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THE RHETORICAL DISCOURSE SURROUNDING FEMALE INTERSEX ATHLETES

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ABSTRACT

For decades, female intersex athletes have been ostracized by professional sport organizations due to their androgynous or masculine physiques. These athletes have experienced backlash from sports fans and competitors due to the assumption that they are men masquerading as women, or that they have gained unfair advantages in competition through the use of testosterone (Schweinbenz & Cronk, 2010). Negative media coverage has led to some of these athletes being required to undergo sex verification tests and/or suspensions by the International Olympic Committee (IOC; Elsas et al., 2000). This study explores the rhetorical discourse surrounding female intersex athletes in professional athletic settings, using a case study analysis of a number of professional athletes. The study will examine the derogatory and harmful rhetoric used against female intersex athletes and discuss how these messages have affected their professional image and impacted the public's perception of intersex athletes in international competition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many international sports organizations operate on the idea that athletes compete as either male or female. For female intersex athletes, this is not always the case. By definition, "*Intersex* is a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't fit the typical definitions of "male" or "female" (Intersex Society of North America, 2008, n.p.).

For example, an athlete may be born with an external feminine appearance but have male-archetypical anatomy internally. Many often confuse the term “intersex” with the term “transgender;” the term “*transgender* describes an individual whose gender identity doesn’t match their assigned sex at birth” (Carroll, 2014, p. 368). For example, a female transgendered athlete may self-identify as a woman but was biologically born as a male. The term *cisgender* refers to a person whose gender identity matches the sex that was assigned to them at birth (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). The focus of this study is specifically limited to female intersex athletes.

Early Cases of Intersex Athletes

Stalislawa Walasiewicz and Helen Stephens.

Women first began competing in the Olympics in 1900; however, it was not until 1928 that the first instances of female competitors with masculine and androgynous features were noted (Xavier & McGill, 2012). Gender differences between male and female athletes were recorded, and separation by gender was sustained, based on the belief that men had superior muscle mass and therefore had an unfair advantage if allowed to compete in women’s events (Elsas et al., 2000). As a result, media reports of male athletes masquerading as women triggered concerns that female competitors experienced a physical disadvantage. The reports focused specifically on Stalislawa Walasiewicz (later known as ‘Stella Walsh’), who represented Poland, and Helen Stephens (later called ‘Fulton Flash’), who represented the U.S, and they competed against each other in the 100-meter dash at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. One headline of the time read: “Fulton Flash Beats Stella the Fella” (Xavier & McGill, 2012, p. 3903). Such headlines reflected concerns about the muscular physique of the athletes and the world’s contemporary perception of womanhood and femininity. Subsequently, “Stephens was subjected to a sex verification examination” (Xavier & McGill, 2012, p. 3903); her test was a vulgar and invasive physical examination involving the inspection of her nude body and confirmed that she possessed female external genitalia (Ritchie, Reynard, &

Lewis, 2008). On the other hand, “Walsh continued to compete and was discovered to have ambiguous genitalia at autopsy in 1980” (Xavier & McGill, 2012, p. 3903).

The history and dialogue surrounding sex examinations and gender fraud in global athletics displays the world’s attitudes and perception about gender. For decades, we have identified sports favoring a masculine physiology. According to Heggie (2010), “The competitor who is taller, has a higher muscle-to-fat ratio, and the larger heart and lungs (plus some other cardio-respiratory factors) will have the sporting advantage” (p. 158). Therefore, professional athletes are more likely to have developed a muscular physique than women who are not good at sport, which targets them for sex verification.

Sex verification examinations created an additional restriction for female athletes. “[T]here is a point at which their masculine-style body is declared ‘too masculine’, and they are disqualified, regardless of their personal gender identity” (Heggie, 2010, p. 158). As for male athletes, “there isn’t a genetic, or hormonal, or physiological advantage that’s tested for, even if these would give a ‘super masculine’ athlete a distinct advantage over the merely very athletic ‘normal’ male” (p. 158). Comprehensively, several genetic variations can lead to unjustifiable advantages in athletics, but variations concerned with gender are used to bar or invalidate female intersex athletes.

Gender Fraud: The Cases of Herman “Dora” Ratjen and Irina and Tamara Press

Herman “Dora” Ratjen.

As stated by Dworkin, Swarr, and Cooky (2013):

The most frequently cited case used by sports organizations to rationalize sex and gender verification testing of female athletes occurred in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, when Herman, (known as “Dora”) Ratjen, was forced by German officials during Nazi rule to compete in the women’s high jump event disguised as a woman. (p. 44)

Heggie (2010) stated that Ratjen’s story “seems to be one of gender confusion at birth and an ongoing inability to negotiate a new

sexual or gender identity once he had mistakenly been registered as a female” (p. 340). For several decades, Ratjen’s example resulted in a continuing fear that gender misrepresentation in athletics could occur in the future.

