

Physical activity and sport among Spanish trans persons

Participation data and personal and sociocultural factors

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Introduction

The potential benefits of physical activity and sport (PAS) for health are widely recognised, both in their biological and psychosocial dimensions, and in the short and long terms (Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee, 2008; World Health Organization, 2010). All persons and groups of people can benefit from regular PAS activities, but the social distribution of access and satisfactory PAS practice is far from being egalitarian. This is especially unsatisfactory among the sexual and gender minority groups such as trans persons (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2017; Muchicko et al., 2014). Beyond the recognised general biological effects of PAS, trans persons can benefit from the psychological wellness these practices can provide. This is especially important because these persons often experience different mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and addictions (Dhejne et al., 2016; Millet et al., 2017) due to the stress produced by marginalisation, stigmatisation, and discrimination (HSE LGBT Health Sub Committee, 2009). Moreover, PAS can complement or accelerate the effects of hormone treatments, alleviate their possible side effects (e.g. cardiovascular risk factors, osteoporosis, or osteopenia), and contribute to maintaining an appropriate weight for their health (Coleman et al., 2012; Elling-Machartzki, 2017; Wierckx et al., 2012). The benefits can also be social, since participating in PAS may help them to develop a physique according to their desired identity and favour recognition and social justice in this vulnerable social group (Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, Fuentes-Miguel et al., 2018; Klein et al., 2018; Pérez-Samaniego et al., 2019).

The term trans, or transgender, is used to refer to persons whose gender identities do not match the sex they were assigned at birth based on their anatomy. According to Stryker (1994), it is used as an umbrella term that covers a variety of identities related to gender non-conformity. These would include a person (self)identified as transsexual, transgender, genderqueer, gender fluid, two

spirits, genderless, or gender questioner, among others. Within this diversity, some trans persons undergo surgery or hormone treatments to align their bodies with their gender identities, while others refuse to take any sort of far-reaching medical procedures to accommodate their bodies to gender normative standards or social expectations. Mirroring the rationale of the term “trans”, the rest of the people who are not considered transgender are labelled as “cisgender”. Thus, and according to Serano (2007), we use “trans persons” to refer to people whose gender identities do not coincide with the sex they were assigned at birth based on their anatomy, and “cisgender people” to refer to those persons (non-trans) whose gender identities are in line with their gender assigned at birth based on their anatomy.

In the words of Butler (1990), gender is not something fixed that we have, but something that is performed and, consequently, we are constantly making gender. Since gender is (re)created in everyday life, most trans people participate in gender transition processes to achieve a gender expression aligned with their gender identities. Although these processes often refer to binary gender transitions (from male to female -or vice versa-), the term “transition” is also used for any individual who takes steps towards a different gender expression (Coolhart et al., 2013). A common characteristic of all transition processes is that they affect the social (re)presentation of the body. During transitions, trans people present their gender expression publicly and recognisable by others through different strategies applied “ad hoc”, at particular moments and contexts, to their bodies (see Ekins & King, 2006). It is a complex interactive social process between the bodies of trans people and their environments, which struggle in dialectical negotiations that can allow and restrict the social recognition of trans people (Elling-Machartzki, 2017).

Conversely, far from representing a compact and monolithic discourse, the increasingly popular trans movement entails its own tensions (Travers, 2006). Some trans people challenge and confront bigenderism – upholding “radical gender” or “revolutionary gender” identities (Namaste, 2005, p. 6) – while others conform to it. For the latter, the transit is achieved once they are “men” or “women”, in the hope to become invisible in a gender binary society. These tensions suggest that the trans movement is still defining itself and that, according to Devor (2014), “trans” means different things to different people.

This comprehensive conception of the trans movement is influenced by several close theoretical domains such as feminist studies, queer studies, and transsexual studies which share many conceptual stances, although they also differ in some others, namely those related to gender identity. In this particular aspect, queer studies emphasise that gender identity is a fluid notion, since it is historically and socially constructed thus not stable and changeable (e.g. Giffney, 2009), while transsexual and feminist studies problematise the idea of gender fluidity, and are aligned with a gender identity continuity (e.g. O’Hartigan, 1993; Prosser, 2013). Altogether, despite these different positions on gender identities, they coincide in

their commitment to working with trans persons for their empowerment in coalition with groups and communities, including PAS contexts.

