

# Transgender Wellness Initiative Round 1

## Executive Summary

### The Problem

We all know that to be healthy, we need to exercise more. So why don't you? Yes, YOU. Is it that you don't have enough time? Or is it actually that the mere thought of stepping foot into the gym fills you with dread? Buff, muscular, intimidating guys strutting around and judging you for not lifting as much as they do, mirrors everywhere reflecting your unfit body right back at you, and tight lycra clothes emphasizing every crevice and fold, are enough to keep most people from the gym. We get it. Really, we do. In fact, for us, it's much worse. For transgender people, whose bodies are the main source of distress, being in a gym space is almost unbearable.

Anxiety experienced in traditional fitness environments is amplified for trans individuals and many miss out on the health benefits that exercise brings. "The majority of transgender people have a negative experience of [...] sport-related physical activities."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, one literature review of transgender people in sport found "the barriers transgender people experience" in engaging in physical activity to be a "significant limitation to the promotion of healthy behaviour in transgender individuals."<sup>2</sup> In this community, with a 40% suicide rate and high rates of anxiety and depression, access to wellbeing promoting services are vital.<sup>3,4</sup> Transgender people need a way to exercise comfortably so they can combat gender dysphoria<sup>5</sup> and improve health, wellbeing, and mood.

**What stops transgender people from accessing traditional fitness environments, and how can the situation be improved?** To answer this question, we conducted our own research interviews, reviewed the literature, and investigated options currently available. We found a dearth of literature and a lack of evidence-based models to establish a safe environment to overcome the many obstacles that prevent trans people from exercising in the first place. The current options offer partial compensation but do not provide significant societal change. More research is needed to inform changes in policy and to provide trans people the tools to shape their bodies and handle dysphoria.

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<sup>1</sup> Bethany Alice Jones et al., "Sport and Transgender People: A Systematic Review of the Literature Relating to Sport Participation and Competitive Sport Policies," *Sports Medicine* 47, no. 4 (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016). The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality.

<sup>4</sup> Megan M Muchinko et al., "Peer Victimization, Social Support and Leisure-time Physical Activity in Transgender and Cisgender Individuals," *Leisure* 38, no.3-4 (2014).

<sup>5</sup> Many trans people struggle with dysphoria: feeling uncomfortable with their body, often because it does not match with their gender identity

## Our Research

Our research method started with 30 minute in-depth interviews with 9 trans-identified individuals. They ranged from regular gym goers to those who have never exercised. Interviews were discussion-based, seeking to assess individual's relationship to traditional fitness environments.

Our analysis largely revolves around gym environments. While we acknowledge there are other venues for physical activity, it became clear from the interviews that exercising outdoors is virtually impossible for most trans people due to the fear of harassment. Discussion, therefore, is primarily around the experience of transgender people in gyms. Our solution landscape expands the scope to include other fitness environments because of the absence of transgender-friendly gyms.

We found that individuals had similar negative experiences. A key issue was **privacy**: changing rooms lacked private spaces which made it difficult to change, especially for those who have not had surgery or who did not yet pass as their desired gender. One UK study on leisure participation noted that avoidance levels were highest for those currently undergoing gender reassignment or transition: 50.4% reported avoiding gyms.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, 5 of our respondents reported that they left gyms because of a negative experience. Whether in curiosity or malice, gym-goers stare at anyone who does not fit typical gender presentation, creating an **unwelcoming** environment. The stage of transition was particularly important in both our findings, and in the literature. Our respondents struggled with what to do when they didn't yet pass as their gender identity, or changing when they hadn't yet had surgery.

The gym is a highly gendered place. **Societal expectations** of a body prevent people from feeling comfortable. Respondents felt alienated by the male/ female dichotomy and feeling like they had to conform to enter a certain locker room, or run the risk of danger. Recent controversies have included the 'trans bathroom bill' trying to prevent trans people from choosing bathrooms in accordance with their gender identity. It is understandable, then, that gendered bathrooms engender anxiety in transgender individuals. Genderqueer respondents also explained that they didn't feel that they fit comfortably as either 'male' or 'female' and traditionally gendered gym environments felt alienating.

Some individuals, especially trans women, feared more than non-acceptance, but **harassment and violence**. This fear is well-founded. 2016 was the deadliest year for trans-women<sup>7</sup> in the US, many of who face the fear of sexual violence and murder.<sup>8</sup> One of our transfeminine respondents had trainers stand over her and laugh at the gym. Many of our respondents cited a **lack of a clear policy** to handle gender violence as being a key issue.

Ultimately, the gym is a place of **danger and extreme anxiety** that also intensified internal conflicts around achieving one's desired gender presentation. Yet we also found that majority of interviewees really wanted to go the gym, despite all the issues. Not only did it help with overall mental wellbeing, we found something else that that wasn't identified in the research: **exercise reduced body**

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<sup>6</sup> Sonja J Ellis et al., "Gender, Stage of Transition and Situational Avoidance: a UK Study of Trans People's Experiences," *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 29, no. 3 (2014).

