

Women's Sports and the Controversy Around Caster Semenya

Caster Semenya is a South African runner with two consecutive Olympic gold medals in the 800 meter race, but her glory has been cut short by the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) and their rule on the levels of testosterone women must have to compete. As a female runner with unusually high levels of testosterone, Semenya has been subject to this changed regulation. The issue of whether to allow Semenya and other women with high testosterone to compete has become a highly controversial issue, transcending athletics and becoming a topic that human rights activists discuss. Dr. Benjamin D. Levine claims that testosterone plays a major role in athletic performance, but the UN Human Rights Council argues that regulations on women with higher testosterone levels is a violation of human rights norms. Although some studies may display the advantage testosterone gives to female athletes, strong evidence suggests that Semenya should be allowed to compete, considering the discrimination she has faced and the inconclusive data on testosterone in women's sports.

Women with higher testosterone may have an advantage in middle distance races. According to Dr. Benjamin D. Levine at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, testosterone "...builds skeletal muscle, it builds cardiac muscle. It increases the number of red blood cells" (Kolata). These advantages are especially crucial in middle distance races because they may help enhance an athlete's endurance, strength, and lean muscle mass. Because middle distance races are very intense but also relatively long, athletes who compete in them must have exceptional endurance and also more muscle mass than athletes who run longer races. The concern about women competing with higher levels of testosterone is that it may be unfair to female athletes who have normal levels of testosterone. Based on evidence gathered by

researchers affiliated with the IAAF, “women with high testosterone performed as much as 3% better than those with lower testosterone in a handful of [track] events” (Schultz). Some people do not think women with higher testosterone should be allowed to compete because they are taking opportunities away from women who have lower testosterone. According to their perspective, although there are many physical advantages various other athletes may have to give them an edge in competition, having higher testosterone is an advantage that warrants restrictions. The IAAF views “women’s sport as a ‘protected class’ and insists that it must ‘place conditions’ on the female category in order ‘to ensure fair and meaningful competition’” (Schultz). The protected status of women’s athletics might make the restrictions on testosterone necessary, but there isn’t enough definitive research to warrant a discriminatory and hurtful ruling against women like Semenya. There may be slight physical advantages for these runners, but banning them from racing could be discriminatory and extremely hurtful for them.

Due to her high level of testosterone, Caster Semenya has been banned from competing in middle distance races at the international level unless she takes medication to lower her testosterone, a ruling that both discriminates based on a physical trait and puts her at the risk of any negative side effects of the drug. After the IAAF created the rule, Semenya appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), but her appeal was denied, despite the court admitting that “the new regulations ‘may not be compatible with international human rights norms and standards’” (Schultz). Not only is Semenya facing discrimination due to her hormones, she also is battling those who insult her because of her race, gender, and sexual orientation. Many people agree that “Semenya, a gay black woman from a South African township, has dealt with a decade of almost unimaginable adversity… Semenya has had to endure this toxic combination of racism,

sexism and homophobia” (Crouse). Semenya’s career and personal well being have both been negatively impacted by the difficulties she has had to face, including the hatred from people in the running community who are not happy with her success. In addition to the inequality and bias against her, if Semenya decided to take the medication that would limit her testosterone enough to allow her to compete, there could be a multitude of negative, harmful, and possibly chronic side effects from the drug. Even the Court of Arbitration for Sport “expressed concern about these side effects” (Karkazis and Jordan-Young). If drugs to limit an athlete’s natural level of testosterone causes harm to that athlete, then it should not be administered. For women like Caster Semenya, though, taking the drug is the only option they have if they wish to continue in their running careers. The ruling against Semenya and other women with high testosterone should not exist because it is discriminatory and may cause irreparable harm to the athletes forced to take any hormone-altering drugs to compete.

The evidence on testosterone that the IAAF used to formulate the rule disqualifying Semenya from running middle distance races is unreliable and inconsistent. Testosterone, despite what many people believe, is not strictly a male hormone. According to countless hormone researchers, “testosterone has wide-ranging effects on metabolism, liver function, bones, muscle, skin and the brain in both sexes” (Karkazis and Jordan-Young). A common myth about testosterone is that it is restricted to the male body and alien to females, but this misconception is blatantly untrue. Defining a “female” cutoff is arbitrary and discriminatory. In addition, the data displaying that testosterone is a hormone that enhances athletic performance is inconclusive and contradictory. A study involving 1,100 women competing in track and field events was conducted by the IAAF and the results contradicted the evidence they based their ruling on. The

study proved that “for three of the 11 running events, women with lower testosterone actually did better than those with higher levels” (Karkazis and Jordan-Young). Because the data collected on the impact of testosterone in athletics is inconclusive, it is premature to blame this particular hormone for Semenya’s achievements. She should not have to abide by the rule to limit her testosterone because the data supporting the regulation is unreliable.

The discrimination that Semenya has faced in her career and the inconclusive evidence on testosterone’s effects in athletic performance demonstrates why Semenya should not have to reduce her testosterone to compete. Semenya has been insulted because of her race, gender, and sexual orientation, and the rule banning her from competing in middle distance races is just another discriminatory action against her. If she did decide to take medication to reduce her testosterone, she could be exposing herself to serious and dangerous health risks. Even if there was complete reliance on this medication, the reason for taking hormone-reducing drugs is based on inconsistent and unreliable evidence. There isn’t enough data to prove that testosterone levels give female athletes an advantage. The rule created by the IAAF is discriminatory and not backed with dependable evidence. Simply put, the rule is a way to restrict athletes who are different from competing, and it should not be tolerated. As more women enter into competitive sports, this will affect growing numbers and must be addressed in a way that protects human rights.

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