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Has the Olympics become too sexualised? How sex and gender debates drove online discourse Reflecting on the whirlwind of Olympic coverage, and the Paralympics now kicking off in Paris, the Herald's Tom Rose looks into why athletes' bodies were placed under intense scrutiny.

Theme: Participation

Has the Olympics become too sexualised? How sex and gender debates drove online discourse

Co-authored by Tom Rose

The Olympics is the world's largest multi-sport event. Athletes representing over 204 nations compete in 329 events across 32 types of sports, putting themselves directly in the spotlight.

The organising committee for Paris 2024 and the Paralympic Games, which began yesterday, promised to make the Games "more responsible, more sustainable, more united and more inclusive", and the recent Olympics was the first to reach gender parity in its history.

Looking at this year's numbers, the celebration of 50/50 representation wasn't entirely accurate; 5630 men and 5416 women competed.

Meanwhile, the focus on athletes' bodies and appearance came to dominate news stories and social media.

Female boxers Imane Khelif and Lin Yu Ting faced intense online abuse as false accusations about their gender identities surfaced, other competing women experienced belittling remarks and stereotypes, and male athletes were objectified across social platforms.

While Paris 2024 can be seen as forward-thinking in many ways, social media has expanded the scope of critique and commentary – driving more intense and invasive interest in Olympic athletes.

How are athletes treated like celebrities?

Athletes amass huge fanbases (Cristiano Ronaldo has 635 million followers), yet one of the consequences of achieving viral fame is that they become objects of entertainment and public consumption.

Gender imbalances also mark this attention, says Dr Sabrina Moro, a media, film and communication lecturer at the University of Otago, who notes female athletes are covered differently and "considered as women first, and then athletes".

This has "shaped the media coverage that we see of them as sports celebrities" and diverted attention from their athletic ability and talent, undermining women's presence on the field and perpetuating stereotypes, Moro says.

Coverage of male athletes usually examines their skills and speculates on future prospects, reinforcing a gendered double standard and creating the perception that men's sports are more important and professional.

The gender pay gap in sports is tightening, yet huge disparities exist globally in sports like football, basketball, and golf.

A 2021 New Zealand Olympic Committee study found media are twice as likely to comment on a female athlete's personal life, and while women's sports leagues saw record viewership in the lead-up to the Olympics, the framing of coverage leaves a lasting impact on female athletes' wellbeing and self-perception.

Do women face unique challenges?

A 2014 BT sport survey of 110 elite female athletes found 80% felt they should conform to "a certain image and body type", while a 2020 BBC Sport survey saw 78% of female athletes report feeling self-conscious about their bodies.

Sports performance requires good mental health, yet 30% of female athletes revealed in the BBC survey they'd been trolled and encountered "horrific" abuse online.

85% said the media hasn't done enough to promote women's sports, although 93% noted this has improved. 65% also reported experiencing sexism in their sport, yet only 10% had filed a complaint.

In 2021, the Norwegian women's beach handball team was fined €1500 (\$2713) for wearing shorts instead of bikini bottoms during a tournament match.

"I don't see why we can't play in shorts," Norwegian player Martine Welfler told the *New York Times*, saying they should be allowed to "wear a little bit more" with an increase in "body shaming" nowadays.

International Handball Federation beach handball rules only allowed men to wear shorts; these were soon updated.

Gymnastics NZ updated its self-described "archaic" dress codes in April, deciding women can wear shorts or leggings under leotards – a privilege once confined to only men.

Two of Nike's US track and field team uniforms – a tank top and mid-length shorts for men, and high-cut bodysuit for women – drew allegations of sexism ahead of the Olympics when revealed side-by-side on news.

Track and field athletes wear tight clothes regardless of gender to improve performance and eliminate friction.

US track and field athlete Lauren Fleshmen called the women's uniform "a costume born of patriarchal forces".

US long jumper Tara Davis-Woodhall said it was the picture that had done "no justice" after she saw the "beautiful" uniforms in person.

Is media coverage biased?

Four days after the Olympics started, the head of the Olympics Broadcasting Services called for camera operators to avoid evoking "stereotypes and sexism" in their coverage.

European sports channel Eurosport had banned commentator Bob Ballard for his remark during a women's swimming competition: "Well, the women just finishing up. You know what women are like... hanging around, doing their makeup."

"Unfortunately, in some events, they [women] are still being filmed in a way that you can identify that stereotypes and sexism remain, even from the way in which some camera operators are framing differently men and women athletes," OBS chief executive Yiannis Exarchos said, per *Le Monde*.

He said "unconscious bias" drove this behaviour, with camera operators and TV editors tending to show more close-up shots of women than men.

Another broadcaster made remarks during a women's tennis match between France's Caroline Garcia and Diane Parry and Italy's Sara Errani and Jasmine Paolini.

"There's Sara Errani, who is the boss. She does everything: the washing up, the cooking, the mopping up," he said.

Why was gender discourse dragged into sporting success?

Boxers Khelif and Lin, both cisgender women, were caught in the crossfires of false allegations and transphobic rhetoric.

The Russian-led International Boxing Association claimed the two failed to meet unspecified gender eligibility tests at the world championships last year, stoking a belief that they were ineligible to compete.

However, the IBA itself had lost its credibility. The IOC stripped the governing body of recognition in 2019 and later permanently banned the organisation from the Olympics.

The IOC also criticised the IBA over the lack of transparency around the gender eligibility tests, asserting that Khelif and Lin were "born and raised as women".

