



Transgender rights require a more civil debate

Cathy Young

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Perhaps no debate today, including abortion, is as contentious as the one on transgender rights — an issue that implicates complex questions of personal identity, sexual difference, parental rights, and autonomy for minors.

Some LGBT activists have claimed that it's "harmful" to even have a debate, and that the validity of transgender advocates' claims must be accepted as a matter of basic dignity. Now, we are seeing a revival of open discussion on these topics in liberal quarters and mainstream culture, and simultaneously, an authoritarian backlash on the right. It's important to promote the debate and resist the backlash.

Take the question of transgender athletes in women's sports, propelled into the spotlight this year by University of Pennsylvania swimmer Lia Thomas (who won an NCAA women's championship but had ranked, pre-transition, 65th in the same men's event). The pressure to support inclusion has been so strong that Thomas' teammates, concerned about what they saw as unfair competition, mostly spoke out anonymously. Even pioneering lesbian athlete Martina Navratilova has been slammed as "transphobic" for suggesting that male-born athletes had inappropriate advantages in women's sports fields.

Now, FINA, the official international body governing elite water sports competitions, has ruled that transgender athletes are barred from women's competitions if they have gone through male puberty — which many scientists agree confers an irreversible advantage. Despite criticism, there has been widespread recognition that FINA's step is a response to legitimate concerns.

Meanwhile, The New York Times Magazine has published a groundbreaking article by staff writer Emily Bazelon on another lightning-rod issue: transition-related care for minors. For some time, the progressive position has been that a child's or adolescent's declaration of a transgender identity must be presumed valid and affirmed by therapists and other health care providers.

Bazelon's article reveals intense disagreement among clinicians who work in transgender care, many of whom are themselves transgender. There are concerns that kids who are questioning their gender identity for a variety of complicated reasons — including social influences in real life and online peer groups and personal struggles related to conditions such as autism — are often rushed toward transition without appropriate assessment. Transition may include puberty blockers, hormone treatments, and (for biologically female adolescents) mastectomies.

Indeed, the upcoming revised standards of care to be issued by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health recognize these problems and recommend taking them seriously.

Bazelon's article, which respectfully mentions the work of journalists previously demonized as bigots (such as Abigail Shrier, author of the 2020 book, "Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters"), should move the needle toward a more honest debate.

Yet this debate also takes place amid a troubling backlash on the right — which includes attempts in red states such as Texas and Florida to end all gender transition care for minors, investigate parents who approve their children's transition as child abusers, and remove books on gender identity from school libraries. A law recently passed by the Ohio State Legislature targeting trans athletes in scholastic girls' and women's sports contained language (removed after an outcry) that could have led to genital checks for female athletes whose natal sex has been questioned.

Trans advocates say that people who warn about overreach and radicalism on the pro-transgender side are enabling and bolstering the right-wing backlash. But it's equally likely that the backlash is being fed by the overreach. Silencing civil debate can only promote polarization — and bring out the ugliness.

Opinions expressed by Cathy Young, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, are her own.