

SPECIAL COMMUNICATION

A New Era in Sports with the Emergence of Transgenderism

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ABSTRAK

Semasa temasya Sukan Olimpik yang lalu, terdapat kontroversi terutamanya dalam sukan lasak seperti tinju, seorang atlet (yang mengenalkan diri sebagai wanita tetapi sebelum ini dikesan secara kromosom sebagai lelaki) menewaskan seorang atlet wanita dalam masa kurang daripada satu minit melalui serahan (tap-out). Kejadian seperti ini semakin kerap berlaku, terutamanya apabila persekutuan sukan yang berbeza mempunyai keperluan peraturan yang berbeza dalam pengelasan jantina. Hal ini menimbulkan kebimbangan terhadap keselamatan atlet, isu perlindungan insurans dan potensi penyalahgunaan dalam acara-acara sukan akan datang. Tanpa mengambil kira isu doping dan manipulasi hormon, adakah atlet wanita benar-benar bersaing di tahap yang sama apabila berhadapan dengan atlet transgender (lelaki yang mengenal diri sebagai wanita)? Mungkin langkah ke hadapan ialah dengan mengekalkan acara sukan berdasarkan jantina dan untuk atlet transgender (lelaki yang mengenal diri sebagai wanita), mewujudkan kategori berasingan bagi atlet transgender, atau mempertimbangkan untuk mengadakan acara tanpa kategori jantina - demi mempromosikan keterangkuman dan kesaksamaan. Ini kerana terdapat kajian yang menunjukkan bahawa tahap testosteron yang ditekan (dalam lelaki yang mengenal diri sebagai wanita) masih memberikan kelebihan tidak adil berbanding atlet wanita. Oleh itu, satu kata sepakat perlu dicapai sebelum kejadian seperti ini berlaku dalam acara berpasukan pada masa akan datang. **Kata kunci:** Kesaksamaan dalam sukan; Sukan Olimpik 2024; transgenderisme

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ABSTRACT

During the recent Olympic games, there was a cloud of controversy especially in the contact sport of boxing where an athlete (identifies as a woman but was previously detected to be chromosomally a man) defeated a woman athlete in under a minute by tap-out. Such instances are becoming common especially when different federations have different regulatory requirements for gender classification. This raises the concern of athlete safety, potential insurance coverage issues and potential abuse for future events. Doping and hormonal manipulation aside, are the women athletes competing with the transgender group (men who identify as women) at an equal competing level? Perhaps the way forward is by either maintaining sporting events for same-sex and transgender athletes (men who identify as women), having separate categories for transgender athletes or to even consider having events without gender categories (to promote inclusivity and equality). After all, we already have literature showing that suppressed testosterone levels (in a man who identifies as a woman) still provides an athlete with an unfair advantage over a woman. A consensus must be reached before such instances occur in team-based events for competition.

Keywords: Fairplay in sport; Olympics 2024; transgender-ism

SHORT COMMUNICATION

In the recent Olympics, we saw incidences happening for the very first time. One of the few “first-time” incidents that was witness (which eventually became a hot topic) was the boxing match when a person from Algeria who now identifies as a woman (unsure of her birth gender) defeated a woman athlete (born and identifies as a woman) in under a minute by a tap-out (Laviertes 2024). A similar event happened in the year 2014 when a male who identified as a woman fractured the skull of a fellow opponent in the Mixed Martial Arts event (Purohit 2021).

The Recent Olympic Controversy

The Olympics saw a new change in regulations from other sporting events because the Committee decided to determine the gender of the athlete based on testosterone levels rather than chromosomal composition (chromosomal determination as practiced by the International Boxing Association (IBA) under their definition of men and women) (International-Boxing-

Association 2024). This simply means that the same competing sport has two different methods to determine the gender of the athlete for different sporting competitions. Incidentally, the IBA had already written to the Olympics committee justifying that they had disqualified the same Olympic Algerian fighter in the past based on chromosomal testing (Nair & Foroudi 2024). This non-standardised guidelines for different competitions not only cause confusion but also pave way for potential controversies to occur during matches. This is a topic that differs from the differences in sex development (DSD) issue where women are born with hyperandrogenism etc. This is a topic where we look at individuals who are born as men (with a sex chromosome of XY) and wish to identify themselves as women. Though it was a new approach by the Olympics committee to allow, recognise gender identification and encourage equality-together it invited questions of fairness into the on-field competitions. Though inclusivity is important in sports- the question of athlete safety, the legality involved and fair-play in

sports comes into question. This article was to review the potential issues that can occur in the future if the Olympic decision became a precedence.

Fairplay in Sports

Considering that this should be looked on holistically, let's first consider this logically. We have a person who identifies as a woman but is genetically a man competing against those who are born as women. Physiologically, the muscle building capacity and response to training will be different in both sets of athletes though they might compete in the same event (Hilton & Lundberg 2021).

