Committee: IOC
Topic: International standards for the inclusion of transgender and intersex athletes in elite sports
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Overview of the Problem

Many athletes compete in the Olympic Games, one of the most recognized sporting events in the world. The Games are governed by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which requires them to be held every four years. Regulations concerning transgender athletes and athletes with variations in sex characteristics in elite sports have become an important topic of debate. The main objective is to establish fair rules that ensure the safety, dignity, and confidentiality of athletes.

The following organizations play a role in this process: the International Olympic Committee, international sports federations, and national sports organizations. However, many other individuals and organizations are also involved, including athletes, medical researchers, and human rights organizations.

It is anticipated that delegates will focus on eligibility rules, the testing of athletes' medical and hormonal status, and issues related to dignity. They will have to determine whether universal rules or sport-specific rules should be introduced. The 2026 IOC policy replaced the 2021 framework, making both the policy change and its implementation central to this discussion.

Introduction

Sports competitors are often divided into categories based on variables such as age, weight, and gender. The importance of this issue lies in the role of sex categories, particularly the female category, and the treatment of athletes whose identities or characteristics do not match standard definitions. The main goal is not just to address the problem but to develop practical solutions which will enable the move from

awareness to action. The ultimate goal is to provide opportunities for everyone in sports without discrimination.

Article 1, particularly Article 1.1, of UNESCO's International Charter recognizes the right to access physical education, physical activity, and sport without discrimination. This broad principle provides an important context, while eligibility for a particular elite category remains a separate regulatory question (UNESCO, 2015). In this background paper, delegates will examine the basis for eligibility standards, the quality of supporting evidence, the use of hormonal or genetic assessments, and access to review and appeal procedures.
They must also distinguish between policies governing IOC events, rules for other international competitions, national events, and recreational sports.

A transgender person has a gender identity that differs from the sex assigned to them at birth. A cisgender person has a gender identity that corresponds to the sex assigned to them at birth. Intersex is a general term for biological variations in sex characteristics, including chromosomes, reproductive organs, or other physical characteristics. Sporting rules also use the term "differences of sex development" (DSD). These terms are not strictly interchangeable in all medical or personal contexts, and individuals may use them differently. Being transgender does not necessarily mean that a person is intersex, and an intersex person does not necessarily have to be a transgender person (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2020).

Testosterone is an androgen that affects certain physical characteristics relevant to sports performance. Endogenous testosterone is produced within the body, while exogenous testosterone is introduced from outside the body. Gender-affirming hormone therapy can affect hormone levels and physical characteristics, depending on the duration of treatment and the outcome being considered. Hormone levels, gender identity, and legal sex are three separate concepts. Delegates will therefore be encouraged to apply their country's positions to their resolutions and assess their relevance without treating these concepts as equivalent.

Historical Background

The regulation of female eligibility in sports dates back further than the current debate about transgender athletes' participation. The history of gender verification, including physical examination, chromosome analysis, and subsequent hormone analysis, is explored in Human Rights Watch's research (2020). Issues involving potential humiliation, the publication of confidential health information, and the medical treatments that athletes may have undergone during the eligibility process are discussed in detail. This context helps explain why testing methods continue to be debated in policy discussions.

Dutee Chand and the demand for evidence

In 2015, Dutee Chand filed a petition with the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) to challenge the IAAF's hyperandrogenism regulations. The panel decided to suspend the regulations for two years, beginning on July 24, 2015, to allow the IAAF more time to present evidence regarding the extent of the performance advantage associated with elevated endogenous testosterone levels. The issue was not whether testosterone was associated with performance, but whether the evidence established a performance advantage sufficient to justify excluding an athlete from the female category. The award did not establish a single percentage cut-off for eligibility across sports (International Association of Athletics Federations, 2015).

Caster Semenya and proportionality

Caster Semenya and Athletic South Africa challenged the IAAF's DSD regulations in 2019. Under the rules, athletes with certain 46, XY DSDs who competed in restricted middle-distance events, ranging from 400 meters to one mile, were required to maintain serum testosterone levels below 5nmol/L for at least six months to be eligible. The majority of the CAS panel accepted the challenged regulations, finding that the discriminatory distinction was necessary, reasonable, and proportionate to the objective. However, the panel expressed some concerns about their implementation. The award

addressed the rules and evidence available at the time; it did not approve every subsequent restriction.

