

Gender verification / Gender stereotyping -- Or, The politics of equality in an online track and field community

Sandy Wells
University of British Columbia

Introduction

South African runner Caster Semenya touched off a firestorm of controversy in 2009 by winning the women's 800m at the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) World Championships in Berlin. Finishing in a time of 1:55.45, Semenya easily outdistanced the field but almost immediately faced accusations that her masculine body had afforded her an unfair advantage over her female competitors. As a result, she was required to undergo tests designed to analyze whether she is fully female.

While much has been written about the sociological implications of gender verification little research has looked specifically at the ways in which members of sporting communities – coaches, administrators and athletes themselves – have made sense of such controversial issues from their positions within cultures of sport. This is a significant gap given that internet communications and social media now serve to connect people in sport culture more easily and readily (see Wilson, 2007) and that such cybercultures have often been looked to for their resistive or emancipatory potential in the face of gender hierarchies (see Lecourt, 1999).

With this in mind, the study reported here examined the ways in which members of an online Track & Field community based in Canada debated and attempted to reconcile the Semenya story and its implications for gender verification and women's participation in the sport.

Methodology

In 2007, Brian Wilson called for greater attention to be paid to the role of the internet and online communications in relation to sport-based political activism and resistive practices.

This transformative potential of the internet has held particular resonance for feminism and feminist struggles that go beyond sport. LeCourt (1999), for example, identified two theoretical processes by which online communication might upset or challenge patriarchy: promotion of feminist voices and the construction of feminist epistemologies. However, on both counts LeCourt concludes that online communications offers at least as much potential for reinscribing gendered power relations and stereotypes as it has for resisting or reconstructing them.

With this in mind, this study followed Van Doorn and Van Zoonen's (2009) assertion that gender both shapes and is shaped by the internet and that investigations of such ambivalence are best approached through specific case studies. An online email group organized in Canada (which we've called "TrackNet" or TN) served as our case.

Comments posted to TN during the 2009 IAAF World Championships regarding Caster Semenya and gender verification served as the data. All TN members who participated in this online discussion gave informed consent for the use of their comments for this project. This research was approved by the Research Ethics Board at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

For more information, contact: Sandy Wells [wellscas@interchange.ubc.ca]

Works Cited:

- Lecourt, D. (1999) "Writing (Without) the Body: Gender and Power in Networked Discussion Groups". In Kristine Blair and Pamela Takayoshi (eds), *Feminist Cyberscapes*. 153-176
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Context

- Leading up to the 2009 IAAF World Championships, Caster Semenya dramatically improved her times in the 800m, dropping more than 16 seconds in one year. Such stark improvements in athletic performance often catch the attention of doping officials and raise suspicion of illegal substances or techniques.

IAAF World Junior Championships, July 2008	2:11.98 (7 th)
Commonwealth Youth Games, October 2008	2:04.23 (1 st)
African Junior Athletics Championship, July 2009	1:56.72 (1 st)
IAAF World Championships, August 2009	1:55.45 (1 st)

Figure 1a – Caster Semenya was relatively unknown on the international track and field circuit prior to 2008, the year she competed at the IAAF World Junior Championships at the age of 17. Her meteoric rise to the top of international professional track and field raised suspicions among observers.

- Sex status is commonly understood to be inherently binary (male or female) and mutually exclusive. However, attempts to verify female athletes' sex have revealed that physiological, genetic, and hormonal data from female athletes do not always align with biomedical definitions of "male" or "female", leaving the question of some athletes' sex unresolved.

