

Female athletes targeted when gender is not a given

By Silvia Camporesi
and Katrina Karkazis

A new international rule that determines whether certain female athletes can compete in the 2012 London Olympics and beyond has just gone into effect. After a lengthy review, the International Association of Athletics Federations and the International Olympic Committee have decided that female athletes with unusually high androgen levels, a condition known as hyperandrogenism, will be banned from competition unless they undergo surgery or take drugs to lower their

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testosterone levels.

This new policy comes as a response to Caster Semenya, the South African runner whose gender was called into question by fellow athletes in 2009. After a private whispering campaign became a public media event, the IAAF felt compelled to investigate. In the absence of a fair and transparent policy for handling such cases, Semenya was mistreated and humiliated. She reportedly was subjected to a two-hour examination, during which doctors latched her legs in stirrups and photographed her sex organs. Afterward, Semenya sent distraught messages to friends and family.

There are many biological reasons some athletes are better than others.

Some endurance athletes have extraordinary aerobic capacity and exceptional resistance against fatigue. As a group, professional

baseball players' eyesight is significantly better than the general population. Many have speculated that Michael Phelps has Marfan's Syndrome, a rare condition that results in exceptionally long limbs and flexible joints, traits that would certainly assist a swimmer. As none of these other naturally occurring variations in elite athletes have been singled out for scrutiny, it raises the question: Why has Semenya's case caused such a public furor?

The answer is that this isn't just about fairness in sports; it is also about traditional standards of femininity and evolving ideas about the proper role of women in society. It took us a long time to be comfortable with female athletes at all, because athleticism wasn't feminine and real women are not supposed to have big muscles. Even today, society prefers "hot" women athletes who accent their femininity. To wit, Serena Williams. Females with high

androgen levels do not conform to our feminine ideals and this causes social discomfort.

The new rules ban these women on the grounds that they have an unfair advantage over other women athletes. But how can we disentangle the role of hormones from other factors leading to athletic excellence? And why is this biological variation alone being singled out among the many others that give athletes a competitive edge? Athletic excellence is the product of a complex entanglement of psychological, biological and environmental factors. If athletes weren't exceptional in one regard or another, they could not compete on the international stage.

Most would agree that we need a transparent and clear gender policy to avoid the humiliation suffered by Semenya.

Unfortunately, the new rules leave too many gray areas and don't

appear to solve the most troublesome issues that arose in Semenya's case. The trigger for medical investigation is anonymous reporting. What is to stop future whispering campaigns? Some women will continue to have to undergo invasive and humiliating examinations of the sort that Semenya went through. Any woman who refuses to comply with this process cannot compete. Although the new rules are clear for some cases, some women, including Semenya, fall into a gray area, and whether they will be allowed to compete will depend on subjective assessment.

There should be sex segregation in sports. The problem is that some individuals buck up against the hard line of such sex segregation, and scrutiny is bound to muddy things more than clarify them. Now, however, that is exactly what we have: exceptional scrutiny of extraordinary women.