in mind, it is much easier to define what the term *transgender* stands for. The very basic Wikipedia definition is, truthfully, sufficient in grasping the essence of what being a transgender individual is, as it defines them as a “person [who] has a gender identity different from that typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.”¹³³

Advocates for trans equality take a step further, and define transgender more precisely, as a ‘broad term that can be used to describe people whose gender identity is different from the gender they were thought to be when they were born’. Note, that transgender individuals do not necessarily identify with gender that corresponds to either of the biological sexes. The term *transgender* is an umbrella term that covers not only those that do identify as either a woman (who was assigned male at birth; AMAB) or a man (who was assigned female at birth; AFAB), but also those who identify as non-binary, gender-queer or otherwise.¹³⁴

A useful phrase to keep in mind at this point would also be *cisgender*, which describes those, whose gender identity corresponds to characteristics typically linked to the sex they were assigned at birth; that is women who were assigned female at birth, and men who were assigned male at birth.¹³⁵

Considering it is in the title of the topic, the definition of *non-binary* is also relevant. It is a very difficult topic, primarily due to lack of overall inclusion of non-binary individuals in studies that research different aspects of transgender individuals, and secondly due to how difficult it is to factually explain how one understands their gender, which is much easier with trans men or trans women, as there is a general (non definable) perception of what being a ‘man’ or being a ‘woman’ is, whereas it is generally difficult for an individual that does not identify as non-binary to ‘understand’ what it means, or even have a clear idea of what being non-binary looks like.¹³⁶ It is a very interesting topic, hence there will be some more materials listed in the Further reading subtopic. For purposes of this discussion however, it is sufficient to refer to the definition of *non-binary* as presented by *Advocates for*

¹³³ Wikimedia Foundation, 2025.

¹³⁴ *About Transgender People*. Advocates for Trans equality.

¹³⁵ Ashley et al., 2024.

¹³⁶ Darwin, 2017.

trans equality, which is as follows: “People whose gender is not male or female use many different terms to describe themselves, with nonbinary being one of the most common (sometimes spelled with a hyphen, as “non-binary”). Other terms include genderqueer, agender, bigender, genderfluid, and more. None of these terms mean exactly the same thing – but all speak to an experience of gender that is not simply male or female.”¹³⁷ Individuals identifying outside of the binary genders might use they/them as their preferred gender pronouns, however it is not a criterion to use these as one’s preferred gender pronouns in order to be able to identify as non-binary.¹³⁸

And lastly, on defining what *intersex* stands for. *Planned parenthood* defines it as a “general term, used for a variety of situations in which a person is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn’t fit the boxes of ‘female’ or ‘male.’”¹³⁹ That can mean that an individual has both ovarian and testicular tissue, that their chromosome combination is not XX or XY (which are the typical two combinations) but rather, say XXY. In such instances, the parents and doctors at birth decide which sex to assign to the child.¹⁴⁰

1.1.1. The process of transitioning

It is important to note that given the nature of gender being incredibly fluid, there is no one way to transition. Some transgender individuals might find it sufficient to change their name and start using different gender pronouns. Leaving aside the societal acceptance of people that chose to transition, not all countries legally allow an individual to begin the process.

As of October 2025, it is legal to change one’s gender without any restrictions in 32 countries, 21 require a medical diagnosis, and 24 allow for an individual to change their gender upon undergoing medical surgery.¹⁴¹ While transgender individuals used to be diagnosed with ‘transsexualism’ or even ‘gender identity disorder’, the 11th edition of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-11) adapted more

¹³⁷ *Understanding nonbinary people: How to be Respectful and Supportive*. Advocates for Trans equality.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *What is intersex?*. Planned Parenthood.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Right to change legal gender by country*, 2025.

contemporary phrases to describe people's gender identity in regards to the sex they were assigned at birth.¹⁴² While the World Health Organization (WHO) did change the classification of transgender health issues from being classified as mental or behavioural disorders, many states, as previously mentioned, still require a medical diagnosis in order to allow an individual to even begin their legal and medical transition. It is thus, in some countries, still classified as a mental disorder.¹⁴³

The legal transitioning can look like an individual changing their legal name, acquiring all means of identification with the correct (new) name, and possibly even changing the gender marker on their legal documents, enabling them to enter a civil partnership or get married as the gender they identify with.¹⁴⁴