In a *Der Spiegel* article, Berg (2009) examined Ratjen’s medical records and reported that he was born with polysemous genitalia. Respecting an obstetrician’s suggestion, his parents raised him as female (Berg, 2009; Padawer, 2016). Ratjen identified as “Dora” until 1938, when police were warned about a commuter dressed in women’s attire who appeared to be a man. According to the *New York Times* (Padawer, 2016), “The police noted it in their report [that] Ratjen told them that despite his parents’ claims, he had long suspected he was male. A police physician examined him and agreed, but reported that Ratjen’s genitals were atypical” (Bryant & Stout, 2017, p. 113). Thus, for several years, the sports world and media assumed Ratjen was a gender “cheat.”

Irina and Tamara Press.

The gender fraud controversy escalated when two Russian sisters, Irina and Tamara Press, dominated their events in the Olympics in the 1950s (Ritchie et al., 2008). At that time, female athletes were also forced to undergo:

examinations...called “nude parades,” in which [they] stood naked in front of a committee (panel of doctors), and were subjected to an inspection of their external genitalia. Nude parades occurred at the European Track and Field Championships in Budapest, and in 1967 at the Pan American Games in Winnipeg. (Ritchie et al., 2008, p. 396)

A total of 243 women were “examined,” and no abnormalities were reported. If the women passed the examinations, “they were given a *Certificate of Femininity*, signed by the President of the Medical Commission of the International Olympic Committee, which they had to carry with them in order to compete in professional competition” (Hay, 1974, p. 123).

The Press sisters were not examined, and they never competed again. Their decision not to compete was presumed by the media to indicate that they both had atypical external genitalia. It was never proven that the sisters were men masquerading as

women, nor that they had a “Disorder of Sex Development” (DSD; Ritchie et al., 2008). According to Saha (2013), “because there are so many stages of sex development in human life, there are a lot of opportunities for a person to develop along a path that is not the average one for a boy or a girl” (n.p.). DSD is a term used to describe numerous variations of sex development; the privacy rights of the women who were forced to participate in the nude parades were violated due to their physical appearance. In the 1960’s, the practices of sex verification examinations and external genitalia inspections were recognized as both an unethical and unacceptable practices (Ritchie et al., 2008).

In 1968, a new method for solving gender fraud in athletics, “Barr body detection,” was created. Priyadharsini and Sabarinath (2013) wrote that, “The Barr body detection consists of cells found only to be present in females, which can be used as a vital tool for determination of the sex of the individual” (p. 65). This method was found to be controversial. Ritchie et al. (2008) explained that, “Confirming or refuting sex purely from a chromosomal test fails to take account of the complexities of sex determination itself” (p. 399). Women who have high levels of testosterone can be disqualified from competition due to their possession of XY chromosomes, even while appearing to be female. On the other hand, men with XXY chromosomes would be allowed to compete as women, and might therefore gain a distinct competitive advantage due to their body structure (Ritchie et al., 2008).

Sex verification examinations were a source of humiliation for female athletes who had intersex irregularities, often unknowingly, and chose to compete in the Olympics (Ritchie et al., 2008). There is still a lack of evidence to prove that these athletes display relevant physical characteristics or advantages in athletics. After years of debate, the decision to abandon the practice of sex and gender verification in Olympic competition occurred in 1999. Ritchie et al. (2008) stated that, “Although this decision was initially taken as a temporary stance, this policy continues today: the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has the authority to request gender verification on an individual basis, if there is suspicion of masquerading” (p. 399).

Recent Occurrences of Female Intersex Athletes: Caster Semenya and Dutee Chand

The female athletes discussed above – Stalislawa Walasiewicz, Helen Stephens, and Irina and Tamara Press – all faced discrimination because of the assumption, perpetuated by the media, that they were males competing as females. However, they are not the only female intersex athletes who have experienced such discrimination. Caster Semenya and Dutee Chand, who competed in 2009 and 2014 respectively, also faced intense media scrutiny after their competitors posed questions about their androgynous appearance. After the media amplified the concerns, both Semenya's and Chand's eligibility was investigated.

Caster Semenya.

For decades, women were discouraged from participating in sports due to ideas and assumptions that sports would make women appear “masculine” and strip away their femininity, thus negatively influencing the world's perception of femininity and of intersex athletes (Bryant & Stout, 2017). The point in question became critical in 2009, when the South African female runner, Caster Semenya, was electric at the World Championships in Berlin. Caster competed as a woman, but there were questions about her deep voice, broad shoulders, narrow hips, and unshaven armpits; she wore long shorts, instead of the bikini shorts favored by the other runners, and she had a prominent Adam's apple (Block, 2016). Semenya received increased attention from the media when two of her competitors spoke out after the race, describing her appearance as abnormal, and her unusual physique and strength unfair in competition.

