

Do girls have a (moral) right to compete in sporting contests that exclude boys?

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Abstract. This paper explores the moral right of girls to compete in sporting contests that exclude boys, examining the ethical implications of gender segregation in sports. It argues that boys-only competitions are morally problematic, reinforcing gender stereotypes and perpetuating structural injustices. The paper also critiques open-division competitions, which can disadvantage girls due to inherent physiological differences. Through a review of historical and contemporary cases, the study highlights the necessity of girls-only competitions to ensure fairness and to challenge societal norms that undermine female athletes. The conclusion advocates for a dual system of girls-only categories alongside open divisions, allowing girls the choice to compete independently or alongside boys, depending on their preferences and aspirations.

Keywords: Moral Rights, Gender Segregation, Gender Stereotypes, Female Athletes, Open-division Competitions, Structural Injustice.

1. Introduction

“Right” etymologically means what is just or what is fair. If a person has rights to perform (or not perform) certain actions, they are permitted to perform (or not perform) certain actions. Moral rights are distinct from legal rights since they are based on moral standards independently of particular laws, and they govern our wider understanding of justice. This paper argues that girls should have the moral right to play in sports events that exclude boys. First, I will show why boys-only sporting contests that exclude girls from participating are morally problematic. Second, I will question the justice of open-division competitions that prohibit girls from having their independent contests. In the end, I will consider a counterexample that might seem to challenge my argument about the value of girls’ independent sporting contests and address it by clarifying existing structural injustices in gender relations.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. Boys-only sporting competitions are morally problematic

The exclusion of girls from competitive sports has been a problem throughout history: from the first Athens Olympics, where girls were banned from competing to the twentieth-century rules in some sports that excluded female athletes from specific competitions.

The rationale for excluding girls is unsound. Historically, people argued that sporting events are bad for girls. For example, to protect female runners from consequences such as infertility and premature aging, all female track and field events over 200 meters were eliminated after the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics. The reason given for the elimination was that public opinion at the time was that the competitions demanded too much strength from girls and that girls couldn’t handle the excitement of such a race. Not only did this rule go against the wishes of the female athletes themselves, but it was also a testament to the stereotype of girls as necessarily more fragile than boys. However, this is not the case, and the article about the girls 800-meter race sparked an outcry and led to the cancellation of the rule. The New York Evening Post article that reported on the frailty of the girls 800-meter athletes even incorrectly stated the total number of athletes competing, and its reporter may not have even actually been at the race. Yet this erroneous, biased, and inaccurate report was accepted by the world and the girls middle-distance running program was banned for 32 years. People

naturally chose to believe the “facts” as they were perceived and readily accepted the belittling and suppression of girls’ athletics.

Of course, many will still claim that girls are indeed physically weaker than boys, especially in strength-dependent sport. But that is not the reason why only boys are eligible to compete in a particular sport. In fact, after allowing for the creation of girls divisions in more sports, the performance of female athletes improved more than that of boys after the initial period of acclimatization. This improvement mirrors the negative effects of the previous ban on girls’ sports, and shows that not giving girls the right to compete alone is clearly a distributive injustice. The right to participate in sports means more exposure, more opportunities to realize life’s values and gain admirations, a more substantial income for the athletes as well. The improvements reinforce the fact that exploiting the right of female athletes to compete alone is a trivialization and waste of their value, an injustice that stems from gender stereotypes, and is immoral. The preference for boys in competitive sports seems to champion male “dominance.” By defaulting boys are stronger than girls, gender stereotypes are further entrenched, and thus form a vicious cycle of expanding the gender gap. Some might argue that if girls may exclude boys from their sporting contests, boys may also exclude girls. But as I have shown, there are different reasons for the exclusion, rendering the latter morally problematic.

2.2. Open-only sporting competitions are also morally problematic

To only allow girls and boys compete together could be also morally problematic for reasons of fairness, and therefore girls should have the right to compete independently. Fairness is the basic principle of all sports contests, which means that athletes have equal opportunities and resources in their initial positions before the competition begins: “Same situation, same treatment”. The only difference should be the level of skill, physical fitness, and mental state, which is also the basis of competitive play. However, the premise that such differences can be used as a measure of athletic outcomes is that the upper limit of competitors’ abilities, laid down by their physiology, is objectively approximated. It is also considered an injustice when the difference is innate and not impossible to reduce through training.

The basic anatomical and physiological sex differences determined by sex chromosomes and sex hormones have usually been seen as the primary determinants of athletic performance. Speaking from average physiological differences between males and females, adult males are typically stronger, more powerful, and faster than females of the same age and similar training status. Thus, for athletic events and sports that rely on endurance, muscular strength, speed, and power, males typically outperform females by 10-30%, depending on the requirements of the event. That said, boys will generally outperform girls in sports with equal effort and reciprocal talent.