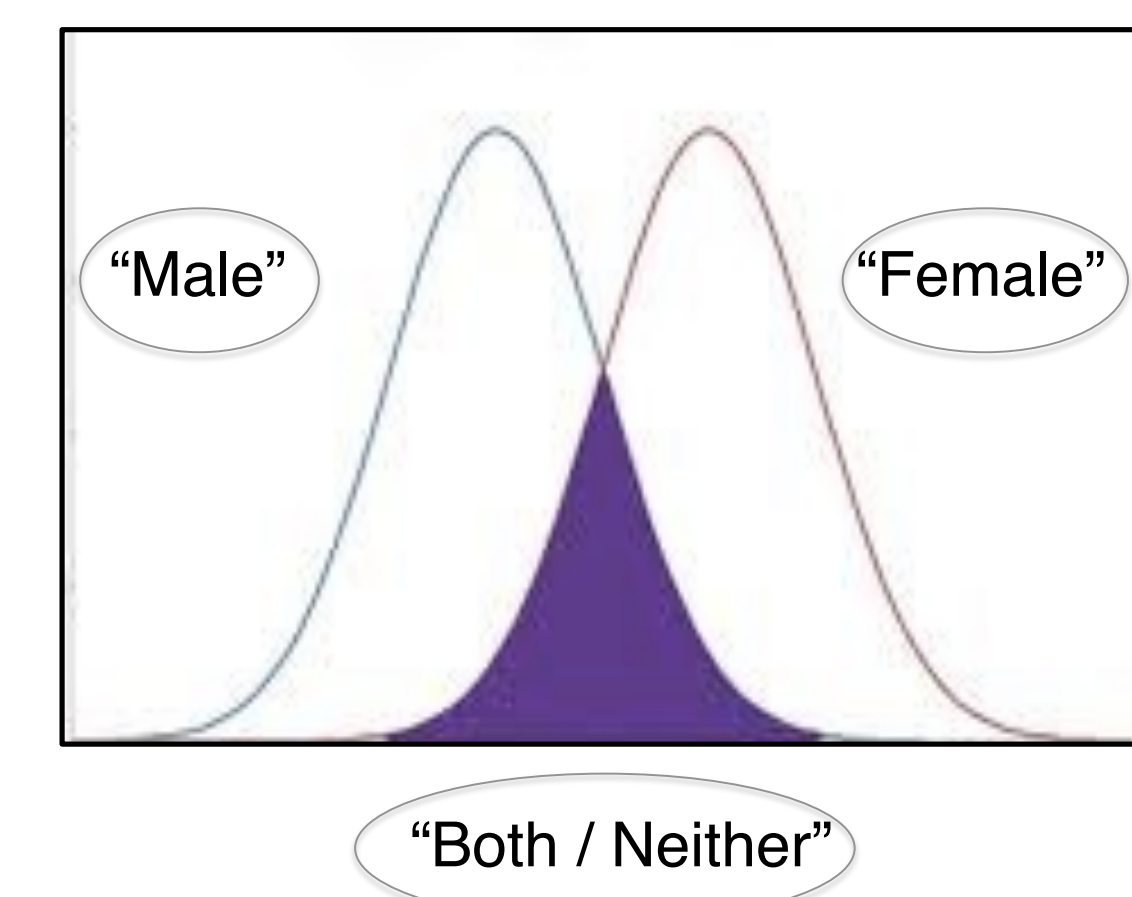


Fig 1b - Commonsense notions of sex assume an unambiguous and mutually exclusive separation of "male" and "female" traits, especially with regard to athleticism. However, the actual overlap among men and women on most traits complicates this assumption.

- Sport, sex, and biomedical science share a claim to a direct connection to nature, often understood to be separate from and prior to culture. Stereotypes of sex, gender and sexuality are part of the bedrock that supports the organization of sport, for both men and women, and are buttressed to a large degree by biomedical knowledge concerning normal and abnormally sexed/gendered bodies.
- The assumed natural connection between "maleness" and "athleticism" implies that female athletes with mixed markers of sex are unfairly advantaged in sport.

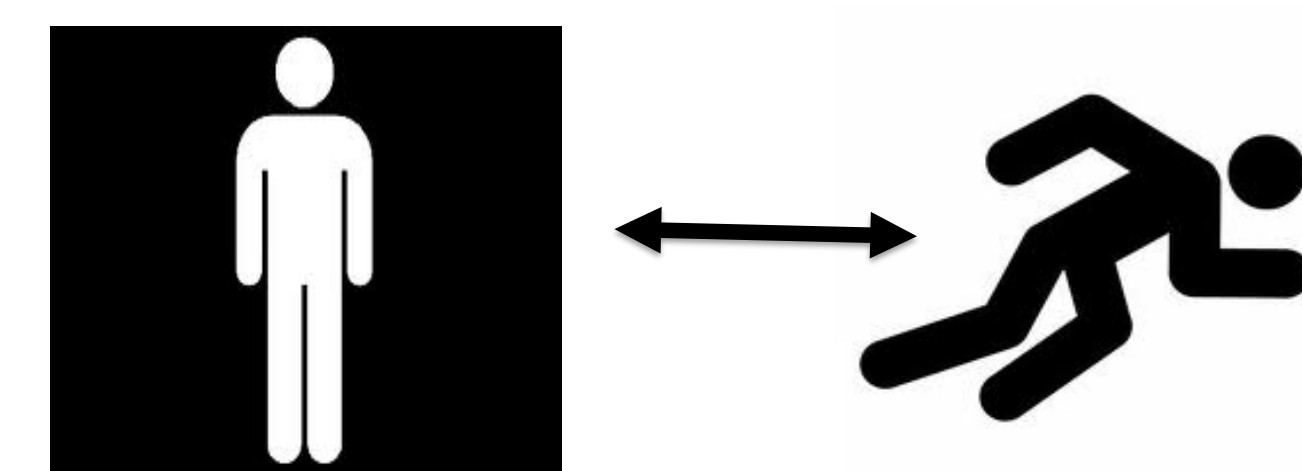


Fig 1c – "Maleness" is often considered synonymous with "athleticism", which makes it difficult to see female bodies as capable of excellent athletic performances.