Notwithstanding the potential benefits of PAS for trans people, there is a lack of participation data on these issues and also a lack of knowledge of the personal and sociocultural factors that contribute to facilitating or inhibiting their participation. This knowledge is of great importance for establishing PAS promotion strategies among trans persons based on sound evidence. This is the reason why we present the main results of two studies developed within the same project but in different phases, one quantitative and another qualitative follow-up study.

What do we know?

Among the few studies available on trans persons' PAS participation, we find a comparative study between USA transgender ($n = 33$) and cisgender ($n = 47$) people (not trans) on leisure-time physical activity, social support, and physical self-perception (Muchicko et al., 2014). Trans persons were less active and reported lower social support than the cisgender participants. Another comparative study, developed with British citizens, informed of insufficient levels of physical activity among trans ($n = 360$) and cisgender ($n = 314$) participants, although the last ones engaged in significantly more physical activity than trans people (Jones et al., 2018).

Some studies also offer information on the PAS participation of trans people as subsamples within wider lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) surveys. One of them reported that 33.3% of a small sample of 14 Australian trans persons were active (30 minutes or more of physical activity) during the previous week. Moreover, close to 67% of them participated in team sports while 33% participated in individual sports, being walking the most popular activity (Symons et al., 2010). Another report found that young trans adults ($n = 42$) from the United Kingdom were less disposed to participate in any sport than their lesbian, gay, and bisexual peer, although they showed a similar percentage of participation in team (approximately 53%) and individual sports (approximately 51%). Going to the gym was the most popular activity among trans participants, followed by rugby, running, football, and swimming (National Union of Students, 2012). In a recent large European study, more non-cisgender participants felt excluded or stopped sport participation (48.4%) than their cisgender counterparts (14.2%) (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021).

This brief review indicates the lack of knowledge about trans people's PAS participation and the quality of data provided. There are a handful of studies and samples are short, in some cases too short to obtain sounded evidence. In several studies, trans people represent rather small subsamples within wider surveys of LGBTQ's PAS participation. Accordingly, it exists a great necessity of research to obtain an accurate picture of trans persons' participation that could lead to a diagnosis for further PAS promotion.

This situation is not different regarding the knowledge on personal and socio-cultural factors that affects trans persons' PAS participation. Some qualitative studies highlight how heteronormative contexts, characterised by a sex or gender segregation of activities, strongly determine trans persons' experiences in PAS participation in different contexts such as physical education (PE) and sport. Beyond legal impediments, they refer to certain barriers to participation related to anxiety, body exposure, and being ridiculed or objectified in different PAS environments and spaces (Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, López-Cañada et al., 2018; Englefield et al., 2016). Trans people tend to describe changing rooms as uncomfortable and unsafe places that do not facilitate their engagement in PAS, as well as spaces that stimulate their social rejection (López-Cañada et al., 2021; Pérez-Samaniego et al., 2019; Semerjian & Cohen, 2006; Sykes, 2011). Changing rooms can influence people's subjectivities and identities and cause the marginalisation of non-normative bodies because they are not expected to be found there: unfit, old, non-heterosexual, or transgender bodies (Fusco, 2005; Sykes, 2011). Other trans people even avoid entering fitness centres to be less exposed to gender scrutiny (Ellis et al., 2014). Language is also a barrier to participation, because in the sports environment, it is often the usage of discriminatory and transphobic talking (Gill et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2012; Symons et al., 2010). This is indicated by some studies which refer to verbal abuse as the predominant type of harassment in different contexts, including sports (Devís-Devís et al., 2017).

Filling the gap of knowledge: The case of Spain

Recent reviews on trans persons' PAS participation, and by extension LGBTQ participation, indicate that research has increased during the last decade, although it is underrepresented in comparison with general population research (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2017; Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2021; Landi et al., 2020; Pérez-Samaniego et al., 2019; Piggott, 2020). Moreover, most of this inquiry is focused on populations from English-speaking countries, showing a big black box from other countries, in particular Spain.

