

# “Transvestigating” in Sport

## And How It Feeds Misogyny

Transphobia and misogyny are closely linked together and many who are swept up in this moral panic of transphobia are actually harming those who they claim to protect. **In the name of “protecting women”, this crusade ultimately places more surveillance, scrutiny, and limitations on women’s bodies.** One common act of surveillance that occurs under the guise of “protecting women” is so-called “transvestigating”.

### What is “transvestigating”?

**Transvestigating** (transgender + investigating) is the informal discriminatory investigation into whether a person is secretly transgender (usually assumed to be trans women), generally conducted by analyzing that person’s appearance and anatomical structure. The discriminatory aspect of this behaviour lies in the categorically false idea that trans women and trans feminine people are actually men who are pretending to be women in order to gain some sort of advantage.

Transvestigating is...



- **discriminatory** and explicitly excludes intersex people because their bodies do not fit into the strict boxes binary gender.



- **transphobic** because it is used as a tool to determine transness and thereby using transness as a reason for ineligibility/invalidity.



- **racist** because most athletes who have been interrogated about their eligibility to compete have been racialized women.



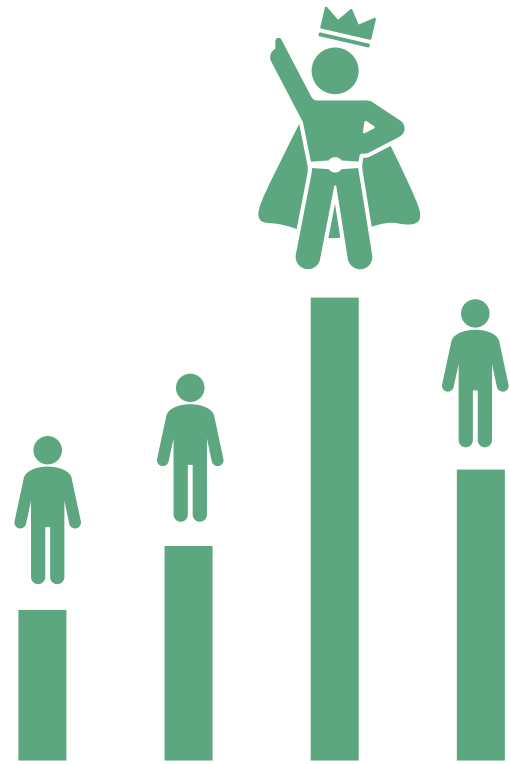
- **invasive** as it often focuses on a person’s genitals and medical history.



- **harmful** to the women it claims to protect by imposing sexist and misogynist standards.

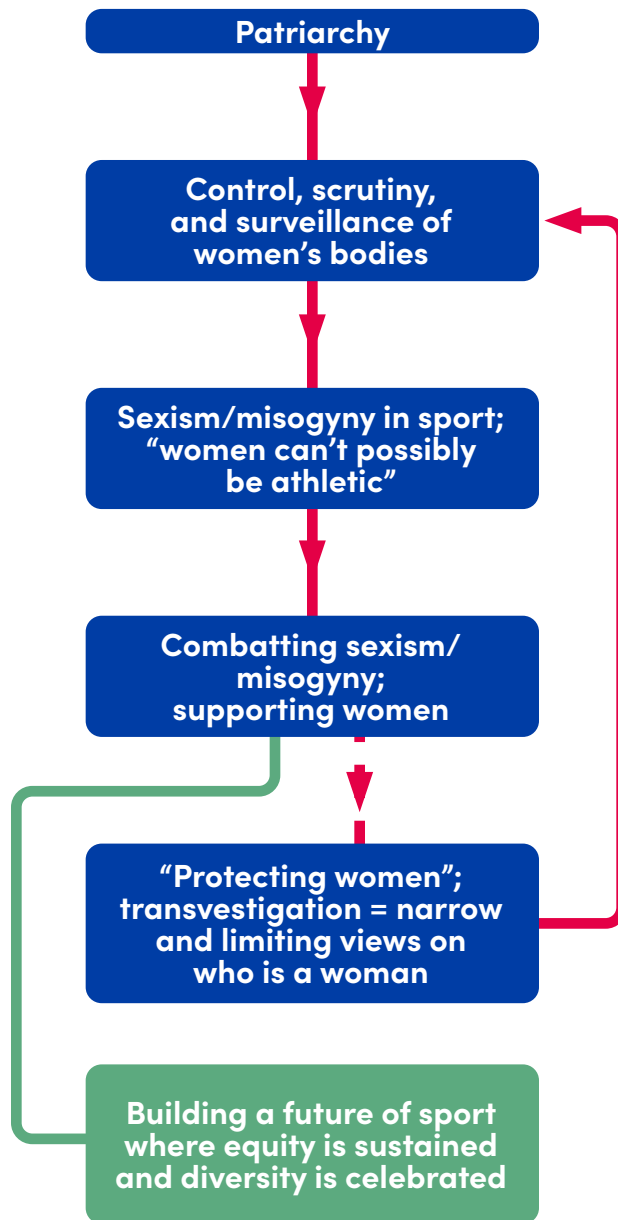
## How does transphobia and transvestigating maintain sexist and misogynist standards in sport?