Yes, it is a win for gender equality and as the organisers strongly felt that no one should be discriminated against in sport, but is this an allowance for bias to creep in?

Now, there are blood measurement levels of allowed testosterone levels in the body of athletes, but the levels differ for men and women. The current guidelines by The World Athletics (formerly known as International Amateur Athletics Federation-IAAF) state that there are no minimal levels of allowed testosterone in women but a maximum level of 10 nmol/L (for 12 consecutive months and within the competition of games) whilst scientifically, a normal woman has a testosterone level of between 0.5 to 2.4 nmol/L (5 nmol/L and above with an XX chromosome suggest hyperandrogenism) (Fulghum Bruce & Collier 2024; IAAF 2018; IOC 2015). What is even more baffling is that women with DSD need to maintain a testosterone of 2.5 nmol/L continuously for 24 months according to the World Athletics guidelines before being able to qualify and compete in the women's category (World Athletics 2023).

This brings a massive problem for those who identify as women but were born men

when competing with women (who are born and identified as women). How is it possible to stop individuals who identify as the opposite gender from competing in the gender they now identify with? Till date, though there is a World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) guideline for Therapeutic Use Exemption as well as Prohibited Substances for Transgenders in sport that mainly focuses on men who identify themselves as women competing in the women's category (WADA 2022). If WADA uses the transgender level of measurement for testosterone guidelines, are they leveling the sport to a fair ground?

Physical Building Capacity

To consider another aspect in terms of safety, physical safety of the athletes are now in question after officials reviewed the mixed martial art match and the Paris Olympics Boxing event (Laviertes 2024; Purohit 2021). Some women athletes (born and identify themselves as women) competing in boxing events have already declared that they will not compete against a person who is biologically born as a man (Amani 2024). A study in the past concluded that post-pubertal athletes of both genders can have different physiological and physical capabilities when it comes to sport performances (Handelsman et al. 2018). This would mean, despite hormonal regulation, the capacity of muscle and physiological developments differs based on the birth gender of a particular athlete. Will this also give rise when arbitration of physical injury is due to competition?

Potential Legal Issues

Some insurance companies might utilise this opportunity to reject policy claims for women athletes being injured as a result from

a competition with a transgender athlete (man identifying as a woman) as they have only insured the female athlete for a contact sport under the impression that they were only going to be competing against other genetically born women.

With the complication of doping and hormonal manipulation (natural or otherwise), sporting has now become a non-levelled competitive playing field, no matter how one might look at it. It has also been discussed in the past that testosterone suppression in transgender athletes has minimal effect on muscle mass and performances. This produces an advantage to the transgender athletes competing (a man identifying as a woman) in a sport event (Hilton & Lundberg 2021).

Potential Solutions for a Way Forward

It is high time that the sporting world took a hard look at this and consider that we are not only complicating the practice of sport, but all the other factors to ensure fair and leveled competitiveness. Perhaps competition amongst the transgender group (men who identify themselves as women) should be considered. However, the possible issues are to again consider the fact that this will mean a new set of standard guidelines, identification qualification, acceptable hormonal measurement levels and acceptable doping guidelines, especially with the use of anabolic steroids/testosterone, as how new and other emerging substances have popped up in competitive e-sports (Arvinder-Singh et al. 2024). With the existence of world same-gender and transgender sporting game events and the recent attempt to amalgamate the international games together, perhaps having different categories for the interest of sporting fairness and safety might be the way to go. The other option that can be considered is to

have all games as an open category- no gender differences where everybody competes in one event. After all, with the Olympics granting men who identify as women to compete in the women category, it is really an open category if you think about it. Perhaps with an open category, legality especially on insurance coverage, perhaps severe physical injuries etc can then be anticipated so that necessary precautions be placed to avoid or prevent potentially life-threatening/life-altering possibilities. Possible safety situations are readily anticipated by both the athletes and by coaching staff as well as sporting bodies/authorities/insurers. That will benefit the current Olympic guidelines on section 3 (non-discrimination) (IOC 2021).

Some thought on fairness and level playing fields must also be given into the future potential of men who identify as women who wish to compete in team sports (ie basketball, sailing, dragon boat racing, 4 X 100 sprints etc). Will this all lead to potential abuse?

Questions to be Pondered?

Is it fair to compare an athlete who is chromosomally born as a woman (XX) with a transgender woman born as a man (XY)? Why is there discrimination against women (born XX) with DSD when the permitted testosterone levels differ from those of transgender women (born XY)? Are we now prepared to revise the sporting records that were set by women in the women's category of sports? Will the new set records by transgenders be considered women's records or recorded separately? What about team events (such as 4 x 100 m events etc.), where 2 of the runners are women and 2 men who identify as ladies? Will they be considered to be entitled to breaking currently set records? Will all of this lead to potential abuse especially for athletes born as men who

intend to identify as the opposite gender so that they gain an advantage in competitive sports? The sporting world must decide and be prepared for this in the near future.

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