

Misinformation, abuse and injustice: Breaking down the Olympic boxing firestorm

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In a preliminary women's under 66kg boxing match at the Paris

Olympics last week between Algerian Imane Khelif and Italian Angela Carini, a powerful punch to the face resulted in [Carini withdrawing after 46 seconds](#).

Carini dissolved into tears, crying "this is unfair," and "I have never been hit so hard in my life."

Almost immediately, journalists and commentators jumped to Carini's defense, raising questions about International Olympic Committee (IOC) policies and making many false assertions about Khelif's gender identity.

The backstory

In the face of harmful inaccuracies and [widespread online hate speech](#) it is important to outline some of the basics.

Khelif has identified as female since birth and [lived her entire life as a woman](#), including throughout her sporting career.

She is not transgender. She did not go through puberty as a male and then transition later.

Her passport marks her identity as female, thus meeting the [IOC criteria for gender classification of boxers](#).

In her first international boxing competition in 2018, she lost five of six elite level bouts. She went to the Tokyo Olympics in 2021 as one of Algeria's first Olympic boxers and while she won her opening bout, she lost her second.

Khelif has had some previous international success but she has been beaten by nine women boxers prior to the Paris games.

Boxing's questionable approach to gender testing

In 2023, a boxing competition held in Russia and run by the International Boxing Association (IBA) questioned the gender identity of Khelif and Taiwan's Lin Yu-Ting (who is also competing at the Paris Olympics).

The IBA president, Umar Kremlev of Russia, was [quoted](#) as saying the two athletes had XY chromosomes and thus were subsequently disqualified.

Elsewhere, it was [stated](#) the athletes presented with "elevated" levels of testosterone.

The facts are yet to be confirmed and it is not the role of an international sports organization to be handing out personal and private information.

Upon request from the athletes, the IBA refused to provide evidence of the tests undertaken.

The [IBA minutes](#) (available on its website) state the decision to disqualify Khelif and Lin was initially taken solely by the IBA secretary general and CEO.

The IBA board only ratified it afterwards, with the minutes stating the organization needs to "establish a clear procedure on gender testing."

As the records suggest, the IBA did not follow ethical practice regarding the disqualification of Khelif and Yu-Ting. In fact, the very use of such tests to identify an athlete's sex and/or gender are highly problematic.

Sex testing in question

Since 1968, some sportswomen competing in the Olympics have had to undergo humiliating [tests "proving" their gender identities](#). This often involved visual examinations of their genitals in front of doctors and other medical experts.

Mandated by the IOC, "gender verification" tests were then implemented by international sports organizations.

Underpinning such practices was a set of [problematic assumptions](#), particularly that a woman who is good at sport could perhaps be a man masquerading as female.

Beyond visual examinations, blood tests documenting hormone levels and/or chromosome testing were used. But as [research](#) has revealed, the effects of testosterone on performance are often overstated, and understandings of sporting performance and gender require much [more nuanced approaches](#).

After [many years of critique](#), the IOC halted such practices in 1999.

In place of outdated sex tests that fail to recognize the physiological and socio-psychological complexities of gender identity, the IOC introduced a new set of [guidelines](#) prioritizing the basic human rights of privacy, inclusion and participation.

While the IOC sets out the framework in the hope of guiding other international organizations towards more inclusive understandings of gender, the guidelines remain contested.

Some organizations opted to take alternative approaches to testing and proving an athlete's "true" gender identity—for example, [World Athletics](#) continue to use testosterone testing.

Boxing and the IOC: a clash of ethics

The boxing events at the Paris Olympics are not being organized by the IBA, but instead by a special IOC-appointed unit.

The IBA was suspended in 2019 by the IOC, and last year stripped of its status as the world governing body of amateur boxing due to [concerns](#) regarding its governance, financial transparency and integrity of its officials.

The IOC was also concerned the IBA refused to follow their approach in issuing sanctions on Russian athletes over the Ukraine war.

With the Russian leadership of the IBA, this position highlights another layer of [geopolitical complexity in this case](#).

Responding to the media frenzy after the Khelif-Carini bout, the Paris 2024 boxing unit stated: "all athletes participating in the boxing tournament comply with the competition's eligibility and entry regulations, as well as all applicable medical regulations set by the Paris 2024 Boxing Unit (PBU)."

The [IBA has responded](#) by offering Carini and her coach a payment similar to the purse awarded to the Olympic champion (US\$100,000).

Since the incident, Carini has [apologized to Khelif](#) for her reaction and the resulting abuse, stating she would "embrace her" the next time they meet.

The real issues for women in sport

In the contemporary context, many sportswomen who appear too

powerful, too successful, or look "too masculine" according to a particular set of values are at risk of being targeted. Importantly, it is most often [non-white athletes](#) who face the most scrutiny of their gendered sporting bodies.

Beyond the ethics of the tests being used, the extreme levels of [online abuse](#) directed to sportswomen such as Khelif and Lin reveal new ways in which women's bodies are being policed and regulated.

To avoid such accusations, many sportswomen are engaging in what scholars have termed "[emphasized femininity](#)"—wearing long lashes, jewelry, make-up, painted nails and overtly feminine clothing. This is not because it enhances their performance but to [reassure audiences](#) (and critics) of their femininity.

If they do not offer a convincing performance that meets limited versions of femininity, they may also face surveillance of their gendered bodies, and public attack and online abuse.

However, this recent controversy may be a distraction from the real issues affecting women's sport, such as safeguarding against systematic abuse, which has been seen in recent high-profile cases involving Volleyball Australia [and U.S. Gymnastics](#).

While the Paris Olympic and Paralympics may be celebrated as the first "[gender equitable](#)" games, with 50% female participation, the abuse faced by Khelif and Yu-Ting highlight the challenges many women still face in sport.

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