Aside from social transitioning, which can either predate or correlate with legal transitioning, medical transition is oftentimes also a key part of an individual embracing their gender identity. While it is not necessary for an individual to undergo medical treatment in order for their gender identity to be valid, many still opt for it, and perceive it as crucial in embracing their gender. When discussing medical transitioning, we talk either about hormone therapy or about gender affirming surgeries.¹⁴⁵

Hormone therapy consists of administration of hormones to people, who want to achieve their body reflecting their gender, when it does not correlate to their sex. Firstly, on masculinizing hormone therapy. Its intentions are to “(1) induce the development of male secondary sex characteristics and (2) suppress female secondary sex characteristics”.¹⁴⁶ Testosterone can either be injected or applied in the form of a gel or patches. The results of testosterone therapy highly reflect the average experience of a cisgender male's puberty, with the addition of menstruation cycle ceasing to appear.¹⁴⁷

Feminizing hormone therapy has the exact opposite goals to the masculinizing one; that is ‘to both stimulate the development of female secondary sex characteristics and suppress

¹⁴² World Health Organization. *Gender incongruence and Transgender Health in the ICD*.

¹⁴³ *Transgender no longer recognised as “disorder” by WHO*, 2019.

¹⁴⁴ *Transitioning: Gender identity (social, medical or legal)*, 2025.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Fortin et al., 2020.

¹⁴⁷ *Transitioning: Gender identity (social, medical or legal)*, 2025.; Fortin et al, 2020.

male secondary sex characteristics'.¹⁴⁸ It normally consists of applications of oestrogen, as well as anti-androgen (which is essentially a substance, that keeps androgens (male sex hormones) from binding,¹⁴⁹ and is used in hormone therapy with the intention of reducing amounts of oestrogen needed to reduce testosterone levels).¹⁵⁰ It is important to note at this point, that taking hormones can cause certain irreversible changes, causing most doctors to set a minimum required amount of time one must identify with a certain gender, before hormone therapy can be prescribed to them.¹⁵¹

1.2. Sex verification methods

Since women began to participate in the Olympic Games, there has been a fear of 'males' attempting to participate in the women's category in order to get better results. As such, different methods were being used at different points, which aimed at determining whether an individuals' gender identity corresponds to their biological sex, which was checked either via 'naked parades' in front of doctors, or later on with chromosome and later DNA testing. More on the history of sex verification under the point 2.2.

As of October 2025, sex verification is not mandatory to all, as the IOC quit requiring it back in 1999. However, individual sports' committees are the ones responsible for how they approach the topic. Many still opt to test eligibility, mainly through testing testosterone levels of female athletes. The aim is presented to be leveling playing fields; however, the methods are being questioned on a regular basis, as its legitimacy is questionable, due to notable interference with very personal and private information regarding individual athletes. Specifically, the testing can mean that individuals find out for the very first time that they are, for example, intersex. That is very problematic, as it quickly becomes rather public, causing a lot of potential harm to these individuals.¹⁵² Even finding out about one's karyotype (that is picture of one's chromosomes) not matching the sex they were assigned at birth can and does cause a large shock to individuals, as gender identity is one of our core

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ *NCI Dictionary of Cancer terms*. Comprehensive Cancer Information - NCI.

¹⁵⁰ Fortin et al, 2020.

¹⁵¹ *Transitioning: Gender identity (social, medical or legal)*, 2025.

¹⁵² Resta, 2024.

beliefs about ourselves. Thus finding out one's biology does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth, raised into, and even possibly identify with can be a rather traumatising experience.¹⁵³

But even leaving aside the gender aspect of what DNA and chromosome testing can mean in terms of possibly devastating news an individual can get because of them; there is also the aspect of possibly finding out about genetic diseases, which makes the issue even wider.¹⁵⁴

1.3. International legislation

Relevant legislation to this discussion that should be taken into consideration and furtherly studied is divisible in two main categories, that will be presented in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Firstly, the laws in which the right to equality and non-discrimination is addressed. Generally, it is granted already in Article 2 of The UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, in which it appeals to the states to 'respect and to ensure to all individuals within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction the rights recognized in the present Covenant without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex [...], birth or other status.' Furthermore, it demands the states to 'undertake the necessary steps (where the rights are not provided by existing legislative or other measures) in accordance with its constitutional processes and with the provisions of the present Covenant, to adopt such laws or other measures as may be necessary to give effect to the rights recognized in the present Covenant.' It is thus clear that ICCPR stands firmly against discrimination based on any circumstance of an individual.¹⁵⁵ While gender identity is not mentioned directly, it is logically safe to assume that it falls under the category of 'other status'.¹⁵⁶

Furtherly, in Article 26, ICCPR directly addresses people's equality before the law, specifically in that "the law shall prohibit any discrimination and guarantee to all persons

¹⁵³ Newbould, 2016. pp 256–259.

