

Expert weighs in on gender identity and regulation in Olympic boxing

August 16 2024



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Olympic competition is meant to celebrate the best of the best—often serving as a career high point for elite athletes.

For gold-medal-winning Olympic boxers Imane Khelif, of Algeria, and Lin Yu-ting, of Taiwan, however, their success at the Paris Games brought as much scrutiny as celebration when a firestorm of misinformation erupted about their eligibility to compete as women in their respective weight classes.

Brock University Associate Professor of Sport Management Michele Donnelly says the ordeal was "horrifying," and that it was "incredibly sad to see that these athletes had made it all the way to the Olympic Games—and this is the story being told about them."

The commentary circulating in mainstream and social media is loosely linked to the two athletes being disqualified from last year's World Boxing Championships after allegedly failing gender eligibility tests administered by the International Boxing Association. Khelif has since filed a lawsuit about online harassment related to the ongoing situation.

Donnelly says one statement from a "completely discredited, unrecognized—by the International Olympic Committee—International Boxing Association" did not warrant the international criticism thrust onto the two athletes.

"Khelif and Yu-ting were used by some individuals with large social media followings to forward an anti-trans or trans-exclusionary agenda that really has nothing to do with them, or, I would argue, has very little to do with women's sport," she says. "To me, it reinforces how harmful gender or sex-based eligibility requirements are for all women athletes. These women are being targeted based on their appearance, their skill sets, the sport they participate in and people's continued discomfort with women in a combat sport, like boxing."

The situation also plays into rhetoric that women athletes and women's sport categories need to be "protected," Donnelly says, which is fueled by a "patronizing, condescending notion that if a man did compete in a women's competition, of course, he would be successful."

She also says some believe in the "bizarre notion that someone would change their gender or disguise themselves as a woman to compete in a women's competition—but nobody is choosing to be trans to compete in women's sport. Full stop."

Further to that, Donnelly adds that both Yu-ting and Khelif are cisgender women who have competed in the women's category for their entire boxing careers.

This isn't the first—or last—conversation surrounding gender identity and regulation in sport, either.

"This is a continuation of policing women's bodies and activities, and after many years of sex and gender-based testing in sport, we know that there's no one characteristic that easily distinguishes between male and female bodies—human bodies are much more complex than that," Donnelly says.

"There's a racialized element, too, and it's been consistent in the time that sex testing has been in place that brown and Black women are targeted with these questions about their femininity and womanness. What we see is an expectation of a very specific version of what it means to be or look like a woman in the world, and in sport."

While Khelif and Yu-ting will return home as heroes in their home countries, the scrutiny they endured may also be of concern to young athletes.

"They may question what could happen to them if they continue to compete in their sport, and want to compete at the highest level, and don't want to or cannot meet the imposed and limited standards of femininity and what it means to look and act like a woman," Donnelly says. "We celebrate exceptional bodies in men's sport, but we don't have the same conversations when women's bodies are exceptional."

Provided by Brock University

Citation: Expert weighs in on gender identity and regulation in Olympic boxing (2024, August 16) retrieved 17 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-08-expert-gender-identity-olympic.html>

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