<sup>7</sup> Individuals who transitioned from male to female

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Campaign, "Violence Against the Transgender Community in 2017," Human Rights Campaign, accessed February 15, 2018, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/violence-against-the-transgender-community-in-2017>.

**dysphoria.** We found that the trans community stand to benefit even more than cis<sup>9</sup> people from regular exercise. Our research found that exercise eases body dysphoria as individuals shape their body to match their internal sense of self. Jones et al show that body dissatisfaction is core to the distress trans people feel.<sup>10</sup> Despite the internal conflicts associated with increased body awareness and issues of comparison and self-image at the gym, trans people still wanted to go to the gym to shape their bodies. They just didn't feel welcome.

### Gap in Literature

Given exercise's ability to ease body dysphoria, we tried to find more research on the topic to see what tools were available to trans people. We found was that there was a serious lack of literature regarding trans people and sport. The lack of knowledge and research obviously had implications for creating welcoming, trans-informed fitness environments but just as vitally, there were very few tools to train a trans body and overcome the **physical concerns** of being a transgender person trying to exercise. Transgender athletes tend to be conflated with other sexual minorities under the LGBT umbrella in the literature.<sup>11</sup> While there are some common experiences among LGBT individuals, issues surrounding gender identity differ from those related to sexual orientation. Indeed many of our respondents were unclear on how their bodies change with hormones, or how to safely train with binders and tucking. These are issues have not been researched, and there are no protocols on how to do it safely.<sup>12</sup> In a review of the research on sports psychology, no articles focused on transgender athletes.<sup>13</sup> **The fitness industry is unprepared to work with athletes with alternative gender identities.**<sup>14</sup> Research must move beyond the narrative that trans\* people are a psychologically vulnerable group and focus on design and implementation of programs which tackle minority stress, discrimination and enhance... **social support.**<sup>15</sup> This is a vital gap in the research that we would like to pursue further: **developing a best practice for training trans people**, to give people tools to shape their body and handle dysphoria. But to get there **we have to create a safe environment** for people to understand their bodies.

### Current Models

Given the lack of established policy or models in the academic research, we examined established practice and current models of change. There is currently no standard policies or accepted methods to make it easier for trans people to be more active. None of the current solutions adequately address all the issues we identified that make it so challenging to get to the gym in the first place.

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<sup>9</sup> Cis = not trans. Cis individuals identify with the gender assigned to them at birth

<sup>10</sup> Bethany Alice Jones et al., "Body Dissatisfaction and Disordered Eating in Trans People: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *International Review of Psychiatry* 28, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>11</sup> V Krane et al., "Queering Sport Psychology," *The Cultural Turn in Sport and Exercise Psychology* (pp. 153-180).

<sup>12</sup> Cathryn B. Lucas-Carr et al., "What is the T in LGBT? Supporting Transgender Athletes Through Sport Psychology," *The Sport Psychologist* 25, no. 4 (2011).

<sup>13</sup> Bethany Alice Jones et al., "Sport and Transgender People."

<sup>14</sup> Lucas-Carr et al., "What is the T in LGBT?"

<sup>15</sup> Walter Pierre Bouman et al., "Gender Dysphoria and Gender Incongruence: An Evolving Inter-Disciplinary Field," *International Review of Psychiatry* 28, no. 1 (2016).

Inclusive sports policies are increasingly being adopted by colleges, as well as by national and international sports leagues.<sup>16</sup> But often, they are written by cis-dominant sports leagues focused only on whether and when transgender individuals may participate in competition. Indeed, one study found that most policies were not evidence based.<sup>17</sup> Inclusive sport policies need to **account for the experience of transgender people in sport**, instead of focusing on making cis people more comfortable with the presence of trans people.<sup>18</sup> Policies need to focus on the key issues we have identified that deterred participation in sports: gender neutral bathrooms, explicit acceptance of gender diversity, and clear guidelines on dealing with harassment and gender violence. It needs to be consistent and replicable in all instances to ensure the safety and peace of mind of trans people.

LGBT sports leagues are a vital part of community and support for the LGBT community. The model teaches us about the need for **community driven** efforts to provide safe spaces to pursue competitive and recreational sports. The idyllic promise of acceptance is not always the reality, however. We must not assume LGBT sport spaces are welcoming to transgender individuals; most of the LGBT community is very LG.<sup>19</sup> Discrimination doesn't always come from straight people. Furthermore, our research showed that the trans community has very specific concerns that the rest of the LGBT community does not. Physical concerns are not addressed by these LGBT sport groups. "It's one thing to be a league which welcomes LGBTQ players, but it's entirely different to be a league with specific attention to inclusion of trans athletes. This includes considering how a league registers its participants, locker room and changing areas, and how play is classified in regards to gender."<sup>20</sup> We need to make sure spaces for trans people are taking into account all the physical trans-specific concerns about exercise.

