Carrying the flag for the nation

Anna Meares is a champion cyclist; she could also be a champion flag bearer. Sum_of_Marc/Flickr

One of the greatest honours for an Olympic athlete is being selected to carry the flag in the Opening Ceremony, and who will be selected is the subject of great debate. This year the debate has focused on gender. Only three women have ever carried the flag at the summer Olympics for Australia: sprinters Raelene Boyle (1976) and Denise Boyd (1980), and most recently diver Jenny Donnet (1992), who was flag bearer 20 years ago.

Five-time Olympian Ric Charlesworth has been reported as calling for a woman to carry the flag in 2012. Australia sends many excellent women to the Olympics, and it is troubling that honours such as this are not evenly spread.

As the situation with the Opals, the Australian women’s national basketball team, and their inequitable treatment regarding flights to the Olympics suggests, the structures that manage Olympic sport are gendered. This gendering is so embedded that the differential treatment of women is rarely mentioned. It has been going on for so long that it is normal for women’s sport to be sidelined.

Barely anyone notices when women do not receive accolades such as carrying the flag. That a women had not carried the flag since 1992 was not even mentioned before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, so it being highlighted this year is actually an improvement.

Should the decision be made based on gender? It could be argued that it has always been made based on gender: the evidence of past selections indicates men are automatically more likely to be considered. If that is the case, perhaps there needs to be a process where women candidates are especially considered, if only for them to be considered at all.