Semenya was forced to take a sex verification test. Her results indicated that she had testosterone levels three times higher than most women (Block, 2016). Testosterone may give men a competitive advantage, including a performance boost of about 10% to 12% (Genel, Simpson, & de la Chapelle, 2016). Such competitive advantages that may be enjoyed by female intersex athletes are due to biological factors, not doping, and lead to questions about whether they should be forced to decrease their testosterone levels in order to compete fairly.

This issue was discussed in 2011 by the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF). “The organization ruled that women with high testosterone levels would have to bring those levels down below the normal range for men, either by taking testosterone-suppressing drugs or by having their internal testes surgically removed” (IAAF, 2011, n.p.). The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS, 2014) suspended that IAAF rule, writing that “the IAAF [had] not provided sufficient scientific evidence about the quantitative relationship between enhanced testosterone levels and improved athletic performance in hyperandrogenic athletes” (n.p.). The court permitted the IAAF two years to provide scientific proof connecting high testosterone amounts to improved athletic performance (CAS, 2014). This extension allowed Semenya to compete in the 2016 Rio Olympic games.

Dutee Chand.

Dutee Chand, a runner representing India, was excluded from competition because of her high levels of testosterone. Media reports speculated that Chand’s arms and legs were too muscular, her speed was too fast, and her stride was considered too long for her to be a woman (Padawer, 2016). Track and Field officials approved two ways that women who had high testosterone levels could compete: (1) if they agreed to take hormone-suppressing medicine, or (2) to have surgery to decrease their high testosterone levels (Padawer, 2016).

According to Bryant and Stout (2017), the IAAF issued a letter to the Indian government’s sports authority stating that they had concerns about Chand’s gender representation and demanded that she complete a sex verification examination in order to be permitted to compete again. The results indicated that her male hormone level amounts were too high,

meaning she produced more androgens, mostly testosterone, than most women did. The typical female range is roughly 1.0 to 3.3 nanomoles of testosterone per liter of blood, about one-tenth that of typical males. Chand’s level...was above the 10-nanomoles-per-liter threshold that the IAAF set for female competitors because that level is within the “male range.” As a result, officials said she could no longer race. (Padawer, 2016, n.p.)

In response, “Chand filed her petition against the IAAF on the basis that the Hyperandrogenism Regulations were discriminatory, that they violated her human rights, and that they were based on unsupported evidence” (Browning, 2016, p. 24). In an interview, Chand explained that she had never heard the words “testosterone” or “intersex” before. Bryant and Stout (2017) noted in their book *Best American Sports Writing* that the IAAF and the IOC have been trying to police intersex women based on assumptions from the media that they are misrepresenting their gender by masquerading as women to compete in female-only events.

METHODOLOGY

Rhetorical Discourse

Rhetorical discourse involves actions intended to persuade people towards definitive ends. Examples include: “speeches, presentation material, public dialogue, rallies, blogs, manifestos, constitutions and legislation, declarations, letters of opinion, editorials and demonstrations” (Iversen, 2014, p. 3). The rhetorical discourse surrounding female intersex athletes can be found within the messages the media uses to influence sport fans and to enhance discussion regarding the athletes’ “masculine” appearance and their eligibility to compete in Olympic sports.

The Use of Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-setting occurs when the media have the capacity to shift the importance of issues on their news agenda to the public agenda (Griffin, Ledbetter & Sparks, 2014). Specifically, media content is based on priorities set by those in power (e.g., national television networks, newspapers, and radio), which, in turn, influences the public agenda. “Framing is the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion on the media agenda when a particular object or issue is discussed” (Griffin et al., 2014, p. 380). I will use agenda-setting theory to illustrate how the media framed messages about female intersex athletes, thus influencing the public’s perceptions of their right to compete in Olympic sports.

For my methodology, I examined several media accounts (e.g., local newspaper headlines/columns and local TV reporters' comments) using a rhetorical discourse analysis and applying agenda-setting theory. I considered whether the media accounts were positive and/or negative, and categorized my results into themes. Some athletes discussed above (i.e., Helen Stephens, Stella Walsh, Caster Semenya) had extensive media documentation, whereas the cases of the others (i.e., Dutee Chand, Irina and Tamara Press) were poorly documented.

Themes

I identify two consistent themes in my rhetorical discourse analysis of existing media documentation, and my application of Agenda-Setting Theory: (1). *Are they really male?* and (2). *Do they have an unfair competitive advantage?*

Are they really male?