It's no secret that women still face extensive amounts of [sexism and misogyny](#) in sporting spaces. There is a vast history of exclusion, women are consistently underestimated, underfunded, and not afforded the same spaces and resources that men are. In fact, it's only in 2024 that the [Olympics finally achieved gender parity](#); the Paris 2024 Olympic games saw an equal number of women and men. It's clear that sexism and misogyny are still significant barriers to fight against.



Athletes who are men are often afforded an unlimited range of athletic prowess. Men can only get better, are encouraged to break records, reach beyond the previous limits. If a man greatly outperforms his competitors, he is a champion, if a woman greatly outperforms her competitors and shatters a sexist ceiling of achievement, she is often subject to scrutiny and transvestigation based on the assumption that her achievements are only possible because she is *secretly a man*.

While proponents of transvestigation insist that the scrutiny is necessary because it protects women's sporting spaces from men, the process only harms women more often by subscribing to the sexist belief that only men can access unlimited athletic achievement. What's meant as a protective mechanism actually continues to use patriarchal tools and therefore perpetuates a cycle of sexism and misogyny.



## CASE STUDY: 4 things to learn from what happened to Imane Khelif

At the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, Imane Khelif, a boxer from Algeria, was [accused](#) of being a man after defeating an opponent in 46 seconds.

### 1 The phrase “biological woman”

There are a lot of well-meaning voices that were eager to clarify that Imane is not trans. Within these messages, there was repetition about how Imane is a “biological” woman, where the word “biological” stood in for the word “real”. Hinging her validity as an athlete competing in the women’s division on the fact that she is a “biological” woman and therefore not trans, therefore implies that trans women are both not real women, and also not eligible to compete in women’s division sports.

### 2 Trans as an insult

In an ideal world, vehemently clarifying that Imane is not trans would have no negative impact because being called trans would not be an insult. However, in reality, when people are accusing a woman athlete of being trans, they DO mean to insult. And ultimately, what those who are being incited by this moral panic are accusing Imane of is NOT that she is trans, but that she is *actually a cis man pretending to be a woman*, and therefore not eligible to compete in the women’s division.

Can't imagine how dehumanizing these last few days have been for this woman.



5w 1,129 likes Reply ...

### 3 Empathy for an unjust situation

One comment with over a thousand likes says “I can’t imagine how dehumanizing these last few days must have been for this woman.” Sure, it was a glaring and inciting mistake, because Imane has said that she is in fact, not trans, but it is in this rhetoric that also reveals how to be mistaken for trans must therefore be a dehumanizing experience. If another mistake had been made, say if someone had said she was 27 years old, instead of 25, that is not a dehumanizing experience. It was only dehumanizing to be called trans because our current social context still does not see trans people as rightfully human.

### 4 “It’s not possible because it’s illegal there”

Many people also supplied further evidence about how Imane is not a trans person by stating the fact that it is illegal to be trans in Algeria. While true that in this context it would have been unlikely for such a country to send a trans athlete, let’s remind ourselves that law does not dictate the existence of trans identity.

## How do we prevent and combat transvestigating?

**DO** speak back and counter the misinformation that media reports on. See this resource for tips on how to have [difficult conversations](#).

**DON'T** just show your support on the fact that the person being transvestigated is actually a cis person. Your support for a trans person facing unfair and discriminatory treatment should be just as passionate.

**DO** brush up on your inclusive language skills. For example insisting that someone is a “biological woman” implies both that being a woman is dependent on biology, and that biology makes something more real. In reality, gender expression and identity are not strictly dependent on biology, and further, biology in itself is vastly diverse. A more accurate term might be “Female Assigned at Birth” or AFAB, though this is not a scientific assessment by far, merely whatever was visually assessed by a medical professional at birth.

**DON'T** contribute to the dehumanizing of trans identities and experiences. While it may be hard to exist as a trans person because so many barriers exist, it is made hard because of the existence of oppression (e.g., transphobia, misogyny, sexism, homophobia, cissexism etc.). Being trans or being mistaken for trans is not something that inherently merits pity.

**DO** believe that people are where they are suppose to be, whether that’s in a gendered bathroom, or in a division of sports competition. Your fears about men taking up space with malicious intent have nothing to do with trans people, and everything to do with regrettable men.

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Please note that this resource is only focused on how transvestigating does not in fact protect women. Transvestigation and the call for sex verification of intersex athletes have overlapping effects and consequences; too many to fit in this resource. For more on the harmful impacts on sporting rules governing intersex bodies, see [this article](#). There is also no focus on trans men/trans masculine athletes because by transvestigation misogynist logic, women pretending to be men would not gain athletic advantage. Similarly, nonbinary athletes eligibility in sport varies and merits another resource.