In this chapter, I explore how organized sport works as a constitutive element of current gender relations. To state the project this way requires a move away from a common “sociology of sport” perspective that focuses on relations within sport, toward a “sport and society” perspective that explores the ways that sport articulates with strains, tensions, and shifting formations of gender in communities, the nation, and the world. Two conceptual frames are important here. First, when I write of gender relations I am assuming a multidimensional analytic framework: gender as an important part of the symbolic realm of cultural meanings; gender as actively created through day-to-day interactional processes; and gender divisions of labor and power as a dynamic part of the structure of social institutions. Second, drawing from Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell, I explore the institutional structure of gender in three geographic registers: a local institutional gender regime; a national gender order (of the United States); and a location within the international gender order.

Whether at the level of local gender regimes or at that of national or international gender orders, these concepts never imply a fixity of gender relations. Rather, they are tools we can use to grasp the “state of play” of gender and power, oscillating between moments of crisis and change, and hegemonic moments of relative stability and consensus. Moments of hegemonic stability in turn always create new strains and tensions that foster new possibilities for change, less often radical disruptions, more often contestations over what Connell calls the “steering” of gender relations—within a gender regime, between gen-

1. I develop this three-tiered conceptual framework in Messner, Taking the Field.
2. Connell, Gender & Power.
gender regimes, and within larger gender orders. It is my aim in this chapter to move from local to national to international registers of gender relations by looking first at a local study of youth sports, next at the national politics of Title IX in the United States, and finally at the recent case of South African runner Caster Semenya’s “gender-verification test” controversy, with the aim of illuminating some strains and tensions in the international gender order. I will argue that my local study suggests an emergent hegemonic moment of postfeminist “soft essentialism,” while the national and international foci reveal some strains and tensions that inhere in this moment of gender formation, as well as the limitations of both a local ethnographic study and of an analysis that focuses primarily on gender.

**Sport, Gender, and Society**

Before moving to the body of this chapter, I will briefly reiterate an argument about how sport figures in U.S. historical gender relations. Following an early twentieth-century burst of athleticism among girls and women that accompanied a powerful wave of feminism, a backlash against vigorous physical activity for women eliminated many women’s sports and vastly marginalized those that remained. The resulting binary opposition of athletic males and nonathletic females helped to construct and naturalize a gendered public-domestic split in the mid-twentieth-century U.S.—a divide especially evident in the middle class—and a hierarchical ordering of gender that was premised on ideologies of male superiority. I have called this mid-century ideology “hard essentialism—the shared belief that women and men are naturally and categorically different and should thus be sorted into different and unequal spheres that reflect their natures.  

The resurgence of a feminist movement in the 1970s led to a new burst of female athleticism, corresponding with (especially middle-class) women’s more general move into public life. On one level, this dramatic growth of female athleticism served as a challenge to the ideology of hard essentialism. However, the particular institutional organization of sport differed from that of most other institutions that were undergoing sex-desegregation in the late twentieth century. Unlike higher education, medicine, law, or politics, the integration of girls and women into sport was taking place within an almost entirely sex-segregated structure. Put simply, “equal opportunity” for girls and women in sport has been sought mostly within a “separate but equal”

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4. I introduce the concepts of hard and soft essentialism in Messner, *It's All For the Kids*, and further develop the concepts in Messner, “Gender Ideologies, Youth Sports, and the Production of Soft Essentialism.”
strategy, where male and female bodies, assumed to be naturally different, are sorted into separate binary categories. As equal opportunity is sought, difference is affirmed. Thus, sport becomes a dynamic site for the simultaneous contestation and reproduction of gender equality and inequality, a “contested terrain” of gender relations.  