¹⁵⁴ Wiesemann, 2011. pp 216–220.

¹⁵⁵ *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 1966.

¹⁵⁶ *Legal gender recognition in the EU: The journeys of trans people towards full equality*, 2020.

equal and effective protection against discrimination on any ground such as race, colour, sex [...], birth or other status.”¹⁵⁷

Moreover, the stance against discrimination is made clear in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, specifically in Article 2(a), which states that the states must embrace and “embody the principle of the equality of men and women in their national constitutions or other appropriate legislation [...]”. Even though the words ‘men’ and ‘women’ should be associated with gender identity, rather than biological sex (which should be defined by ‘female’ or ‘male’), we should interpret it as the international community being prompted to look above the stereotypes and perceive and view people, regardless of their sex and/or gender equally. As such, it is very relevant in terms of the fact that many arguments against inclusion of transgender athletes in sports are rooted in assumptions of disparity of physical (and sometimes even mental; see more under discussion of banning trans women from competing in the female category of chess) strength of males and females. While it is not necessarily the most direct in addressing the topic, it certainly opens the question of how the discussion of inclusion of transgender individuals in sports impacts the overall public discourse and perception of imbalance of males and females.¹⁵⁸ That is to say, the discussion should not be focused purely on whether or not transgender athletes should be perceived as the gender identity they identify with, but it should also be addressed, whether dividing athletes based on their biological sex or gender identity is even truly the rational way of dividing the categories; more on that later.

Secondly, on the rights to ones’ privacy and bodily autonomy. This is mainly relevant regarding sex verification and its legitimacy. ICCPR addresses this in Article 17, stating that “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his honour and reputation.”¹⁵⁹ Sex verification can be classified either as interference with one’s privacy, as well as an attack on one’s honour and reputation.

¹⁵⁷ *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 1966.

¹⁵⁸ *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, 1979.

¹⁵⁹ *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 1966.

The latter is a general problem even outside of sports, with the rise of ‘transvestigation’ on social media, which is essentially people on the internet guessing or assuming a celebrity’s gender; more specifically whether or not their gender identity correlates with the sex they were assigned at birth. People base these discussions on assumed facial and bodily characteristics that might ‘give away’ their biological sex.¹⁶⁰ The issue becomes much more prominent for individuals that are outright ‘accused’ of being transgender, which happens in sports more often than in other contexts; it can prompt hateful discussions; even if the individual later turns out not to be transgender at all. More on that under addressing the “boxers’ scandal”.

2. Historical background

2.1. Historical development in the perception of gender

The biggest leap forward in terms of researching gender and pushing for legitimizing gender affirmative healthcare was Magnus Hirschfeld, a German doctor and sexology expert. He made several relevant arguments in favour of queerness not being perceived as an illness, but rather as a natural part of human diversity.¹⁶¹

He also funded a clinic, called ‘the German Institute for Sexual Science’, already in 1919, as well as coined the term ‘transsexualism’ in 1923. The institute was the first institution to offer gender affirming surgeries, such as, for example, a surgical castration procedure, done on Lili Elbe, a transgender woman, back in 1930. She went on to undergo three more surgeries after that one, completing her transition fully by 1931. Interestingly, she was also allowed to legally change her name and sex on her documents and passport, due to having completed the surgeries, and as such transitioning fully.¹⁶²

After that, the movement in Europe died down, due to Nazi policies targeting LGBTQ+ individuals in general, as well as specifically Hirschfeld and his Institute,¹⁶³ which is to this

¹⁶⁰ Webster, 2024.

¹⁶¹ Silverman-Gitin, 2024.

¹⁶² *Lili Elbe*, 2022.