Semenya then brought the matter before the Swiss courts and the European Court of Human Rights. On July 10, 2025, the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights found a violation of the right to a fair hearing under Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The Court concluded that the Swiss Federal Supreme Court's review had lacked the required rigor. This judgement addressed judicial protection in Switzerland. It did not invalidate the international eligibility rules or establish that all athletes with DSDs should be permitted to compete in the female category (ECtHR, 2025).

The change in Olympic policy

The IOC's 2021 framework established several principles, including inclusion, the prevention of harm, privacy and evidence-based decision-making. It also placed the responsibility on individual sports to assess disproportionate advantages within their own contexts. The subsequent policies adopted by different federations varied considerably in their approaches to puberty, testosterone, and eligibility. The 2026 IOC policy superseded that framework and introduced a single approach to female category eligibility for IOC events beginning with LA28.

The Situation Today

The 2026 IOC policy

The new policy restricts eligibility for the female category at the Olympic Games and other IOC events to athletes who meet its sex-criteria. Initial eligibility is determined through a one-time SRY gene screening in most cases. A cheek swab is used to collect the sample, although blood can also be used. World Athletics describes the laboratory screening process as involving quantitative fluorescent polymerase chain reaction (QF-PCR), a technique that amplifies specific DNA sequences.

A negative result is required for eligibility. A positive result would generally prevent an athlete from competing in the female category, with specific exceptions for complete androgen insensitivity syndrome (CAIS) and certain rare DSDs that would not be expected to affect performance through testosterone action. These are policy criteria, not determinations of an athlete's gender identity.

The IOC makes it clear that screening is not, by itself, a medical diagnosis. An athlete who receives a positive result may choose to undergo further assessment to determine whether an exception applies. This process should be preceded by informed consent and appropriate counseling. Organizations operating in community and recreational sports are excluded from the regulation, which also cannot be applied retroactively. Equity, protection, and transparency are the IOC's stated objectives. However, the methods raise questions about effectiveness, confidentiality, and access to professional medical assessment.

Examples of federation approaches

World Athletics announced SRY screening in July 2025, with the rules taking effect on September 1, 2025, for world-ranking purposes. The announcement included exceptions for CAIS and transitional provisions for certain athletes with DSDs. World Aquatics' 2022 policy introduced restrictions related to male pubertal development. In 2023, the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) excluded transgender women who had transitioned after male puberty from women's competitions.

These are different regulatory approaches with different scopes of application. The dates of the announcements should be distinguished from the detailed rules that apply to a particular event.

World Athletics updated its DSD regulations in March 2023 to cover all competitions. The rules primarily required athletes to maintain testosterone concentrations below 2.5 nmol/L for at least 24 months. Transitional arrangements allowed some athletes who had previously competed in unrestricted events to qualify after only six months. This was a different threshold from the previous 5 nmol/L requirement and from the

subsequent SRY screening approach. A value expressed in nmol/L measures hormone concentration; it is not a percentage of performance advantage (World Athletics, 2023).

Scientific findings and their limits

Harper et al. (2021) reviewed 24 studies, most of which involved non-athletic transgender women. Body mass index decreased by approximately 3.0% to 5.4% across seven standardized tests, generally after one year of hormone treatment. These figures represent changes within groups, not the percentage of an advantage over cisgender women. After one year, handgrip strength decreased by 4.3% or 7.1% respectively, according to two long-term research studies.

These figures represent changes from baseline, meaning that 95.7% and 92.2% of baseline strength remained. Other studies found no significant changes in strength. Hemoglobin or hematocrit levels decreased by 4.6% to 14.0% from baseline across different studies and follow-up periods. These are relative changes, not percentage-point differences with cisgender women. Hemoglobin and hematocrit levels reached those of cisgender women after approximately four months.

This is very limited long-term data, and no single figure describes the retention of all performance-related characteristics across 12 to 36 months.

Roberts et al. (2021) examined the fitness records of 46 transgender women and 29 transgender men in the United States Air Force. After two years of feminizing hormone therapy, the differences in push-ups and sit-ups between transgender women and the female comparison group had disappeared, although a difference in running performance remained.

Military fitness tests are not direct measures of Olympic performance, so the extent to which these findings can be generalized is limited.

Hamilton et al. (2024) studied 75 participants: 23 transgender women, 21 cisgender women, 12 transgender men, and 19 cisgender men. The transgender women in the study had higher absolute handgrip strength but lower body-mass-relative aerobic capacity and jump measurements than the cisgender women. Because the study was

cross-sectional, it could not establish changes within individuals over time. The published correction to the paper updates the power calculations in Table 2 and must be read alongside the original article. Hilton and Lundberg (2021), in a separate review, highlighted the possibility that certain physical advantages may persist after testosterone suppression. Taken together, these sources illustrate why the measured outcome, comparison group, and study design are important when evaluating the evidence. They do not demonstrate the same effects in every circumstance.