A Local Terrain of Contested Gender Relations

Between 1999 and 2007, I conducted a study of my local community’s soccer, baseball, and softball youth sports programs. I was particularly interested in gender divisions of labor and power among adult volunteers (mostly parents), and in the course of the study, I became increasingly focused on how the division of labor and power in youth sport’s gender regime (nearly all of the coaches were men and nearly all of the “team moms” were women) tended to articulate neatly with the gendered work and family relations in this professional-class and white-dominated Los Angeles suburb. Much of the book that resulted from this study analyzes the adults’ gender formation processes that result in sex segregation. Here, I briefly outline two interrelated parts of this process: first, the ways in which professional-class adults, through talk and actions, “gender” the boys and girls whom they are coaching; and second, the ways in which adults’ gendering of kids reflects and naturalizes the gendered work-family divisions of labor and power in their own families, thus helping to construct the ascendant hegemony of “soft essentialism.”

Youth sports coaches, including most of the small number of women coaches, tend to view and treat girls and boys in very different ways. Adults applaud their daughters’ participation in sports, seeing it as healthy and empowering. When asked to talk about girls, adults often drop into a language of individual choice: they talk of their daughters’ futures as realms of choice for which, they believe, sports participation is helping to prepare them. This new articulation of girls as flexible choosers is a remarkable sign of social change, vastly different from earlier generations who tended to view their daughters as destined for domesticity. In particular, it is a dramatic indicator of the success of liberal feminism. However, the limits of this language of choice for

6. I emphasize “professional-class and white-dominated” here because in fact the community I studied evidenced considerable class and racial/ethnic diversity (for example, only 44 percent of the community is white). However, I argue that youth sports and other community activities are dominated in form, values, and visible leadership by an ascendant (predominantly white) professional class.
7. Messner, It’s All for the Kids.
girls are revealed in the asymmetrical ways that adults talk about boys. Adults, simply put, are far less articulate when asked to talk about boys and gender. Ultimately, most adults meander to clichés about boys’ supposed natural (testosterone-driven) aggression and emotional linearity (as opposed to the supposed emotional complexity of girls), and about boys’ natural inclinations for sport in particular and public life in general. I call this shared view of girls as flexible choosers and boys as inflexible biologically driven creatures “soft essentialism.” Similar to hard essentialism, soft essentialism is still premised on a belief in natural differences between boys and girls, but soft essentialism no longer posits this difference to be categorical—especially when it comes to girls, who are now viewed as flexible choosers who as adults will be expected to navigate across and between the challenges and demands of public and domestic life. This changed view of girls stands in stark contrast to a largely unreconstructed view of boys.

Soft essentialist ideology, projected onto children, takes on clearer meaning when we consider common patterns of gender relations in professional-class families. Mothers in these families are college educated, often holding graduate degrees, and have spent years building careers in medicine, law, finance, and other professions. On arrival of children in a family—especially second or third children—many of these mothers face a common dilemma—not so much a “biological pull to motherhood,” as conservative pundits would have it, but the constraining experience of being stretched to the limits by the combination of inflexible workplaces, career-committed husbands who do minimal family labor, and expanding public expectations for mothers to involve themselves in the “third shift” of community and school-based work necessary for the concerted cultivation of their own children. Thus challenged, some of these women decide to opt entirely out of their high-powered careers, while others change to less demanding (but lower pay and lower status) jobs. These women narrate their resulting shift in attention away from career and toward care of kids in the language of individual choice, inflected with a feminist sensibility.

In short, the gender regime of youth sports has undergone a huge transformation in the past forty years. And there is evidence to support the contention that girls’ dramatic movement into sports is correlated with health benefits and has fostered embodiments of a competitive professional-class habitus.

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8. Blair-Loy, Competing Devotions; Lareau, Unequal Childhoods; Stone, Opting Out.
However, the youth sports-based construction of girls as flexible choosers and boys as naturally destined for competition in public life plays a largely conservative and stabilizing role in the context of professional-class work-family gender regimes, where highly educated mothers exercise “choice” to opt out or scale back careers, while men continue largely to focus on their public careers. Gender inequalities that persist at the nexus of professional-class work and family gender regimes, rather than being viewed as sites of collective struggle for change, are narrated through soft essentialism as resulting from women’s individual, even feminist-inspired choices. The ideology of soft essentialism, constructed in part within youth sports, helps to naturalize the inequalities that inhere in this moment of hegemonic, class-based gender relations.