¹⁶³ Silverman-Gitin, 2024.

day credited with having paved the way for modern use of hormones and surgeries in the gender affirming process.

Meanwhile, Harry Benjamin, a German American physician, was the first to push for the perception as transgender individuals as people with a biological, rather than with a psychological problem, as well as stood for the idea that the condition can thus be ‘treated’ with hormone and surgical therapy.¹⁶⁴

A very relevant moment in the general LGBTQ+ history, as well as specifically in the history of activism for transgender rights, is the Stonewall uprising, which took place in 1969. It started with a police raid of a gay bar in New York, called the Stonewall Inn. While it is not fully clear who took the initiative of responding with the riots, a fact remains that two most known faces of the resistance are two transgender activists: Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera. While transgender people were not overly welcomed even in the progressive LGBTQ+ circles at the time of the riot, it later opened the door to plenty of discussions regarding the topic and was as such one of the crucial moments in the movement for transgender recognition and rights.¹⁶⁵

Following the raise in discussions about the state of transgender people in society, Sweden was the first country to legally allow ‘changing’ one’s gender, already in 1972,¹⁶⁶ thus opening the stage for more countries to begin acknowledging and processing the option of granting transgender people means of changing their gender legally, as well as to enable them to partake in medical procedures that enable their appearance to match the gender they identify with.

In the 1980s, the general opinion still equated ‘transsexualism’ with an illness, which was changed in 2013, from ‘gender identity disorder’ to ‘gender dysphoria in children/in adolescents and adults’, giving the situation less negative connotation. The overall narrative on what being transgender means, and how it should be treated from a medical and legal perspective is becoming increasingly open.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Carswell et al, 2022.

¹⁶⁵ Stanton, 2025.

¹⁶⁶ *LGBTQI rights in Sweden*, 2025.

¹⁶⁷ Carswell et al, 2022.

On this note, there are attempts at recognising gender as a wider concept, that is outside of the binary perception of it. There have been major pushes to include accurate representation of transgender individuals in media, as well as to begin utilising gender inclusive language (that is saying firefighter instead of fireman/firewoman).¹⁶⁸ Another notable example of attempts at widening the perception of gender, is the push towards introduction of an 'X' mark on passports, that would stand in place of either 'M' or 'F' which are typically used to describe the gender (or sometimes sex) of the identification's owner. As of September 2024, there were 18 countries that issued passports or other forms of identification with 'X' as the gender marker.¹⁶⁹

2.2. Beginnings of “sex verification” in sports

Modern day Olympics can be linked back to 1896, when they were aiming to ‘develop an international sporting festival for the youth of the world based on the ideas and ideals of the ancient Olympics Games’.¹⁷⁰ Needless to say, the Olympics firstly only allowed for males to participate, under the glimpse of following the ancient traditions. However, there were smaller pushes for women to be allowed to participate as well, specifically coming from individual organizing committees. Shelia Mitchell however, in her article on women’s participation in the Olympics from 1977, points out that women were mainly included in sports, which were “aesthetically appealing” and “displayed the female body advantageously”.¹⁷¹

That is to say, that the female participation in the Olympics was, in the beginning, not a true push for equality, but rather yet another means of objectifying women under the glimpse of striving towards emancipation. This is important to bear in mind whenever discussing the purpose of dividing sports based on one’s gender and/or sex. While it could be argued that the situation has improved, it sadly does not appear so, as there have been many controversies in recent years regarding the clothing options female athletes have. Namely,

¹⁶⁸ Sandhu, 2020.

¹⁶⁹ Niewiarowski, 2024.

¹⁷⁰ Mitchell, 1977. pp 208–228.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

there has been a heated discussion about Nike's proposed outfits, where the 'female' outfit was very revealing, and not truly practical from any physical perspectives.¹⁷²

Leaving aside the fact that a push for equality was not the goal of female participation in Olympics, the process of sex verification at the very beginnings is rather problematic as well. In order to ensure that female athletes competing were not 'too masculine', the IOC subjected them to a "nude parade in front of a panel of doctors whose job it was to verify the sex of the competitors".¹⁷³