Research indicates that contemporary media promoted the idea that female intersex athletes were biologically male. The headline, "Flash Beats Stella the Fella," strongly suggests that Helen Stephens and Stalislawa Walasiewicz were men posing as women to compete in female-only events. The *Kurier Poranny* accused Helen Stephens of being a man at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, arguing that she "would have gained first place if she had competed only against women" (as cited in Pieper, 2016, p. 1143). To counter the negative publicity, Berlin Olympic organizers quickly revealed to the public that Stephens had taken a sex verification examination before the Olympic Games. Skepticism about her sex remained in the days leading up to the event. *Look* magazine featured a photo of Stephens, with a caption that read, "Is This a Man or a Woman?" (Hanson & Broegen, 2004, p. 236). The media suggested that Stephens was male, which influenced the public's perception and pressured the IOC to take measures to ensure that she was female.

During Stella Walsh's period of competition, "Gaston Meyer, French editor of the daily *L'Equipe*, wrote [of Walsh]: 'This large brunette shaves every day'" (as cited in Houry, 2011, p. 74). Alexandrine Gibb, manager of the Canadian Women's Olympic team, referred to Stella as "the big, husky Polish girl

with the mannish frame” (Anderson, 2017, p. 73). These examples illustrate the rhetoric used against Stella Walsh. Even after Walsh’s death in 1980, skepticism remained regarding her true gender and whether she competed in the 1936 Berlin Olympics legally (Olszewski & Olszewski, 2014). In a story about her gender controversy, WEWS News (a Cleveland TV Station) ran the headline, “Was Stella a Fella?” (Olszewski, 2014, p. 38).

Do they have an unfair advantage?

The media’s skepticism about androgynous women has led to discrimination against Caster Semanya and Dutee Chand. Similar to Walsh and Stephens, the media described Chand’s stride to be particularly “masculine,” and Semanya’s physical features (e.g., arms, legs, facial hair) as too “manly” for her to be allowed to compete as a woman (Block 2016; Bryant & Stout, 2017; Padawer, 2016). According to the *New York Times*, Pierre Weiss, the IAAF General Secretary, said to the media of Semanya, “She is a woman, but maybe not 100 percent” (Longman, 2016, n.p.). This statement reinforces the narrative that Semanya, and women who are physically and athletically similar to her, should not be permitted to compete as women. The IOC and IAAF forced both Semanya and Chand to undergo sex verification examinations.

DISCUSSION

My analysis indicates that the rhetorical discourse (media coverage) surrounding female intersex athletes has not changed over time and remains highly negative and derogatory. The results also demonstrate that the media have categorized their rhetoric about intersex athletes into two themes: (1) Are they really male? and (2) Do they have an unfair competitive advantage? These themes were consistently applied to all the female athletes discussed in this study, which supports my thesis about the unchanging rhetoric and discourse in the media. However, it is important to note the limitations of my research, which include the lack of data on those athletes not included in this discourse analysis (i.e., Irina and Tamara Press).

The overall data illustrate that female intersex athletes have been discriminated against by the media for decades because

of their physical appearance and athletic abilities, instead of being celebrated for their athletic achievements. The rhetoric and use of agenda-setting theory in my analysis suggest that the media play a role in this discrimination by contributing to the public's negative perception of female intersex athletes, leading to the athletes' public humiliation. Appropriate protocols are needed to address the problems posed by female athletes who possess intersex characteristics. The IOC and IAAF should conduct tests on all athletes, rather than singling out individuals based on media speculation due to their physical appearance. These protocols must also respect athletes' right to privacy. The examination results should be confidential and shared only between the physician and athlete. This saves athletes from public embarrassment. If an athlete is found to be intersex, appropriate protocols must be in place to determine how the IOC and IAAF should respond. All athletes should be treated with respect; clear guidelines concerning testosterone and other hormones should be in place, and sports organizations should allow athletes to compete in the category they choose, based on their testosterone levels. Extensive research is needed to determine an ethical response to the issue of intersex athletes in international competition. This research will go to the heart of how we define what it means to be a "woman."

CONCLUSION

For decades, female intersex athletes have been ostracized by professional sport organizations due to their androgynous or masculine physiques. These athletes have experienced backlash from sports fans and competitors due to the assumption that they are men masquerading as women, or that they have gained unfair advantages in competition through the use of testosterone (Schweinbenz & Cronk, 2010). Media coverage of these athletes is often highly negative, which has led to their undergoing sex verification tests and/or suspensions by the (IOC; Elsas et al., 2000). Despite the limitations, this paper contributes to intersex research by conducting an analysis of rhetorical messages and "frames" that the media have used against these athletes over the past several decades.

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