An obvious limit of my local study of youth sports is my analytic foregrounding of gender. How might the intersecting gender regimes of youth sports, families, and work look through an intersectional analysis that extends beyond the gender/social class matrix at the center of my analysis? This question could be explored by attending more centrally to the experiences of marginalized people within the white, professional-class-dominated community that I studied, or by comparing youth sports in my community to, for instance, youth sports within adjacent working-class and predominantly Latina/o communities. Such a shift in empirical focus would likely reveal the ways in which concepts like “gender regimes” can obscure as much as they reveal. An intersectional analysis that attends as much to class and race relations might better view youth sports not simply as a “gender regime,” but as a dynamic “inequality regime” that intersects with other institutional inequality regimes.10

And though I do connect my analysis from the local youth sports gender regimes to local family and work gender regimes, such a study can be limited by its very locality, unless it is connected to an analysis of the historical and macro-institutional context in which it is embedded. In the next section of this chapter, I draw out the scope to think more about sport and the national gender order of the U.S. And while there are many potential points of entry into an exploration of gender and sport on a national scale, I will limit my comments here to what the politics of Title IX can tell us about current strains and tensions in the national gender order.

10. Acker, “Inequality Regimes.”
Title IX, Sport, and the National Gender Order

Initiated in the United States in 1972 to ensure equal opportunities for boys and girls in educational institutions, Title IX has had a huge impact on sports, helping to usher in a dramatic and continuing surge of sports participation by girls and women in high schools and colleges. In the terms discussed in the introduction of this chapter, Title IX can be seen as a largely successful legal and political effort at "steering" the gender regimes of schools and universities toward gender equity. This equity steering did not go unopposed; from the start, the patriarchal center of institutionalized U.S. sport, led by the football lobby, opposed Title IX, and over the years many legal challenges to Title IX have been fought. For my purposes here, these conflicts illustrate the unevenness of gender reform within and between gender regimes. With gender regimes more deeply contested by feminism in the 1970s, education, politics, and the law clashed with the more stubbornly conservative and less vigorously contested gender regime of organized sports. Title IX can be seen as a political and legal means of steering the internal gender regime of sport toward consensus and continuity with the gender regime of education, and with that of the larger gender order.

Title IX politics came to a head at the national level in 2002 when the Bush Administration called for a series of public hearings to assess the effects of Title IX. The subsequent regional meetings (I attended and testified at the one held in San Diego) revealed Title IX to be a lightning rod for backlash discourse, but also—and even more so, as it turned out—as a powerful rallying point for supporters of girls' and women's sport. Legal activist Nancy Solomon and I observed that the anti-Title IX discourse at the hearings tended to invoke a language of male victimization by the state, which was viewed as unfairly representing women's interests. We argued that the language of bureaucratic victimization of individual men—especially as symbolized by the threatened male “walk-on”—was a strategy that seemed to find fertile ground among young white males who face a world destabilized by feminism, gay and lesbian liberation, the Civil Rights movement, and major shifts in the economy.

It is striking how anti-Title IX talk is one of the few places in national discourse about sport where men become at least potentially visible as gendered beings (“gender and sport” nearly always implies “women and sport”). But critics' stories veer decidedly away from any possible analysis of boys and men as a socially formed group with shared in-

12. See Brake, Getting in the Game; Suggs, A Place on the Team.
terests (much less shared privileges) in sport. Instead, the discourse of critics of Title IX consistently invoked the values of individualism, by telling stories of individual men victimized by liberal state policies that promote the group interests of women. And this discourse rested its case on an essentialist foundation—individual men, the critics argued, are just naturally more interested in sports than are women. The critics agreed that it's a good thing for girls and women to have the right to choose to play sports, but they implied that due to their different natures, boys and men will naturally be drawn to sports, whereas fewer girls and women will be.

