Gender testing and women’s sport

Caster Semenya has been the centre of gender-testing discussions for several years now. José Goulão

The second week of the Olympics is almost upon us, bringing on the athletics competition. Caster Semenya, a talented middle-distance runner, carried the South African flag at the Opening Ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics. The road she travelled to get to this Olympics was a particularly challenging one as not only did she have to qualify, she also had to prove that she was a woman.

I’ve learned two things about gender testing and sport that I found interesting. First, there is no definitive gender test. And second, only women’s sport worries about gender testing.

I’ll take the second point first. Because men are considered advantaged in sport, men’s sport is not concerned about women passing as men to participate. If a woman wants to compete as a man, good luck to her. She might be disqualified if discovered, but no one would be on the lookout for her. In fact, in many sports men with naturally ’low’ testosterone levels are actually allowed to use testosterone supplements to bring their levels up to ‘normal’.

Women’s sport, though, cares very much if men try to participate. Because men have physical advantages, they are unfairly advantaged in contests with women in most sports. So women’s sport polices gender.

This brings me back to my first point: there is no definitive gender test. Chromosome testing might seem definitive, but there are a number of conditions where an infant with XY chromosomes can develop as a female. For example, a person with Complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome would have XY chromosomes, so be genetically male, but would have no male sex characteristics because her body would not process androgens. She would appear female, but would have none of the male advantages that androgens provide. She might in fact may be disadvantaged because most women have androgens. Alice Dreger’s research into this topic has argued that there is no definitive gender test possible because there is no definitive way to determine gender.

This brings us back to Semenya. In 2009 Semenya won the 800m race at the Berlin Championships. She seemed to come out of nowhere. Her somewhat masculine appearance (one journalist described her as ‘breathtakingly butch’) and her outstanding performance raised questions about whether she was actually a woman. Her gender was questioned because she was too good.

Semenya was prevented from competing for 11 months through a poorly handled process that she felt violated her privacy and human rights. But in 2010 her ban was overturned and she is now back on the track. Whatever gender verification process that the IAAF undertook during her ban has confirmed that she is a woman, and can compete as one.

Semenya’s experience highlights the nuances around the nature of gender, and the lack of clarity there is in society around how to deal with this issue. In women’s sport it is couched in issues of fairness, but the reality is that everyone has different capacities for excellence. Gender is just one of the fault lines.

In her work, Dreger suggests that rather than gender testing, anyone who was raised as a woman should be able to compete as one. I agree with this approach. If it had been the policy, Semenya would have always been eligible.