In 1968, the IOC took a step further and implemented a policy demanding so-called 'gender verification', relying on the Barr chromosome test, which was then used all the way until 1992. The test was designed to detect inactive X chromosomes and hence determine whether a competitor is eligible for competing in the female category. It was believed to be less invasive, as it did not require the visual component of what was previously established as the means of checking athletes' sex.¹⁷⁴ However, these tests were proven to be inaccurate already by 1986, when it came to light that the tests oftentimes flag individuals who 'are undeniably female', if they had any type of a genetic disorder (for example androgen insensitivity syndrome).¹⁷⁵ On the other hand, the tests would not flag individuals with XXY chromosomes, even though they express 'male' physical characteristics. As such, this way of dividing athletes was not able to even accurately determine people's biological sex, nor did it accommodate the complexity of all existing chromosomal and genetic variations.¹⁷⁶

When the laboratory-based sex verification was proven to be insufficient, the international sports community replaced the chromosome testing with DNA testing, based on essentially attempting to detect the SRY gene, which "signals the developmental pathway for males".¹⁷⁷

Those tests were, however, also wrong on multiple occasions, specifically falsely flagging certain female athletes that were later on cleared to compete regardless. In 1996 Summer Olympics, 8 female athletes tested positive with the test, meaning they were flagged as

¹⁷² Shamim, 2024.

¹⁷³ Cooky et al, 2013. pp 103–111.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Elsas et al, 2000. pp 249–254.

¹⁷⁶ Cooky et al, 2013. pp 103–111.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

potentially not female, however were later allowed to compete, following further medical testing.¹⁷⁸

By 2000, the IOC abolished sex verification as a mandatory requirement. They did, nevertheless, hold onto the right of ‘verifying’ an athlete’s sex and biological predispositions, had there been any raised suspicions in regard to a specific individual. In 2011, the policy was furtherly adapted under the title *Regulations Governing Eligibility of females with Hyperandrogenism to compete in Women's Competition*, with main changes being utilising more inclusive language. Namely, it dropped the phrase ‘gender verification’ and instead opting for ‘sex verification’, as well as it explicitly allowed for female athletes with hyperandrogenism (which is a “state of excess production of 'male' hormones”¹⁷⁹) to compete in the women’s category, so long as they inform The International Amateur Athletics Federation in advance, and have androgen levels ‘below the normal male range’, which is verified in front of a panel of doctors, who decide whether or not a specific individual is allowed to compete in women’s category.¹⁸⁰

2.3. Historically notable trans and intersex athletes

Stella Walsh was a sprinter and long jumper born in Poland, which she represented at the Olympics. Aside from that, she set 37 ‘marks that could be considered world records’,¹⁸¹ however there were suspicions of her running style being ‘too similar to a man’s’¹⁸², thus the IAAF only recognized 14 out of those marks as world records. Her autopsy following her death did reveal ‘mixed sexual characteristics, although certain media descriptions that she was a man are not fully accurate. The final autopsy findings were one of gynandromorphism, meaning mixed internal sexual organs’.¹⁸³

Laurel Hubbard is the first openly transgender woman who competed in the Olympics, in 2020. She began her career before she came out in the male category, causing a lot of

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Sharma et al, 2021.

¹⁸⁰ Cooky et al, 2013. pp 103–111.; IAAF, 2011.

¹⁸¹ *Stanisława Walasiewicz*. Olympics.

¹⁸² Encyclopaedia Britannica. *Stanisława Walasiewicz: The Curious Story of Stella Walsh*.

¹⁸³ *Stanisława Walasiewicz*. Olympics.

discussions about the legitimacy of her inclusion in the women's category. However, New Zealand (which she represented) stood by her, as her testosterone levels were below a certain threshold.¹⁸⁴

The first openly transgender and non-binary athlete to win the golden medal also achieved that in the 2020 Olympics. **Quinn**, a non-binary Canadian soccer player, contributed greatly to the Canadian women's soccer team taking home the first-place trophy. However, their achievement did open the question of where non-binary individuals fall when all other athletes are divided into two groups based on their gender. Quinn competed in the women's category, which correlates to the sex they were assigned at birth, thus they did not face too many controversies from that perspective, but rather mainly opened the floor to a more serious discussion on where non-binary athletes stand in regards to gender categories, and more over if these even make sense or are crucial enough to core values of sports to justify all potential controversies they could open.¹⁸⁵

Mark Weston is an intersex individual, who was assigned female at birth, and competed as an athlete in the women's category for several years before coming out as a trans man. He stopped competing after beginning the process of transitioning after he came out in 1936, as he started to feel it was not right for him to compete with women.