The critics thus used the values of individualism to smuggle in an articulation of “men’s interests” as collectively opposed to Title IX, but this strategy was limited by the actual complexity of men's interests. To be sure, there is a powerful centripetal pull, even for many marginalized boys and men, to the privilege and erotic power that lie at the center of male-dominated institutions like sport. However, under some conditions, some men disidentify with and even oppose institutionalized male privilege. It has become common to hear stories, for instance, of fathers who become overnight equity activists when they find suddenly that their daughters have been denied access to sport or have been offered substandard playing fields or unqualified coaches. In these cases, individual men clearly see their own interests as intertwined with the interests of their female family members.

Indeed, collective opposition to Title IX appears to have faded in recent years, and many would say that this is because of the popularity of Title IX and the widespread support for girls and women’s sport participation, including substantial support from men. A 2007 national poll conducted by the National Women’s Law Center found that of those who recognize what Title IX is, 82 percent support it.14 Two Women’s Sports Foundation studies in 2008 and 2009 in Boston and San Antonio revealed that only half of those polled knew about Title IX, but the vast majority agreed with its goals.15 And a 2008 national survey found adults widely supportive of girls’ athletic opportunities.16

In addition to growing pro-Title IX public opinion, it is also likely that the very legal structure of Title IX has allowed for a smoothing of current tensions and for a movement toward a national consensus that stabilizes a hegemonic moment of gender formation. In a cogent analysis of the legal politics of Title IX, Deborah Brake demonstrates how

15. Women’s Sports Foundation, GoGirlGo! Women’s Sports Foundation, GoGirlGo!
Boston Post-test 2009.
16. Sabo and Veliz, Youth Sport in America.
Title IX strategically melds different (and in some ways, fundamentally contradictory) strands of feminist legal theory. On the one hand, Brake argues, Title IX is premised on the liberal feminist ideal of equal treatment for individuals, based on merit. Under the law, individuals have the right to equal opportunities to participate in sport. However, this individualist focus in the law is continually in tension with the sex-segregated (and still unequal) collective structure of sport. The liberal feminist strand of Title IX, Brake explains, "strives for equal treatment of men and women without questioning the male-dominated structure of sports and . . . the reasons men and women are differently situated in sport."\(^{17}\)

Counterbalancing the limits of liberal individualism is the strand of "difference feminism" also undergirding the legal theory of Title IX. Difference feminism, according to Brake, "embrace[s] and value[s] women's distinctive interests, needs, and experiences equally with those of men . . . [and] accommodates gender difference in sport by its allowance of sex-separate teams."\(^{18}\) While helping to protect and extend the collective interests of girls and women, this aspect of Title IX also echoes the essentialism of nineteenth-century "social feminists."\(^{19}\)

Premised on a presumed biologically based need to create and maintain a gendered boundary around girls' and women's sports, the law creates and protects a separate sphere within which female sport participation can grow and thrive, while simultaneously risking—perhaps even ensuring—a marginalization of women's sports that stigmatizes female athletes as inferior and often in need of protection. The tension between these two strains of feminist theory is clear: can individual girls and women ever have truly equal opportunities, resources, and treatment in an institution that is divided in binary terms according to an assumed-to-be-natural hierarchy of male-female bodily difference?\(^{20}\)

Title IX, then, is an organically evolving law, its contradictory elements giving it a built-in flexibility that allows advocates to use the law as a tool to push for individual equal opportunity while simultaneously arguing that categorical sex difference creates a distinct group-based interest that must be protected and defended. The effectiveness of this melding of "equal treatment" with "difference accommodation"

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18. Ibid., 10.
20. Most advocates of women's and girls' sports argue that such a separation is needed, while a few feminist critics argue that separate sports for girls and boys will always reproduce gender inequality. See, for instance, McDonagh and Fappano, *Playing with the Boys*. 
is evident, according to Brake, in recent legal cases that have dealt with pregnancy among athletes. National advocacy organizations like the Women's Sports Foundation tend to mirror this dual strategy of advocating for individual equal opportunity alongside a defense of women's group-based interests in maintaining different and separate sports.