Prevalence figures also require a precise denominator. Bermon et al. (2014), studying 849 elite female athletes, estimated the prevalence of hyperandrogenic 46, XY DSD at approximately 7 per 1,000 athletes, or 0.7%. This was around 140 times the expected prevalence in the general population. The estimated general population prevalence was approximately 1 in 20,000, or 0.005%. These figures refer to a particular DSD group within a specific sample. They do not represent the prevalence of all intersex variations or the general rate of positive SRY screening results. They also do not provide information about any individual athlete or quantify a performance advantage.

Key Stakeholders and Their Positions

The IOC establishes Olympic policy and governs the Olympic Movement. Its 2026 position is to protect the female category through sex-based eligibility requirements for Olympic events. International federations govern their respective sports and establish detailed rules within their areas of responsibility. For example, World Rugby has emphasized collision safety in its guidance on transgender participation, while recognizing the limitations of the available research. Therefore, a safety argument in rugby must be considered on its own merits before being applied to a non-contact sport.

Athletes hold a wide range of views on this issue. Some support restrictions because they consider sex categories essential to maintaining competitive opportunities. Others oppose restrictions because they believe the evidence is insufficient or the rules are too exclusionary. For transgender athletes and athletes with variations in sex characteristics, the issue can involve eligibility, income, privacy, and identity. These

groups are not homogeneous. Female athletes, transgender athletes, and intersex athletes do not all share the same opinions or experiences. No group should be assumed to act as a single, unified body.

Human rights agencies and advocacy organizations examine whether the rules in question harm human dignity, involve discrimination, or impose physically intrusive procedures. In Resolution 40/5 the UN Human Rights Council expressed concern about the rules requiring certain women and girls with DSDs to medically reduce their testosterone levels. The OHCHR's 2020 report examined the issue of intersecting racial and gender discrimination. These are human rights concerns, not technical eligibility rules established by an international sports federation.

National institutions also differ in authority. Athletics South Africa supported Semenya's legal challenge. Chand's case involved an Indian athlete challenging Indian sporting bodies. In the United States, NCAA changed its university participation policy in February 2025 to restrict competition on women's teams to athletes assigned female at birth. These are examples of decisions made by individual organizations and competitions. They do not establish a position for an entire country. Delegates should consider the positions of the government, National Olympic Committee (NOC), and relevant sports federations in their respective countries.

Medical staff contribute their expertise but also have a duty to protect the athletes. Coaches and national federations will play a role in meeting the requirements. The cost of implementation, scheduling, and communication will affect event organizers, testing facilities, sponsors, and the media. Eligibility assessments must remain independent of practical and financial interests.

Three possible political approaches may be considered during debate:

1. Implementing limited eligibility requirements without sufficient emphasis on protections, evaluation, or practical participation options.
2. Supporting restricted eligibility backed by sport-specific data.
3. Emphasizing the protection of gender-based categories

These approaches do not represent positions unanimously adopted by every nation. Instead, they provide categories for analyzing the debate. Delegates must decide which approach their country or organization would support and whether there is room for cooperation regarding individual cases, privacy, and further research.

Past Attempts and Existing Frameworks

Earlier approaches included physical or genetic verification, testosterone thresholds, criteria based on the onset of puberty, and assessments by expert panels. Hormonal criteria provided measurable standards but raised concerns about treatment duration, individual responses, and the ethics of requiring medical treatment to achieve eligibility. Puberty-based criteria focus on developmental history but rely on documentation and may exclude athletes regardless of subsequent treatment. Each of these approaches has left the issue unresolved in some way.

The 2021 IOC framework was designed to provide principles for federations to follow while leaving responsibility for each sport with its respective federation. It was a flexible framework that allowed different approaches but did not establish a single eligibility test. The 2026 replacement establishes a single initial eligibility criterion for IOC events, while leaving much of the procedural work to individual sports. Delegates will be able to assess whether this combination provides the appropriate level of consistency and sufficient safeguards.

Open categories are another proposed or implemented solution.
In 2023, the UCI renamed the men's category to Men/Open in certain International Masters events. This could provide another avenue for participation, although delegates would need to consider whether there are enough competitors, events, funding opportunities, and meaningful qualification routes. The existence of an open category in one context does not prove that it would work in every Olympic discipline (UCI, 2023).