Caster Semyana is a two-time Olympics and three-time world champion. After breaking her own record back in 2009, it was requested she take a sex verification test, which revealed that she was born with differences of sexual development (DSD), meaning her testosterone levels were elevated. The only reason that she was able to compete again after the discovery, is that she began taking testosterone reducing drugs, which heavily impacted her mental state.¹⁸⁶

Renee Richards is a trans woman, who came out fairly late in her life, as she has reported she tried to suppress her identity, as the existence of transgender individuals was not widely accepted in the 1970s US. She underwent gender affirming surgeries at the age of 40, in 1975. However, the major controversy surrounding her happened two years later, where she

¹⁸⁴ BBC, 2021.

¹⁸⁵ Pruitt-Young, 2021.

¹⁸⁶ BBC, 2023.

sued the United States Tennis Association, in order to be able to compete in the US Open, in spite of having previously failed the chromosome tests the USTA had her do. She won the lawsuit, and reached the women's double finals, where her teammate Betty Ann Stuart and herself lost.¹⁸⁷

Dora Ratjen, who was later outed as Heinrich, competed at the 1936 Olympics, and placed fourth. He later came forward and confessed that the Nazis forced him to compete in the female category in order to achieve more medals. He later requested for his name and gender to be changed in official documentation as well.¹⁸⁸

3. Different takes on the controversies

3.1. Intersex people in sports

As there is no unanimous answer on the matter of what happens to individuals whose biological sex is not classifiable according to the common perception of it, it is oftentimes referenced as one of the main points in favor of abolishment of gender categories in sports. As stated above, there are different ways of athletes in how they approach their diverse sex development. Stella Welsh for example continued to compete in the woman's category, whereas Mark Welsh opted to quit competing altogether upon realizing he "did not truly belong in the women's category". Caster Semyana, however, opted to utilize medication in order to get her testosterone levels down to where they needed to be, in order to be able to compete in the women's category.

3.2. Trans women in sports

Transgender women are probably the most controversial of all topics, as many claim to be 'protecting women (that is AFAB women) and granting them a leveled playing field'. It is the most common point of discussion amongst the general public, as adult biological males are perceived to be physically stronger. On one side, there are claims that hormone therapy cannot completely negate the impact of male puberty transgender women have been through, with some pushing to implement restrictions that would go as far as to prevent any

¹⁸⁷ Jurejko, 2021.

¹⁸⁸ *Dora Ratjen*. Olympics.

trans women from competing, had they not begun hormone treatment before the age of 12, as that would be the only way for them to be able to pass the proposed tests.¹⁸⁹

While the impact of male puberty is mainly used when discussing trans women that have not yet undergone the full medical transition, *Women in Sport* also brings attention to the difference in the size of people's bone structure, as well as in muscle mass. They point out, how that not only presents a greater opportunity to win to transgender women, but also raises the dangerous aspect of collision sports.¹⁹⁰

On the other hand, a 2024 study which was partially funded by the IOC (also included in the proposed further reading section) revealed that trans women face certain physical disadvantages that do not burden cisgender women, specifically in the strength of their lower body and lung capacity, while their bone density (which is an indicator of one's muscle strength) was equivalent in trans and cis women alike.¹⁹¹

Even though the main argument against trans women being allowed to participate in the women's category is based on their physical strength, there have been some more contraversal situations in which trans women were excluded (on principle) from competing among other women. There was a notable controversy surrounding the International Chess Foundation (FIDE) opting to ban trans women from competing in female-only events. With chess is not a physically demanding sport, any superiority in terms of physical strength is utterly irrelevant. FIDE also decided that titles won by trans women in the male category before transitioning, would be moved into a different category, while any titles won by trans men in the female category pre-transition would no longer stand at all.¹⁹² This decision might carry implications in regards to women, and their perception in the international chess community. On the positive side, FIDE did take a progressive stance in regards to trans women, as their moving their title to a different category goes to show that they respect their gender identity and perceive them as women; not equal to males.

¹⁸⁹ *Trans Inclusion & Women's Sport*. Women in Sport, 2021.

¹⁹⁰ Women in Sport, 2021.