Testosterone plays a key role in this. After male puberty, males are typically heavier and taller than females, with longer limbs relative to their height, larger hearts and lungs, less fat, more oxygen-carrying red blood cells, denser bones, more muscle, and narrower hips, allowing for more efficient running and less chance of injury. This undeniable physiological advantage means that the upper limit of athletic performance for boys is going to be higher than for girls. In the world’s top sporting events, the pursuit of male and female athletes is simply to break through to find and reach their physiological limits, but if there is a significant difference in the limits themselves, then male and female athletes should not be competing together. To do otherwise would be an invisible persecution of female athletes, forcing them to improve their competitiveness in extreme ways that defy common sense to make up for gaps in their physiology.

For reasons of fairness, these concerns support my argument that girls should have the right to compete independently. But agreeing to compete on a binary gender distinction raises some other ethical disputes, such as how to deal with the presence of transgender athletes. The categorization mentioned by Jon Pike in an article in the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* responds quite reasonably to this dispute. In his view, rather than distinguishing between “male” and “female”, sports should use the terms “those who have gone through male puberty” and “those who have not gone

through male puberty” as a way to distinguish between male and female athletes. Here “adolescence” is the key distinction: it is not gender identity that determines which identity an athlete should compete in, but whether or not he or she has the biological advantage of being male. This way of differentiation is a further refinement of the norm of fairness and justice based on the recognition that girls should have the moral right to play alone. The rules of sport should recognize boys’ physical advantage and protect girl athletes from their dominance.

2.3. Structural Injustice

However, while allowing girls to have their own competitions is right, how we currently conduct gender-divided competitions could also raise moral issues. In some specific sports, the styles and requirements of competition are very different between the boys’ and girls’ divisions, and such gender segregation can lead some programs to place greater emphasis on weight and appearance to appeal to the aesthetics of the audience. For example, in girls’ figure skating, athletes are expected to be thin, slender, and soft because it is believed that such girls are graceful. As a result of this audience expectation, girl skaters are required to maintain their shape through extreme measures that are detrimental to their long-term health, such as excessive dieting, and undergo more demanding training to achieve both strength and a frail appearance. The same is true of gymnastics, especially competitive gymnastics, where the selection requirements for female athletes require them to be petite, and their average height struggles to regrow and is often lower than normal due to the overdevelopment of flexibility and the need for sculpting in subsequent training.

So the counterargument to my defense of girls’ right to exclude boys is that society’s long-held, physically and psychologically harmful expectations of athletes in female-dominated sports is a form of oppression. In order to meet these expectations, girl athletes participating in these programs are forced to “sacrifice” their future health in order to stand out from the contest. These expectations are based on and entrench stereotypes of girls in general and girl athletes. That girls are born to be weak, less powerful, or they just shouldn’t be powerful, posing no threats to boys. At the same time, most people in the audience do not notice the moral problems. They simply recognize this as a norm. Indeed, the criteria set for winning in these competitions treat girls as mere means to meet gender stereotypes. The purpose may be to receive maximum audience’s viewership and does not take the athletes themselves into account. It shows no respect to the girls that they were treated unfairly and forcefully. This seems to reflect a social tendency to ignore the female individual. If it were possible to place male and female athletes in the same division of competition, critics of separate male-female competitions might say, and thus hold female athletes to the same judging criteria as is used for males - purely strength and technique - would this not be effective in minimizing the persecution of female athletes’ physical health?

To respond to this strong set of counterarguments of my position, I agree that having girls and boys compete together would help correct the inappropriate winning criteria to some extent. But that doesn’t mean that girls don’t still have the right to compete in competitions that exclude boys. Only allowing open categories in some sports still violates girls’ rights to have their own competitions. In this way, it could be figured that girls athletes’ situation is improved by placing them in the exact same position as boys, or, in another word, their situation improved because they were seen as the same as boys. The origin of this ‘solution’ could be another form of entrenchment of girls’ lower social status.

The actual cause of the oppression of girls athletes is the deep-rooted stereotypes of girls, forcing girl athletes to respond to the expectations of spectators to their detriments. What needs to be changed is society’s singular judgments of girls’ beauty, instead of the denial of girls’ right to show their beauty in their own way.

2.4. Conclusion

Based on what I have argued, the moral ideal sporting competitions in future should be divided into girls-only category and open division. If in a world where girls didn’t have physical and cultural

disadvantages and struggle with expectations of female weakness, non-segregated sports might be ideal. But as long as those disadvantages persist, they should have a choice to compete excluding boys. In this way, girls who are willing to challenge themselves to compete with boys – despite their physical and cultural advantages – may do so, while they also hold the moral right to play in sporting contests that exclude boys.

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