The UN Human Rights Council's Resolution 40/5 and UNESCO's 2015 Charter represent important instruments. The Olympic Movement, which includes the IOC, international sports federations, and National Olympic Committees, is governed by a

document known as the Olympic Charter. These instruments have different purposes and legal effects. A UN resolution, an Olympic policy, and an arbitral award must therefore be assessed within their respective institutional contexts.

Challenges and Complications

Evidence and the meaning of fairness

Scientific studies can measure performance-related characteristics. However, a policy must also explain why a particular difference would justify restricting eligibility within a category. Differences are expected to determine which characteristics are relevant to the objectives of sex-based classifications and what level of evidence is necessary to justify regulatory action. Possible responses may include safety limits, conditional acceptance, or further research. These responses may be necessary because of gaps in the available data.

Athletes will be affected by each decision, and the resulting consequences must be carefully considered (Hilton & Lundberg, 2021).

Privacy and medical autonomy

Eligibility procedures may reveal information that an athlete or their family did not previously know. Confidential communication, independent counselling, and the extent of access to medical records are all important policy issues. The medical treatment that may be required to maintain eligibility also raises questions about whether consent is truly voluntary when an athlete's career is at stake. These issues require particular care when minors are involved.

Resources and unequal burdens

Access to laboratories, specialist assessments, travel, translation services, and appeals all involve costs. Human Rights Watch’s interviews with athletes from the Global South have highlighted how testing procedures can intersect with existing inequalities. Delegates should consider who is responsible for the costs, what support is available, and how an athlete can challenge an error without losing an entire season (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Legal review and public communication

International rules concerning equity, medical care, and personally identifiable information are relevant to every nation.

Sports eligibility disputes are rarely resolved solely through a jurisdiction's legal recognition of gender. A federation's rules cannot replace applicable national laws. The 2025 Semenya judgment illustrates the importance of meaningful judicial review.

The Committee's Role and Powers

The IOC is not an official UN institution. It operates as an independent international sports organization. Its purpose and relationships with other organizations in the Olympic Movement are defined by the Olympic Charter. The IOC has the authority to establish rules for its own competitions, cooperate with sports federations, and contribute to the objective of the Olympic Movement.

In accordance with the committee's procedural guidelines, delegates may adopt a resolution during the simulated meeting.

The resolution may address eligibility criteria, conduct, research, athlete participation, confidential assessments, financial support, and appeals. Delegates must identify who is responsible for each action and distinguish between proposals directed at countries or other organizations and requests made to the IOC. The committee cannot pass national legislation, overturn judicial decisions, or directly control all sporting competitions.

Cooperation with UNESCO or UN human rights mechanisms could provide access to information and opportunities for communication. However, this would not make those organizations subordinate to the IOC. A practical proposal should specify its scope, implementation timeline, cost, and review process, including how it would fit the policy adopted for LA28.

Guiding Questions for Debate

1. What are the purposes of the female category, and how should delegates assess a rule in light of those purposes?

2. What eligibility standards should be applied across IOC competitions, and how should they vary according to the sport or competition?

3. How should regulators evaluate studies involving non-elite participants, small sample sizes, or different measures of athletic performance?

4. What evidence is necessary to justify a restriction, and who should bear the burden of proving that it is necessary?

5. How should the rules distinguish transgender participation from the different circumstances of athletes with variations in sex characteristics?

6. What safeguards should be established for SRY screening, medical examinations, and the correction of administrative or scientific errors?

7. How can medical independence, informed consent, and confidentiality be protected when an athlete's professional career is significantly affected by eligibility criteria?

8. When an athlete comes from a disadvantaged country or community, who should be responsible for financing examinations, specialized treatment, and appeals?

9. What procedures could provide independent review quickly enough to ensure a fair opportunity to compete?

10. How should the competitiveness of an open category be assessed, and under what conditions would it provide meaningful opportunities for participation?

11. When eligibility restrictions change, especially during qualification periods, how should current competitors be notified and supported?

12. What measures and review schedules should be implemented to determine whether the regulations are preventing harm and achieving their intended objectives?

Conclusion and Call to Action

International eligibility criteria affect athletes' quality of life and competitive opportunities. The transition toward LA28 makes implementation, evidence, and procedural protections immediate concerns for sporting institutions. Delegates should examine the current rules, identify the assumptions behind competing proposals, and distinguish established findings from unresolved questions. They must develop a logical response that considers the impact on every competitor while respecting the limits of the IOC's authority. A successful discussion requires solid evidence, respectful communication, and the ability to balance theoretical arguments with their real-world consequences.

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