For my purposes here, I want to emphasize how Title IX's very strengths, and likely too its popularity, are grounded not so much in a revolutionary potential to disrupt gender relations but to the contrary, in the ways that its melding of equal opportunity and essential difference articulates neatly with the emergence of the professional-class ideology of soft essentialism. In particular, Title IX's emphasis on the individual rights of girls and women as flexible choosers tends to affirm professional-class beliefs in individual meritocracy, while deflecting critical focus away from the ways that gendered institutions constrain those very choices. Simultaneously, the law's essentialist underpinnings then naturalize the unequally gendered outcomes of women's (apparently individual) choices. The inherent strains and tensions built into soft essentialism, I argued above, are (1) its tendency to smuggle in a white, professional-class-based ethic, and either to render invisible and/or to impose that ethic on class- and race-marginalized and subordinated others, and (2) to render boys and men as an undifferentiated, unexamined, and thus unreconstructed category. In the U.S., much pro–Title IX advocacy discourse for girls and women in sport does just that. The liberal feminist individualism helps to construct an individual professional-class white subject, while difference feminism's essentialism helps to maintain boys and men as a naturalized and largely unmarked category. As scholars of masculinities and of whiteness have shown, the invisibility of superordinate categories is often central to the reproduction of the privilege that adheres to these categories.

If politics involve the steering of the gender order, then what strategic steering directions might be implied by the current strains and tensions discussed above? I have argued elsewhere that to push the sport gender regime toward greater democratic egalitarianism would involve two strategies. First, while most advocates of girls' and women's sports are committed to the current institutional segregation of girls' and women's sports as necessary to ensure participation opportunities, many community activists are moving toward a more intersectional understanding of the interests of girls and women, creating sports programs targeted to the needs, for instance, of inner-city girls.

girls of color, Muslim girls, or differently abled girls. Working creatively with this dynamic tension between the collective interests of girls, as protected under Title IX, and the interests of particular groups of girls who are not privileged by professional class, white, or able-bodied status is one of the keys to pushing beyond the class-based individualist limits of Title IX as a strategy for social justice.\textsuperscript{23}

Second, a national social-justice strategy would move toward a strategic degendering of boys’ and men’s sports. This would mean three things. First, this degendering would build a broad social recognition that boys, as much as girls, are socially gendered beings and not simply products of a sexed biological nature. Second, youth sports would be constructed as sites where adults could prepare boys to become flexible choosers who, like girls, need to develop the skill sets and emotional flexibilities that allow them to negotiate across and between the challenges of public and domestic realms of life.\textsuperscript{24} This would involve, in part, seeing youth sports as a place in which boys can expand (rather than contract) their emotional repertoires. Third, the homosocial boundaries of boys’ and men’s sports should be challenged, including, especially, by opening up coaching opportunities for women coaches and continuing the integration of girls into previously all-boys’ sporting activities. Together, these strategies would push sport away from its current role as a professional-class gender comfort zone.

Using Title IX as a lens through which to view the current state of play of the U.S. national gender order extends our understanding beyond that of the local ethnographic study discussed in the first part of this chapter by connecting the national legal and political “steering” of gender relations to our understanding of local work-family-youth sports gender regimes. I argue that we can see the ascendant class-based gender ideology of soft essentialism at both the local and the national level. At both levels, we can see the expansion of individual equal opportunity for girls as a major accomplishment of feminism (albeit one that disproportionately benefits girls from privileged backgrounds), while also seeing how persistent essentialist beliefs—however “soft” they may be—continue to construct and naturalize gender hierarchy, smuggle in class and race privilege under the guise of feminist progress, and leave boys and men as an unexamined and unreconstructed category.

\textbf{A Transnational Moment of Gender Trouble}

Gender and sport scholars in the United States have recently begun to

\textsuperscript{23} Cooky, “Girls Just Aren’t Interested.”
\textsuperscript{24} See Atkinson and Kehler, “Boys, Gyms, Locker Rooms and Heterotopia.”
develop a global focus in their theoretical frameworks and empirical analyses. Connell observes that imperialism and globalization have generated institutions—transnational corporations and markets, global media, the United Nations, NGOs—that are part of a world gender order. Such globalization processes are evident in sport to the extent that scholars can now begin to analyze sport as one site for the collision of national gender orders, within a larger world gender order. The case of South African runner Caster Semenya is one such transnational moment of collision for gender meanings and politics.