¹⁹¹ City and Council of San Francisco, 2024.

¹⁹² Smith, 2023.

A notable example of how the fear of trans women participating in women's category is harmful to all, even the cisgender women it allegedly aims to protect, is the so-called Boxers Scandal, where the performance of Imane Khelif¹⁹³ and Lin Yu-ting¹⁹⁴ in the 2024 Olympics was the center of a heated public discussing, due to them having been disqualified from the World Boxing Cup in the previous year, as they failed the gender eligibility test. They were permitted to compete by the IOC. The decision was generally very controversial, and was deeply criticized by the International Boxing Organization, even though both athletes are recognized as females by the IOC, and neither is, in fact, a transgender woman. The main reason Khelif's gender was questioned was in that she won a fight in only 46 seconds, and combined with the previous disqualification (from competing in the 2023 Boxing World Championship), she was believed to be too strong for a woman.¹⁹⁵

3.3. Trans men in sports

A common response to points in favor of allowing trans women to compete in sports, is asking why trans men are not pushing to be included in men's category if gender is that much more important than sex. That question warrants a rather simple response, as one of the key parts of a trans man's transitioning process is hormone therapy, aiming to raise his testosterone levels, through testosterone injections/patches/etc. Taking testosterone in any form is considered doping, as it is a banned substance in several sports. While it is 'possible for athletes, who have to use prohibited substances for medical reasons, to practice their sport', testosterone levels in trans men are oftentimes raised to the point where they are no longer eligible to compete, due to steps taken to prevent doping.¹⁹⁶

3.4. Non-binary people in sports

The topic of non-binary people in sports is addressed rather seldom, as them not identifying with either of the binary genders makes it far easier for them to compete in the category of their biological sex (example of Quinn). Considering that the question of trans people that

¹⁹³ FRANCE 24, 2024.

¹⁹⁴ AFP, 2024.

¹⁹⁵ Hughes, 2025.

¹⁹⁶ *Testosterone and doping*, 2024.

identify on the binary spectrum is as controversial as is, and that any discussions of possibly abolishing gender categories tend to not be overly productive, it is sadly not surprising that the topic of a third, non-binary category is not often mentioned; especially as it would require a lot of effort to be able to establish it, and ensure it is on par to the man and women categories in terms of the requirements to be able to participate in it being strictly biological, as well as measurable with the currently existing tests.¹⁹⁷

4. Possible solutions

While dividing categories based on gender might intuitively feel like the right thing to do, it is important to bear in mind the fact, that a very complicated division was chosen to be the deciding factor in people's ability to perform, and not say, age, which is much more tangible, and also has a certain level of impact on one's physical abilities.¹⁹⁸ There are, undoubtedly, alternative ways of forming categories in sports, however as with any major shift in the current arrangement, there are several drawbacks and different takes on the matter.

Examples of dividing sports based on different criteria is already used in some contexts. Age is perceived as a factor, for example, mainly in non-professional settings, and specifically amongst younger participants; that is to say that child categories are more likely to be divided based on their age or seniority. Similarly, weight is already commonly used as a factor in for example weight lifting, as participants' weight does in fact impact their abilities in sports. It is, however, still only a part of existing categories, as they are also usually still divided based on gender as well; opening the question of whether or not the further division is also crucial, or even necessary.¹⁹⁹

Naturally, this opens the question of the extent to which fairness is valued in professional sports; that is to say, that it inevitably forces us to weigh the idea of a 'fair' and 'leveled' playing field against the ideas of inclusivity and equality. However, even assuming that a leveled playing field should be our main aim, the fact remains, that gender is not a straightforward concept (nor is biological sex), and as such is not the most objective means of dividing individuals. The most 'fair' way of dividing individual groups would thus have to be

¹⁹⁷ *Get the facts on sports bans by Trans & Non-Binary Students.*

¹⁹⁸ Müller, 2016.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

based on each individual sport, as their specifics should be taken into consideration when determining sensible categorization of athletes, rather than be based on a rather abstract and very broad perception.²⁰⁰

That is to say, the majority of proposals that aim to abolish the gendered categories are based on the idea that metrics such as competitive performance of each individual, which could be based on their previous performances, and then dividing people based on their level of skills. Notably, the restrictions that exist due to safety reasons, such as weight classes in combat sports, should most definitely still be taken into account.²⁰¹