The results presented in this chapter come from a wider research project developed in two phases in Spain. The first phase analyses quantitative data obtained from a survey answered by 212 trans persons on different issues related to PAS participation (see López-Cañada et al., 2020). Of these, a group of 43 trans persons participated in a follow-up qualitative phase to obtain information about the personal and sociocultural circumstances of their lives that may complicate, facilitate, and influence the experience of their participation in PAS (see Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, López-Cañada et al., 2018; López-Cañada et al., 2021).

Trans persons' PAS participation

From the 212 participants from the first phase, about 44.1% were trans women, 51.2% trans men, and 4.7% non-binary persons. Most are young adults in an age

range of 10 to 62 years ($M = 30.63$, $SD = 10.75$). They were recruited from main LGBTQ associations using a convenience sampling and a snowball strategy to reach more potential participants. The main results of the first study are:

- The 75.5% of the sample practiced PAS at some time in their lives, 50% of them with a frequency of ≥ 3 times/week. These results indicate similar participation of trans persons in comparison to the general Spanish population of young adults (closer age range of 15–24 years) (Ministerio de Educación Cultura y Deporte, 2016).
- About 14.5% of them stopped the activity after gender disclosure. Therefore, special attention is required for policies that contribute to the development of a proactive socio-cultural environment that fosters trans' involvement in PAS before and after gender disclosure.
- The results also reinforce international trends in gender differences, as trans men (78.7%) participate more in PAS than trans women (72%).
- Participation in unorganised and individual physical and sport activities predominates among those trans persons who took part in PAS, both before (67.5%) and after gender disclosure (94.2%).
- Taking into account the 12 most practiced activities in trans persons, the study points out that after gender disclosure, activities like swimming, football, basketball, dancing, and volleyball are significantly reduced, while others like bodybuilding became more practiced. When analysing by gender identity, a significant drop has been seen in trans women after gender disclosure in football, basketball, and volleyball. In contrast, in trans men, participation increases significantly in bodybuilding, jogging, and cycling.

Personal and sociocultural factors that affect trans persons' PAS participation

The second qualitative phase helped to obtain deeper insights about personal and sociocultural factors affecting PAS participation. Forty-three participants in this phase were selected for attending to the following three criteria: (1) gender balance of participants, (2) wide range of age, and (3) participation in PE and sport before and after their gender disclosure (López-Cañada et al., 2021).

We called upon a socio-ecological perspective for understanding and identifying personal and sociocultural factors and barriers that may complicate, facilitate, and influence their participation in PAS. The most relevant factors we identified are (a) body appearance; (b) compensation of hormonal side effects; (c) sports spaces; (d) legal recognition of gender; and (e) school PE.

A) Achieving a body appearance coherent with the gender they are identified with and the consequent increasing body satisfaction is an important factor influencing their PAS participation (Jones et al., 2017; Klein et al., 2018). For instance, trans men often engage in weightlifting and fitness exercises to burn fat, as well as

to look fitter and more muscular. For example, Darío (trans man, 18 years old) and Carlos (trans man, 35 years old) point out:

For example, if you walk a lot your hips get reduced. It is a change that trans guys want . . . well, they do not totally disappear . . . but yes. . . . It is true, they [the hips] get reshaped.

(Darío)

I would like to be a little more physically fit. . . . I'd especially like bigger pectoral muscles. . . . This year I'm working on it a little more.

(Carlos)

B) Another factor refers to the role reserved for physical exercise to compensate for undesired effects of hormonal treatments that many trans people undertake (oestrogens for trans women and testosterone for trans men). Trans people are aware of the positive influence of exercise in mitigating some of the physical and psychological side effects, such as fluid retention, liver difficulties, poor blood clotting, insomnia, psychological stress, or overweight. As Laura (trans woman, 14 years old) remarks:

I have to do a lot of sport . . . a lot of cardio and stuff like that so that hormone treatment does not affect me.