In 2009, eighteen-year-old South African runner Caster Semenya won the gold medal at the International Athletics Association Federation (IAAF) World Championships in the eight-hundred-meter run. Although the IAAF had previously joined other international sports governing bodies by doing away with mandatory "gender-verification tests," it was still the case that if and when competitors raised questions about an athlete's "true sex," a gender-verification test could be ordered. This occurred in the case of Semenya, setting off an international debate about human rights, "true womanhood," race, and the use of gender-verification testing.

I do not intend here to discuss the incipient scholarly literature on the politics of transgender or transsexual athletes. Nor do I intend to tackle the very complicated task of understanding the full meanings of the Caster Semenya story, either within or outside of South Africa (to do so would risk oversimplification at best, and a re-inscription of an oppressive colonial gaze at worst). Instead, my goal is more modest: I simply want to use this case as an example of a transnational sporting event that makes questions of sex and gender salient and visible, thus revealing some strains and tensions within the international gender order. From this, I hope to gain insight into the limits of my analysis of local and national gender orders. Fortunately, other scholars have developed a sophisticated analysis of the meanings and nuances of the Semenya incident, and I draw here from two such current works.

An understanding of the transnational meanings of the Semenya incident begins with a sketch of the role of sport in the developing gender order of post-apartheid South Africa. Jennifer Hargreaves

25. Connell, Gender.
27. For foundational works on this topic, see Birrell and Cole, "Double Fault"; Sykes, "Transsexual and Transgender Politics in Sport"; and Travers, "The Sport Nexus and Gender Injustice."
28. Cooky, Dycus, and Dworkin, "What Makes a Woman a Woman?" vs. 'Our First Lady of Sport"; Dworkin, Swar, and Cooky, "Sex and Gender (In)Justice in Sport."
conducted perhaps the first such overview. Gathered in 1995, shortly after the formal end of apartheid, Hargreaves's research in South Africa offers a glimpse into the development of sport within an emergent post-colonializing gender order. Hargreaves observes that sport in pre-apartheid South Africa was “a symbol and celebration of racial ... superiority and White masculinity,” and the immediate years following the end of apartheid were characterized by “piece-meal sport reforms ... [that] systematically prioritized boys’ and men’s sports.” But by 1995, South African sport had also become a site of struggle for race- and gender-justice: “Black women see sport as a channel for self-definition—simultaneously Afrocentric and feminist. Following years of subjugation under apartheid, their struggles in sport today are part of a wider quest for recognition and dignity; their successes reflect a radical independence and autonomy often absent in other areas of life. Sport is an important politico-cultural space for Black people.”

A result of these struggles by the South African women’s sports lobby was the development of national efforts to promote gender equity in sports, including the 1997–2000 establishment of a “Women in Sport South Africa” initiative within each province. Hargreaves observed that women's sports participation was becoming a visible pillar in the building of a post-apartheid South African national identity. And—of central importance for my purposes here—unlike the white and professional-class values embedded in the promotion of women's sports in the U.S., the development of women's sports in South Africa is intertwined with a state-sponsored movement to resist and transform white supremacy and colonial domination. The Caster Semenya event, a decade later, reveals the strains and tensions at the nexus between this national South African gender order and that of a transnational gender order dominated by the Global North.

