

Caster Semenya & the 2016 Olympics

Fight prejudice & discrimination

Caster Semenya won the 800m at the 2016 Rio Olympics as emphatically as expected. Her victory was rightly celebrated by fellow South Africans and the majority of sports enthusiasts worldwide. The significance of her victory far transcended her achievements on the track. She triumphed not just against her opponents, but against the racial prejudices amongst some of her fellow competitors.

Basil Hendrickse

Contemptuously disregarding Burundi's second-placed Francine Niyonsaba and Kenya's bronze medallist Margaret Wambui, Polish middle distance runner Joanna Jozwik, who finished fifth claimed she "feels like a silver medallist and proud to have finished as the "first European" and the "second white" in the race.

But it is her victory over the athletics establishment that was perhaps the most significant. In 2009, Caster was withdrawn from competition on the basis of claims that – as a woman – she had a higher-than-normal testosterone level (a condition referred to as hyperandrogenism) that allegedly gave her a performance advantage. In 2011 the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) announced a rule that would require athletes not only to undergo "gender verification tests" but to accept medical intervention including surgery on genitalia or sex organs and to accept oestrogen-replacement therapy.

Concentrated in this stance are the vilest of prejudices ruling elite's worldwide use to subjugate especially working class women. The IAAF promotes the belief that a person's gender can be reassigned through medical intervention so that she can fit into the 'right' box. This deprives women and the entire LGBTIQ community of their right to being. It is as barbaric as "corrective rape" and female genital mutilation. Promoted by as prominent a body as the IAAF it legitimises the prejudices that underpin gender oppression.

Since the introduction of the "hyperandrogenism" rule over thirty athletes have been subjected to this humiliating "treatment". In 2013 four young female athletes from developing countries all with atypically high but entirely natural

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As *Izwi* was going to press Semenya was quoted in *The Times* newspaper making remarks critical of student free education protests. We condemn these remarks unequivocally. Semenya has clearly been taken in by government propaganda and media hype. However, regardless of these stupid comments, the prejudices that Semenya became the focus of in the course of the Olympics must be combatted resolutely by all socialists. On those grounds we took the editorial decision to carry this article.

levels of testosterone – agreed to have their clitorises partially removed to enable them a year later to return to competition. Whereas for these athletes sports offers an escape from poverty, unemployment and often war, for sports bodies and their multinational business partners, it is not about sport but profit.

The IAAF's attempt to press science into their service backfired when the working group on hyperandrogenism found there was no scientific evidence to prove that testosterone levels influence performance. Working Group member Liz Ferris, a medical doctor and former Olympian, submitted a report based on a study of the hormone profile of 693 elite athletes. There was no correlation between testosterone levels and performance. Worse for the IAAF, there was a complete overlap of testosterone levels between men and women with some women above the female limit and men well below the male limit.

Indian athlete Dutee Chand's Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) appeal succeeded in 2015. The rule was suspended and Caster was back. Shockingly, the IAAF has appealed because what is at stake is far more than athletes' right to participate freely in sport. Sport is big business and integral to capitalism – a system that benefits the 1% at the expense of the 99%. A cornerstone of the economic dictatorship of this parasitic minority is the oppression of women and the LGBTIQ community whose existence is an inconvenient refutation of the notion of fixed biological and gender categories.

Pierre de Vos points out that talk of "gender verification" is itself misleading because what is being tested is not gender but biological sex. "They might use "scientific language", but they are almost certainly channelling... their deeply entrenched social beliefs about women: about what *in essence* makes somebody a woman; about how they think women are supposed to look, about how they think women should behave. Athletes excel for many reasons. Biological or genetic characteristics give some athletes an advantage over others, but these are celebrated "as a source of inborn excellence." (*Daily Maverick* 15/08/16)

Madeleine Pape, an Australian former 800m Olympian runner points out that there are double standards for men and women. The exceptional performances of male athletes like Usain Bolt are celebrated unconditionally. "By contrast, the celebration of female athletes comes with conditions, with which Semenya did not comply... Add to the colour of Semenya's skin her queerness, her gender non-conformity, her athletic abilities, her African-ness, and many people can no longer see or accept Caster for the woman that she is."

Caster has become the intersection of the multiple oppressions that sprout like poisonous weeds out of the roots of capitalist society. Her battle shone the spotlight on the role of institutions like the IAAF plays in promoting gender oppression, prejudice and ignorance and the subversion of science. Only under socialism will sport be a true celebration of human achievement.



South African athlete Caster Semenya

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