C) Sports spaces and facilities are hyper-normative areas that operate as a hegemonic influence on gender issues (Doan, 2010). The overt or implicit regulation of gender binarism in changing rooms and many sports facilities and activities conditions the gender expression of many trans persons. Thence, they often choose to avoid such facilities, opting for outdoor individual activities such as jogging or cycling. Others even build their own gym at home to avoid the crowds, as Yeraí (trans man, 20 years old) puts it:

No, I never go to gyms. Before chest surgery, I was too anxious. And now [after surgery], I rather prefer to exercise alone at home. I do not feel comfortable with many people and so . . . that's why I have the gym at home. I have the weights and a punching bag at home, and I practise with tutorials.

Swimming pools are some of the most unsafe spaces for trans persons, because body exposure causes them acute discomfort, as Alex (non-binary, 32 years old) expressed:

I really like the water but, of course, with the problem of the swimsuits . . . swimming pools are much more normative [spaces] . . . then I feel a little uncomfortable, . . . in the swimming pool, as I have breasts and I go. . . [topless], well I feel a little self-conscious.

Despite these examples, there are other PAS spaces in which trans persons feel welcome, such as LGBTQ sports teams. Some participants, as Darío (trans man, 18 years old) and Llurena (trans woman, 32 years old), feel part of the teams and have affinity and empathy with the rest of the players:

You feel integrated into a group, you see people who are just like you, who have the same problems, and protest against the LGBTQ phobia. . . . There is always companionship, they pass you the ball, everyone plays, teams exchange, we always stay longer, we have a drink and comment on the game . . . for me, this is very rewarding.

(Darío)

[In the LGBTQ team] there are lesbians, as well as heterosexuals, bisexuals, and so on, and then I, who did not match with anyone, did not stand out much in the end! [laughs]. . . . I chose this LGBTQ club because in my case as a trans person, a woman in this case, at that time I was not reassigned. Then my body, at least the genital part, could induce doubts, some little problem, and then I chose that team because I thought it would be easier for me not to get stuck. . . . Having a safe space in which you do not have to think, do not have to think over and over, you just practice sports, just play.

(Llurena)

D) The legal recognition of gender identity is of the utmost importance for trans people. In the realm of sport, to have the gender registered in the National Identity Card (Documento Nacional de Identidad [DNI]) is often required in competitions. However, the lack of an updated DNI does not mean per se the trans persons' exclusion of sports facilities. Often, those who have not achieved legal recognition of their gender identity find the understanding and compliance of managers, workers, and other users of the facilities as Laura (trans woman, 14 years old) indicated:

I've never [had any problems], I've never even had to explain anything. Anyway, those who run the sports club know me and love me a lot, so they have never said anything. And on the DNI there is another [male] name, that is not "Laura", but they corrected my name on my sports card.

(Laura)

Despite the advances in the recognition of trans and intersex participants in some sports contexts and organisations, the public acceptance of this population is not generalised.

E) School PE is remembered by trans people we interviewed as a subject in which they felt misplaced, because they did not fit in those physical and sports activities segregated by gender. As Antonio (non-binary, 32 years old) said:

At the end, you are in the middle and you are completely alone. And you think you are isolated in the universe.

Usually, trans boys refused to carry out activities that the teachers and the rest of the students considered girlish, and vice versa. This had consequences in the way they were treated by schoolmates. Some say they were insulted, stigmatised, and harassed when they tried to swap to “the opposite side”. Carlos’s classmates yelled at him: “look at the butch lesbian!” because he was playing soccer. And when Antonio attended PE swimming classes without a shirt, he remembers some pupils squawking: “Why do you go topless if you are a girl?”

Negative experiences in PE were also frequent among trans girls. For example, Verónica (trans woman, 50 years old) and Gloria (trans woman, 28 years old) said that before making the gender change public:

I didn’t want to do those tough things [in PE] . . . just to avoid being seen as a rough guy . . . and I tried to do more feminine things. . . . I did it because I didn’t want to get strong muscles.

(Verónica)

In my case, I haven’t got such good memories of PE classes. It wasn’t because of sport, since I did practise it, but rather because of situations in which certain kids were teasing me, and finally I didn’t want to do it.