Following Semenya’s victorious run, the subsequent IAAF imposition of a gender-verification test on Semenya, along with the hand-wringing in the Euro-American sports media, can be seen as the Global North flexing its imperial muscle to impose Euro-American, binary conceptions of gender on a less powerful nation of the Global South. After all, the very organizational structure within which Semenya was competing was created by, and in the image of, the powers of the Global North. But such a simplistic one-way analysis risks re-inscribing a colonial gaze, and—especially important for my purposes here—misses seeing the dialectical nature of such transnational events. As Connell argues, “The interaction of gender orders is not all one-way

29. Hargreaves, Heroines of Sport, 18, 28, 30.
30. Ibid., 36.
...There is no question that the pressure of the metropole on the gender orders of the global periphery is much stronger than pressure the other ways. [However] we should not think of that as simple ‘modernization’ of gender. [Rather], the wider historical literature on gender and imperialism show turbulence in the process, and sometimes acute tension.”

The Semenya incident reveals such turbulence and tensions at the intersection of North-South gender orders, which may provide opportunities for disruption and change not only transnationally but also possibly within the national gender orders of the Euro-American metropole.

First, this focus on a moment of transnational sporting “collision” reveals, even more than my local or national foci, the limits of a simple focus on gender relations. In particular, the Semenya case brings into stark relief the need for an intersectional analysis of gender with that of race and nation. Sociologists Cheryl Cooky, Ranissa Dycus, and Shari L. Dworkin conducted a systematic analysis of media coverage of the Semenya event, comparing South African print coverage of the story with coverage in the United States. In the U.S. coverage, the dominant media frame “centered on the ‘medicalized’ aspect of sex/gender . . . among scientists and academics on whether or not ‘sex tests’ could identify and verify ‘real’ female athletes.”

In the South African press, the imposition of gender-verification testing on Semenya was not framed simply (or even primarily) as a violation of an individual human right, or even simply as a violation of “women’s rights,” but as a white, Euro-American insult to the integrity of South African identity. Semenya, for her South African advocates, was not so much seen as a champion of the rights of women or of transgender or intersexed people, but as “our girl,” thus revealing the particular way that race and gender configure to construct the emergent post-apartheid South African national identity.

I do not want to imply a romanticized view of South Africa (or anywhere else in the Global South) as a place where sex/gender binaries are less than meaningful, or where gender fluidity is embraced. To the contrary, feminists in South Africa continue to organize around the strategic interests of women as a social category, fighting against stubborn legacies of institutionalized patriarchy in politics, the labor force, health care, and families, as well as struggling against various forms of violence against women.

32. Cooky et al., “What Makes a Woman a Woman?”
33. Dworkin, Colvin, Hatcher, and Peacock, “Men’s Perceptions of Women’s Rights
and Cooky point out, South African leaders have been no champions of human rights for transgender or gender-nonconforming people. But when South Africans witnessed scientific gender-verification tests being imposed on Caster Semenya by an institution representing the interests of the Global North, this conjured up recent historic parallels with oppressive medico-scientific practices during apartheid that subjected people to “race-verification tests.” In response, it appears that the interests of asserting antiracist and anticolonial South African identity were best served not by engaging in debates about gender fluidity, but instead by embracing Semenya as “our girl” and denouncing as racist any questions about her gender. As such, the South African defense of Semenya affirms an antiracist, anticolonial construction of national identity, with women’s sports as one pillar of this identity. Simultaneously, this defense reinforces, rather than challenges, an institutionalized gender binary in sport, thus erasing an opportunity to champion gender diversity and fluidity as part of an expanding human rights discourse.34

Second, the Semenya case reveals the limited scope of the concept of soft essentialism for thinking about contemporary gender relations in a global context. On the surface, we see in the Semenya case similarities with central aspects of soft essentialism—reaffirmations of binary sex categories; women’s sports treated as a realm that requires “protection” (in this case, through gender-verification testing that aims to affirm a protective boundary around women athletes); and a silence surrounding boys and men as an unmarked, never sex-tested, and thus naturalized superior sex category. But the North-South asymmetries in what the category of “women’s sports” means, and in how these categories were strategically deployed, reveals some differences. While the sport agencies and mass media of the Global North attempted to impose their own institutionalized (and “science-based”) essentialist and categorical male-female sport binaries, when we examine the meanings and strategies that emerge from South African groups, we see that these sex/gender binary categories were deployed not as a way of creating an individual professional-class “choosing” female subject (as in soft essentialist discourse), but rather as a collective form of resistance against white supremacy and control by the Global North.