Khelif has detailed how the online abuse impacted her and filed a criminal cyberbullying complaint against Elon Musk and JK Rowling among others.

"Immediately after there was a big uproar," Khelif told Algerian TV channel *El Bilad*. "It affected me a lot, it hurt me a lot. I can't describe to you the amount of fear I had."

Khelif said those fomenting hatred and criticism were bringing their encroaching political views into her profession.

"Honestly, I don't like mixing politics with sports, but they've brought it into sports."

"It's important to situate this particular moment of the Olympics in relation to the ongoing surge of transphobia that we're seeing playing out in politics, in changes of laws around the world, but that we're also seeing playing out online," Moro says.

Normalising transphobia harms all women because whenever "a woman doesn't conform to a dominant standard of femininity – what we think a woman should look like and behave like – then their gender identity is questioned."

So how did this debate last in mainstream discourse?

"We can't isolate any of the assault on trans and queer people's rights across the world without thinking about the role of social media in promoting and giving weight to this transphobia," Moro says.

"The way it circulates online is giving legitimacy to this form of hate speech and hateful, harmful policies as well."

What have the men faced?

Memes, suggestive comments, and jokes surged on social media after French pole-vaulter Anthony Ammirati hit his crotch on the pole, which, contrary to headlines, did not cost him his chance at a medal.

One adult entertainment website publicly offered him US\$250,000 (\$397,220) to create a webcam show.

French diver Jules Bouyer, who finished fifth in his event, inadvertently went viral for the briefs he wore – not for his athletic performance.

Users shared explicit comments on Bouyer's appearance. The diver told *Reuters* such comments "can take the athlete out of his bubble and that it can hurt".

Dutch swimmer Arno Kamminga went viral for swimming trunks that appeared translucent in some camera angles.

"In public? Is this legal?" wrote one X user, while another wrote after he lost the race: "Arno Kamminga you are still so important to me."

Moro highlighted that "when men are objectified, they're objectified in different ways".

"In this instance, their sexual objectification reinforces a dominant understanding of masculinity, but specifically of masculinity and virility."

Moro explains they went viral for complying to "masculine ideals" and questioned whether coverage – such as the "big talent" double entendre used to describe Bouyer – risked equating these idealistic standards with "their athletic skills and worth as men and as athletes".

The reaction to the coverage from some Olympians suggested they weren't comfortable with it either.

After Bouyer went viral, German diver Moritz Wesemann was seen covering his trunks with a towel while talking to his coach.

A journalist shared a video of him anyway with sexually suggestive commentary narrating over it.

Some athletes make use of the attention – Kiwi rower Robbie Manson runs his own OnlyFans account – and good on them for doing so; Olympians often need alternative income streams to fund their sporting careers.

But is it fair to place focus on other athletes who haven't chosen to be perceived sexually?

When Italian swimmer Thomas Ceccon won a bronze medal, and was instead called "sl*tty" for the way his shirt raised on the podium, the unwanted objectification of Olympic athletes seemed pervasive.

Athletes suffer under sexualisation, Swinburne University sociology lecturer Dr Paul Bowell told *news.com.au*.

"I don't think the objectification of any bodies is right," Bowell said. "There should be a focus on talking about their prowess and the technicality of the sport, we should be talking about their entire physical makeup instead of just how their body looks."

Many social media users held similar concerns.

"Can we move past their physical looks and delve more into their chosen sport and the chosen path to get there please?" one Facebook user commented on a post about Ceccon's "wardrobe malfunction".

Will anything change?

Sex and sports have always been entwined, but the Olympics coverage shows we're still behind in making sport a respectful space for everyone.

"Even though Paris 2024 marked itself as a more equal Olympics, what we see with those viral moments and the media coverage that came out of it is that those double-gendered standards are still very much happening," Moro says.

How can this online behaviour be managed within social media's public setting?

"I think social media platforms have a responsibility when it comes to making sure their online spaces are safe from sexist, racist, transphobic, and ableist abuse," Moro says.

We, as everyday people, "also have ourselves to think about in thinking about accountability".

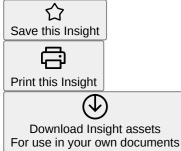
"Just ask yourself, why are we so invested in understanding gender as a binary and as a hierarchy when we know that it ultimately harms everyone?"

"How can we show up for our peers, our friends and family members who might be competing and think about how different forms of support can impact them?"

The Games can't be considered "gender-equal" until the nuances of sex itself are recognised and accepted.

From conventions of masculinity, femininity and gender identity, to unwanted objectification of athletes' bodies, we need to better reflect on how this all impacts athletes.

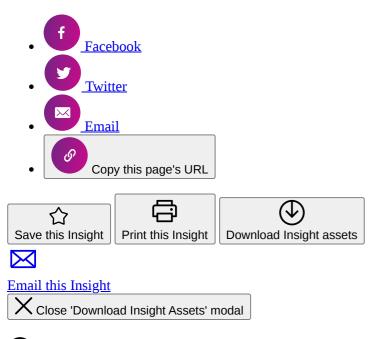
A larger, more civilised conversation around how we can approach these ingrained issues in sport respectfully and without prejudice is needed if the Olympics truly wants to be gender-equal for all participating.



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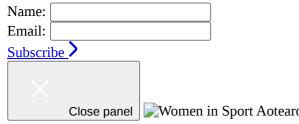


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