Results

Analysis of the online discussion of the Semenya case revealed three dominant themes that underpinned the importance and intelligibility gender verification for members of the TN listserv and, in turn, served as the ethical and ideological bases for their claims as to how the sport of track & field should proceed. These themes are: Recognition and understanding of the 'normal' female body, the importance of defending fair competition, and the protection of female athletes. Each is discussed in this section, with excerpts from TN member emails used to illustrate the themes.

THEME 1 – THE NORMAL FEMALE BODY

Even before the IAAF announced that they would be conducting "gender verification" tests on Caster Semenya, the TN listserv was active with posts commenting on her physical appearance and sharing articles, weblinks, and comparisons with transitioned (male-to-female) athletes.

"I see her and I feel that something is deeply wrong...Nothing about this person (save presumably her genitalia) is "feminine": not her body shape, not her facial structure, not her voice, not even the way she moves her eyes!...Semenya's being allowed to race against women is patently unfair"

TN Member 1

THEME 2 – DEFENDING FAIR COMPETITION

While gender was understood by many to be an important part of an individual's identity, it did not figure in most accounts of what constituted fairness. "Fair competition" was put forward as the highest value of sport, and signs of "maleness" in women's sport as the biggest threat to sporting fairness – at least as threatening as illegal doping.

"The fact that she wasn't trying to get away with something...is irrelevant...someone who has been innocently taking a cold medication full of banned stimulants isn't allowed to compete simply because their intentions were pure. That is exogenous doping. Her's was endogenous doping. Both should be illegal"

TN Member 2

THEME 3 – PROTECTING FEMALE ATHLETES

Connected to the issue of "fairness" is that of "victimization". TN members understood Semenya's competitive advantage as a problem because it would victimize so-called 'normal' female athletes who could not win against her.

"There's a need to protect the opportunity for women to compete and succeed in sport, or we face the dissolution of women's sports. And if this means that <0.1% of people who have intersex characteristics are excluded from competing as women at the highest international levels, then that's the collateral damage that at least I accept."

TN Member 3

Conclusions

Canadian track fans in an online community relied upon stereotyped notions of 'normal' femininity, sex-linked athleticism, and the level playing field to formulate a response to the Semenya gender verification controversy of 2009. Semenya's 'masculine' appearance was disturbing TN members and signalled to them a corruption of the rules. As a result, members voiced their desire to prevent Semenya, and any female athlete like her, from competing in elite track and field. TN members drew primarily upon their own experiences and upon circulating biomedical discourses about sex and athletic performance to come to these conclusions.

These results suggest that gendered stereotypes continue to provide the basis for sporting communities to address issues relating to sex and athleticism. Athletes like Caster Semenya *could* provide the impetus for deconstructing such stereotypes by making obvious the arbitrary dividing line between "maleness" and "femaleness". Instead, the Semenya case highlights the continuing strength and flexibility of these stereotypes to persist, and subsume, challenges to its logic. Not only were TN members able to interpret Semenya as "less than female" based on her appearance, they were able to justify her exclusion from women's sport in benevolent terms. Thus, gender verification was positioned as way to support and protect female athleticism, though with some regrettable "collateral damage" (TN Member 3).

This study also suggests that new regimes of truth, and subject positions regarding gender and sport, are difficult to construct online – particularly ones that challenge phallogocentric power. In this case, the online community replicated the relations of power in the broader sporting community. LeCourt (1999), drawing on Irigaray, argues that feminist resistance must jam the theoretical machinery. In this study, we saw no evidence that this was happening at all. We suggest that what actually happened was that the Semenya case was used to reconstruct the authentic feminist voice and thus primarily served to subject the cultural and biological complexities of the case to the mechanisms of phallogocentric power.

Limitations

- This study did not attempt to capture all online track and field fan communities, or sport communities explicitly engaged in political activism who may be more radically attuned to patriarchy in sport. Such groups would have produced significantly different results.
- Second, it is impossible to generalize from this study the broader track and field community in Canada or elsewhere. This study is best understood as a snapshot of the issue of gender verification situated within broader interrelations of power constructed along lines of gender, medical science and competitive sport.
- Third, and perhaps most importantly, the significant absence of women posting to the TN listserv means that the voices explored here are not illustrative of the gendered demographics of competitive track and field. In other words, while recognizing that not all women identify as feminists and that feminists are not only women, the significant number of women who participate in competitive track and field as athletes, coaches and administrators were largely absent from this study. Future research should strive to make sense of their understandings of the difficulties posed by gender verification and the presumption of a strict and definable gender binary. Of course, the extent to which men continue to dominate online communication related to sport may pose a challenge to such studies.