In the Semenya case, gender categoricalism is reaffirmed in sport by the dominant discourse of both the Global North and the Global South, but it seems to be a very forced categoricalism, strained at both ends by Northern attempts to use science to force Semenya into

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34. Cooky et al., “What Makes a Woman a Woman?”
one or the other sex category, and by Southern discourse that insists on Semenya's femaleness by denying the veracity of gender-verification tests, thus erasing potential questions about gender fluidity and even muting the emergence of Semenya's own voice in the matter. Superimposing the concept of soft essentialism onto this transnational moment, then, risks adopting the standpoint of the Global North, thus doing violence to the intersecting interests at stake, and the different ways these interests are played out in sport.

Conclusion

This chapter has been an exercise in examining sport and contemporary gender relations via three registers: a local gender regime, a national gender order, and a site that reveals some dynamics of a global gender order. This exercise is useful in two broad ways. First, it offers a means of expanding my own scholarly standpoint beyond the local or the national levels, thus potentially shifting or disrupting my domain assumptions. For those like myself who mostly conduct scholarly research on gender and sport within the Global North, attempting to look through a standpoint from the Global South hints at broader strategies for change within the metropole. When we observe sporting institutions dominated by the Global North in direct contact with those of the Global South, our assumptions about the momentary hegemones within the U.S. national gender order and within local gender regimes can face some radical challenges. It is the very insularity of the U.S. scholars' work on gender and sport, my own included, that can lead us to falsely universalize concepts like “soft essentialism,” and to assume, for instance (as I have seen in international discussions of gender and sport), that Title IX has some relevance and meaning to those outside the U.S. A transnational focus illuminates the limits (without necessarily denying the local relevance) of local or national concepts and policies.

Second, a shift in geographic registers can help us to understand more deeply how the strains and tensions in local and national hegemones are already intertwined with larger, transnational structures. I have argued that at the local level of a gender regime of youth sports in a professional-class, white-dominated U.S. community, we can see the emergence of an ideology of soft essentialism that reveals both the success and the limits of a professional-class-based, individualist feminism. At the level of the national gender order of the U.S., I argue, we can see this same soft essentialism at work in the legal and political

35. Ibid.
“steering” of the gender regime of school sports. I have acknowledged that the successes of this steering at the local and national levels are impressive, but also limited by the class-based liberal feminist focus on individual equal opportunity, and by the ways that categorical gender discourse and sport policies render the gendering of boys and men as invisible.

Drawing our scope out from national to transnational further complicates the analysis of sport and contemporary gender relations. The controversy surrounding Caster Semenya raises many potential questions, fundamentally among them the question of “what is at stake in questions of gender equality in sport?” (with a tentative reply being, “not always the same things in all situations and all places”). When and how are assertions of categorical sex difference oppressive? When and how can the categorical interests of girls and women be strategically invoked to press for greater equality and distributive justice? When and how might other categories (for example intersexed, race, or place) acutely reveal to us the extent to which “gender” itself is a limiting frame through which institutional sex segregation and naturalization of two supposedly dichotomous sexes is accomplished? And how does an intersectional analysis—especially one that goes beyond the trinity of local race/class/gender—help us to understand the complexities and contradictions in pressing for categorical justice? For example, in asserting the rights of girls and women, when does Title IX in the U.S. erase the particular interests of girls and women marginalized by social class, race, or ethnicity, or of people with differently gendered bodies? In South Africa or elsewhere, how might the deployment of women’s sports as resistance against white supremacy and colonial domination also simultaneously render invisible the particular needs of differently gendered people who don’t (or won’t) fit into binary sex categories, however strategically they may be deployed? In other words, by shifting through these different regional registers, we can more clearly see the ways in which gender relations in sport express the complexities of intersectional inequalities, and how “gender politics” can be a means of steering toward one aspect of social justice, while steering away from another.

**Bibliography**


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