However, the few trans-only spaces that exist are also inadequate solutions. Trans-only sports groups are a great space to combat some of the key internal issues that we identified. They provide **social support**, a key mediator in the level of physical activity in transgender people.<sup>21</sup> But these options are limited and self-selecting. When we suggested the relevant options to our respondents, some mentioned the limited selection of activities. Additionally, one of our respondents noted that they "didn't want to be segregated and separated." The research suggests we need to establish spaces that cater specifically to trans people and counteract the barriers imposed by society.<sup>22</sup> But to take a step further than the trans-only groups, we need groups that work to change the culture so that established public spaces are more accessible to transgender people.<sup>23</sup> There are pockets of spaces for insulated, trans-only groups, but they are limited in their reach and impact.

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<sup>16</sup> Colleges and Universities with a Trans-Inclusive Intramural Athletic Policy," Campus Pride, accessed February 15, 2018, <https://www.campuspride.org/tpc/trans-inclusive-intramural-athletic-policy/>

<sup>17</sup> Bethany Alice Jones et al., "Sport and Transgender People."

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Jayne Caudwell, "[Transgender] young men: gendered subjectivities and the physically active body," *Sport, Education and Society* 19, no. 4 (2012).

<sup>20</sup> Trans Athlete, "Recreation League Policies," Transathlete.com, accessed February 15, 2018, <https://www.transathlete.com/recreation-leagues>.

<sup>21</sup> Megan M Muchinko et al., "Peer Victimization, Social Support and Leisure-time Physical Activity."

<sup>22</sup> Bethany Alice Jones et al., "Sport and Transgender People."

<sup>23</sup> Megan M Muchinko et al., "Peer Victimization, Social Support and Leisure-time Physical Activity."

## Next Steps

Our thorough examination of the current issues preventing trans individuals from accessing traditional gym environments, has identified the following factors as key for a successful solution.

### 1. Have a clear, consistent policy

One of the biggest issues currently facing trans people contemplating entering traditional environments is the **uncertainty** of safety in any given situation. People needed to feel safe that if any adverse event was to occur, they would be supported and have gym staff on their side. We need to create a clear, consistent policy informed by the experience of trans people.

### 2. Be community driven and focused

A key issue we identified was **ignorance** of the dominant fitness industry towards the experience of transgender individuals. Efforts to solve the issues we have identified will need to be community driven and focused.

### 3. Advocate to change the culture

At the same time as being community focused and community driven, innovative solutions to the problem of trans people accessing exercise has to raise awareness of the issue and advocate to change the dominant culture. Solutions can't further isolate this marginalized community. Rather, it needs to actively **challenge the discrimination** currently present.

### 4. Be attractive to the cis fitness industry by being scalable and sustainable

To prevent isolation, solutions need to partner with the cis dominant fitness industry and provide them with a model that is attractive. Trainers need to want to train trans people and see them as an **opportunity for professional growth**. Gyms need to see trans people as a client base necessary to pursue and provide a welcoming environment accordingly. A successful model would integrate with the cis fitness industry to change the industry from within and make the mainstream recognise trans people as legitimate players in the field.

### 5. Educate and grow knowledge base on training trans people

The recommendations of our research and the literature is clear. There is a need to promote greater satisfaction with this group's physical selves.<sup>24</sup> Currently this is not a need leisure professionals are equipped to provide.<sup>25</sup> This can be accomplished through inclusive physical activity groups and supportive social networks. If such interventions could successfully improve the social environment of transgender individuals and bolster their confidence in their physical being, this may have a positive effect on leisure-time physical activity and, by extension, improve the health and well-being of this marginalized population.<sup>26</sup> To do this, we need to create a **supportive environment** that is safe enough that we can learn more about the experience of trans people in fitness environments. We need to build a knowledge base on the trans-specific concerns associated with exercising. We need to derive the knowledge, and then provide these tools to transgender individuals to empower them to take control of their health and tackle their dysphoria.

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<sup>24</sup> Cathryn B. Lucas-Carr et al., "Supporting Transgender Athletes Through Sport Psychology."

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

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## **APPENDIX – Research Discussion Guide**

### Current Exercise Routine

- How often do you exercise?
- What is your preferred environment?
- Why do you exercise?
- Do you like to exercise alone or in a group?

### Past experiences

- What is most important to you when choosing an exercise routine or class?
- Describe your thought process.
- Can you describe past experience of using a gym/ going to an exercise class?
- How did these experiences impact your willingness to go again?

### Search process

- How do you normally find exercise classes?
- Have you used apps or websites to find exercise classes before?
- Describe experience
- Frustrations you have had?
- What do you want to know that is not apparent on website

Is there something you'd like to say that I haven't asked?