



Historical Evolution of Transgender Participation in Sports: Global and Indian Perspectives

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Abstract

Sports are a mirror of society. For many years, sports accepted only two categories – male and female. This created barriers for transgender people, who were often excluded. Slowly, athletes and courts started challenging these rules. Globally, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and other bodies made new policies to include transgender players. In India, the Supreme Court's 2014 judgment (NALSAs case) gave legal identity to transgender people, opening doors for participation in different fields, including sports. This paper explains the history of transgender participation in sports, the challenges faced, and the progress made at both global and Indian levels.

Keywords: Transgender athletes, sports history, gender inclusion, India, IOC, participation

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Introduction

Sports are said to be fair and equal, but for transgender athletes, the reality has been different. Traditional sports rules divided athletes only into men and women. Transgender people, whose identity does not fit in this binary, were left out. Across the world, many transgender athletes fought for their right to play. Their struggles forced sports bodies to rethink rules. In India, the 2014 NALSAs judgment was a turning point. After that, states like Kerala and Manipur took steps to organize events for transgender players. Still, challenges like stigma, lack of policies, and social acceptance continue.

Review of Literature

Scholars such as Pieper (2016) and Travers (2018) have highlighted the ways sports regulations have historically marginalized transgender athletes. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has been central in shaping these regulations, with policies evolving from strict sex verification tests in the 1960s to more flexible guidelines in the 21st century. Indian scholarship, although limited, often situates transgender sports within the framework of social justice (Menon, 2019). Case studies of state-level initiatives in Kerala and the representation of transgender athletes in bodybuilding and athletics reflect the emerging discourse of inclusivity in the Indian context.

Global Historical Evolution

- 1930s–1940s: Early cases such as Dora Ratjen revealed the gender policing in athletics.
- 1977: Renée Richards' legal battle to play professional tennis marked the first major victory for trans inclusion.
- 1990s: IOC introduced sex verification testing and later shifted towards hormonal criteria.
- 2004: The Stockholm Consensus by the IOC allowed transgender athletes to compete post-surgery and hormone therapy.
- 2015–2016: The IOC relaxed its guidelines, removing mandatory surgery and focusing on testosterone levels.

• 2020: Canadian athlete Quinn became the first openly transgender and non-binary Olympic gold medalist.

These milestones demonstrate a gradual shift from exclusionary to more inclusive policies, though debates continue on fairness and competitive balance.

Indian Context

India has witnessed a slower but meaningful trajectory. Traditionally, the hijra community held cultural significance but faced exclusion from formal sports. Progress began only in the 21st century. On 15 April 2014, the Supreme Court directed the central and state governments to grant legal recognition to transgender identity.

Following the directive, Kerala implemented a transgender policy, making it the first state in the country to have such a policy.

- 2014: Following the NALSAs judgment, recognition of “third gender” spurred discussions of inclusivity in sports.
- 2017: Kerala hosted India's first Transgender Sports Meet with over 130 participants.
- 2018: Aryan Pasha, a transgender male, won silver at Musclemania India in bodybuilding.
- 2020: Anamika, a transgender woman, won a state-level judo gold medal in Kerala. Kozhikode resident Anamika Leo became the first transgender referee to officiate a recognised sports event in India.
- On 29 January, Leo officiated a Kerala state-level Kurash competition held at MES College, in Ernakulam's Perumbavoor, organised by the Kerala State Kurash Association.
- Present: Initiatives like Manipur's Ya-All FC, India's first transgender football team, symbolize grassroots inclusivity.

Timeline of Transgender Participation in Sports (Global and Indian)

Year / Period	Global Milestones	Indian Milestones
1930s–1940s	Dora Ratjen case, 1936 Olympics gender scrutiny.	No official records; transgender participation invisible.
1977	Renée Richards wins legal right to compete in women's tennis.	–
1990s	IOC introduces sex verification and hormone-based policies.	Sporadic local visibility, not official recognition.
2004	IOC Stockholm Consensus: trans athletes allowed post-surgery + hormone therapy.	–
2014	Chris Mosier breaks barriers in duathlon; policy debates intensify.	Kerala begins policy discussions.
2015–2016	IOC removes mandatory surgery, introduces testosterone rules.	Kerala hosts first Transgender Sports Meet (2017).
2018	Patrício Manuel becomes first trans male professional boxer.	Aryan Pasha wins silver at Bodybuilding India.
2020	Quinn wins Olympic gold (football).	Anamika wins state judo gold in Kerala.
2021–2022	Laurel Hubbard competes in Tokyo Olympics (weightlifting).	Ya-All FC, first transgender football team in India.
2023	–	Maharashtra announced plans to include transgender athletes in state sports events.
2025 (Present)	IOC recommends sport-specific policies.	Emerging athletes like Anaya Banger (cricket) advocate recognition.

Discussion

Globally, the story of transgender athletes shows a shift from exclusion to limited inclusion. Earlier, they were banned or forced to undergo strict tests. Now, IOC rules allow them with some medical conditions. Still, debates continue about fairness, especially in strength-based sports.

In India, the problem is not only rules but also social stigma. Even though states like Kerala and Manipur have taken steps, there is no national sports policy for transgender athletes. Support in the form of training, coaching, and financial help is also very limited. Yet, players like Aryan Pasha and Anamika show that talent can shine if opportunities are given.

Conclusion

The history of transgender participation in sports tells us two things:

1. Progress has been made, but
2. Much work is still needed.

In the world, transgender athletes have broken barriers and changed policies. In India, legal recognition has given hope, but implementation in sports is weak.

For the future, India should:

- Create a national sports policy for transgender inclusion.
- Provide special scholarships and training programs.

- Organize inclusive tournaments at state and national levels.

- Run awareness campaigns to reduce stigma.

Sports are not only about winning medals; they are about unity and equality. If transgender athletes are given equal space, sports will truly represent fairness.

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