Going even a step further from the obvious issue of gendered categories, which is gender not being a clearly definable trait, this also resolves the other controversy regarding such division, which is the extent to which it is legitimate to treat women differently from men; opening the question of whether gendered categories are beneficial even for cisgender athletes, or rather completely unnecessary and possibly morally objectifiable.²⁰²

5. Conclusion

The question of including transgender, non-binary and intersex individuals in the ‘correct’ gender categories is in fact not the main question that should be asked, as it just goes to overly simplify an incredibly complex situation that is biological sex in all its’ varieties, gender identity, which is personal to each individual and cannot be generalized, and aims to reduce both topics onto a certain type of a test that is deemed appropriate at a certain moment in time.

Instead, it is time to discuss searching alternative ways of dividing sports that would not only be more open and inclusive, but also very likely be the push the international community needs in leveling the playing field to much higher of an extent.

²⁰⁰ Cooper, 2023, March 23.

²⁰¹ Houser, 2025.

²⁰² Bianchi, 2019.

6. Further reading

The first text is a great explanation of the concept of gender and its' implications about an individual that is associated with it. As such, it is a great starting point for understanding some of the key definitions in this discussion.

- Dembroff, R. (2018). Real Talk on the Metaphysics of Gender. *Philosophical Topics*, 46(2), 21–50. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26927949>

This next text is an overview of Women's participation in the Olympics at very beginnings, and is as such crucial in order to understand the history behind women in sports, which enables putting certain stances in regards to transgender athletes into historical context.

- Mitchell, S. (1977). Women's Participation in the Olympic Games 1900-1926. *Journal of Sport History*, 4(2), 208–228. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43609254>

The following text reads more deeply into the implications and consequences of gender verification tests. Considering the major part of the discussion will likely focus on trans women and means of confirming the biological sex of female athletes, the article is a crucial read in order to understand the implications of said tests.

- Newbould, M. J. (2016). What do we do about women athletes with testes? *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 42(4), 256–259. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44014357>

The next text also focuses on sex verification testing, however from the perspective of whether it is fair towards the athletes that are subjected to it, and the public discourse around them it creates.

- Henne, K. (2014). The “Science” of Fair Play in Sport: Gender and the Politics of Testing. *Signs*, 39(3), 787–812. <https://doi.org/10.1086/674208>

This next text is relevant in regards to finding alternative solutions of dividing sport categories, and even discussing the legitimacy of existing ones, as it discusses the reasonings behind the gender divide in sports.

- Bianchi, A. (2019). *Something's Got to Give: Reconsidering the Justification for a Gender Divide in Sport*. Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute. <https://www.mdpi.com/2409-9287/4/2/23>

The last text is the one that was mentioned earlier. It is the study from 2024, which researches the differences between cisgender and transgender athletes, as well as the advantages and disadvantages their biology brings.

- Hamilton, B., Brown, A., Montagner-Moraes, S., Comeras-Chueca, C., Bush, P. G., Guppy, F. M., & Pitsiladis, Y. P. (2024). *Strength, power and aerobic capacity of transgender athletes: A cross-sectional study*. British Journal of Sports Medicine. <https://bjsm.bmj.com/content/58/11/586>

7. Issues to consider

1. Is dividing athletes based on their biological predispositions the best way of dividing sports categories?
2. Assuming gender identity should be taken into account when deciding whether to allow individuals to participate in the category of their gender, which criteria, if any would be set as 'requirements' to allow anyone to compete under their gender, rather than biological sex?
3. However, if the division based on gender is sensible, what about non-binary people? Should there be a third, 'X' category, which is only aimed at them? Even if the answer we go by is that they should compete according to the sex they were assigned at birth, that still leaves the question of intersex individuals open. Should they be divided based purely on their genitalia? Or rather based on their hormone levels?
4. Is the division even logical on a non-professional level? That is to say, that while professional sports have a possible backing for taking the stance of levelling the playing field in as many ways as possible, semi-professional sports have many other factors that impact that balance far more; specifically economic state of individual participants (as they do not get sponsorships etc., thus their equipment is based on their individual monetary capacities to far greater of an extent).
5. What are the implications of the issue of transgender athletes on the feminist movement in the current society, and the perception of women (and females) in general?

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