(Gloria)

Contrariwise, Jorge (trans man, 42 years old) and Carlos also positively remembered their PE classes:

I’ve always felt comfortable doing sport [in PE] because I was in my element and I liked what I was doing, I was at ease. . . . I participated in everything, races, relaxation sessions.

(Jorge)

It was my favourite [subject], it was my favourite one. . . . I always beat everybody. I don’t mean to brag about myself, but there was only one other guy who ran faster than me.

(Carlos)

The experiences trans people tell about PE teachers are not always positive. In general, they remark that teachers enhanced the isolation and distance they felt in PE classes. For instance, Jorge, when still considered a girl in school, expressed his desire to be evaluated with the boys in the fitness lessons, and his teacher harshly rejected his request:

They [teachers] examine and value you like a woman and I, at least, did not consider myself a woman, I was a man. . . . Then, I said “I want to be assessed like that [like the boys]” but he replied, “here are the men and there are the women and the exams are different”.

At the same time, in many cases, the indifference and apathy of teachers somehow supported the violence exerted towards trans students as Carlos, who was severely beaten by his classmates and the teachers washed their hands off, and they “stared at us doing nothing”.

Final comments

PAS can benefit trans persons' health and social involvement, and it can fuel their recognition and self-affirmation. However, to accurately assess this affirmation, it must be taken into account that the umbrella term “trans” gathers around a cluster of diverse gender identities, transition moments, and embodied experiences which determine diverse and, eventually, contrasting experiences in PAS contexts. For those trans persons who aim to be recognised either as men or as women, PAS provides a privileged scenario to succeed (or fail) in their performance of gender binarism. Conversely, trans people with fluid gender identities reject any form of gender normativism explicitly or implicitly imposed in PAS contexts. Despite these nuances, all trans persons experience numerous and diverse hindrances to participate in PAS that cisgender persons do not have to experience. This is unfair, insofar as the involvement and access to PAS is a right for all persons that, therefore, should not be menaced or limited by gender identity issues.

In particular, body exposure seems to be a determining factor after gender disclosure, because it provokes an acute anxiety and potential discriminatory period, which facilitates PAS disengagement and a difficulty in subsequent PAS reengagement. The analysis of sociocultural factors that affect trans persons' engagement in PAS reveals that they also face interwoven interpersonal and sociocultural issues (body passing, fear of being unmasked, hormone treatment, friends, health, and PE professionals) in several social contexts (family, gyms, sport teams, PE and health system, legal requirements) that influences their behaviour and decisions regarding their commitment to PAS.

These factors are usually interrelated in many ways. For instance, a relevant issue that appears in different themes is the role that PAS play as “technologies of the self”. For Foucault (1988, p. 18), technologies of the self “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves”. Therefore, PAS can be considered as technologies that trans people use to change gender power relations that allow them to fulfil their gender identities. However, trans people's technologies of the self may also become technologies of power and domination. This especially appears in those trans people who only acknowledge a dichotomised “true” embodied identity of man or woman. In those cases, the value conferred on PAS and the motivation and satisfaction of their practice is reduced to specific outcomes (e.g. construction of hypermasculinised/feminised body) that reflect compliance to the social stereotypes explicitly or implicitly imposed by heteronormativity and gender binarism (Travers, 2006).

This focus on the interaction between interpersonal and sociocultural factors provides a deeper social character to this work because of political and social complexities in the analysis of trans persons' PAS participation (López-Cañada et al., 2021). This is necessary to track patterns of oppression and make visible social gaps and hidden issues that affect their PAS (non)participation. Despite the barriers trans people meet in PAS, they still make choices and adopt strategies for becoming social full participants and achieving personal and community well-being. Needless to say, the promotion of trans persons' participation in PAS contexts is a matter of social justice and, consequently, it needs to be fulfilled. To do this, a first step would be to promote social sensitivity and commitment to facilitate that trans people can carry out their right to practice PAS in similar conditions as those of the rest of the population. In the recreational and health domains of PAS, it is important to establish a clear order of priorities: political, sports, and educational actors must put the right to participation first, and take care to guarantee the effective and satisfactory practice of this right to all people, entailing whatever it takes to make PAS suitable for trans people, not trans people suitable for PAS.

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