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*Transitioning to Inclusive Sport: Understanding Barriers to Transgender Canadians' Participation in Recreational and High-Performance Sport (2018)*

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### Project Summary

How and where trans athletes participate in sport is highly contested and inconsistent due to the competing, and often contradictory, policies in force throughout the country in different sport disciplines at a different levels of competition. This study sought to seek out and amplify the voices of people impacted by trans eligibility policies in sport. The study sought to provide high-performance women athletes and athletes who identify as trans an opportunity to speak openly about trans athlete inclusion in sport, and to comment, criticize, or demonstrate their support for current policies without fearing repercussions. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with three groups of participants: 1) trans individuals who consider themselves athletes, 2) trans people who are inactive or participate in physical activity at a recreational level, and 3) high performance cisgender athletes competing in women's events. The main themes drawn from the interviews include: 1) the lack of awareness of current trans inclusion rules in sport, 2) uncertainty regarding the science behind the current regulations and what constitutes a competitive advantage in sport, 3) acknowledgment that the requirements for fairness in sport differ when moving from recreational or grassroots levels to high performance sport, 4) recognition that cultural politics, fear of being labeled transphobic, and the threat of lost opportunities prevent athletes from speaking critically about the sport system prior to retirement, 5) identification that many areas of sport in Canada are not safe spaces for trans athletes, particularly locker rooms, unfamiliar environments, and unknown sports officials, 6) consensus that Canadians require more information on transitioning, and 7) due to the lack of inclusion of trans issues in coaching and officiating education, trans athletes often face the burden of educating sports officials, administrators, and competitors about why they should be allowed to play.

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### Research methods

Through a policy analysis of international, national, provincial/territorial, and local trans sport policies, a media analysis of discourse discussing athletes' reactions to trans sport policies, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews, this study sought to provide insight into barriers to trans-inclusive sport in Canada. Prior to the start of the recruitment process, approval was received from the University of Manitoba's Research Ethics Board (ENREB) to conduct the study. Recruitment restrictions required interested participants to respond to posters advertising a study on transgender athlete eligibility policies. After five rounds of targeted recruitment over three years, recruitment efforts ceased. In total, 26 participants took part in in-depth semistructured interviews, which were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed by the participants, including: 13 high-performance cisgender women athletes, and 13 trans people (including 7 trans men and 6 trans women). Of the participants who identified as trans, 6 people had competed at the provincial level or higher (2 trans men and 4 trans women) and 7 people participated recreationally in sport

(5 trans men and 2 trans women). Interview transcripts were coded, and themes and results were identified by the researchers.

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### **Research results**

The review of policies in effect internationally, nationally, and locally confirmed the inconsistencies trans athletes face when determining when and where they are welcome to participate in sport without first making additional changes to their hormone levels or identity documents. The media analysis confirmed that despite an increasing number of higher profile elite trans athletes coming out, trans athletes continue to face accusations of competing with unfair advantages at the elite sport level, which may be attributable to gender normativity biases, transphobia, and a lack of understanding about transitioning. Seven main themes were drawn from the participants' reflections, analyses, and stories. Briefly, we heard from participants that few had knowledge of the trans inclusion policies in force at various level of sport. Most participants were quite uncertain about the impact of testosterone suppression or supplementation on athletic performance and wanted more rigorous studies to be conducted to understand the 'science' of transitioning. Fairness emerged as a complex idea that participants felt had different necessary and sufficient conditions at the grassroots level of sport compared to high-performance sport. Many cisgender elite women athletes noted they did not feel comfortable, or would not have felt comfortable prior to retirement, publically challenging or asking questions about trans inclusion policies for fear of being seen to discriminate against human rights. Current cisgender women athletes noted they fear for their continued selection to national teams if they question the authority of sports administrators, so instead focus only on their own training and performance. A call for more education was echoed broadly across interviews, with participants noting the lack of educational resources available to athletes, coaches, and officials. As a result, many trans athletes and recreational participants noted that they still need to pave their own way to ensure they can participate safely when they enter a new sport environment, compete against new opponents, or interact with officials they do not know. These themes demonstrate more work must be done to understand the impact of transitioning on athletic performance, to provide trans Canadians with safe sport opportunities, and to educate coaches, athletes, and sports administrators on the barriers that trans Canadians continue to face in sport. These results are limited by the low participation rate, which stemmed in part from difficulty accessing potential participants due to research ethics constraints, and from a lack of cooperation by many national federations contacted and asked to distribute the recruitment poster.

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### **Policy implications**

This study is relevant for sports organizations in Canada at every level, from Sport Canada to local community recreation centres and grassroots leagues. The Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport's discussion paper, *Sport in Transition: Making Sport in Canada More Responsible for Gender Inclusivity* (2012), and document, *Creating Inclusive Environments for Trans Participants in Canadian Sport: Guidance for Sport Organizations* (2016), were not on the radar of the vast majority of trans athletes, trans recreational sport participants, or high-performance women athletes participating in this study, as few could identify any trans eligibility rules in force in sport.

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### **Next steps**

This study highlights that for some people who identify as trans, participating in sport requires cautious involvement to ensure that they will be safe, free of harassment and abuse, and treated with respect. It also highlights that high-performance women athletes can feel muzzled about expressing their views for fear of losing opportunities or being misunderstood. Learning more about the underpinning causes of both issues should be of interest to sports administrators. A larger, multi-site, follow-up study involving participants in all provinces and territories would be beneficial in shedding more light on the experiences of trans athletes in sport and recreation.

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### **Key stakeholders and benefits**

- Sport Canada
- Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport & Trans Inclusion in Sport Expert Working Group
- AthletesCAN
- Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport and Physical Activity
- Coaches Association of Canada
- School divisions across Canada
- USports
- National federations' executive directors