

IOC establishes genetic testing as a requirement in a policy driven by politics not scientific evidence

Today, on March 26th, in a move already predicted by civil society organisations, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced their new policy endorsing mandatory genetic screening for women athletes, entitled “*Protection of the Female (Women’s) Category in Olympic Sport*”. The policy is the current end-point of a process that has been called out by sports and human rights NGOs as **biased and not compliant with international human rights frameworks** from its very start¹.

IOC President, Kirsty Coventry, announced the policy as part of updates in the IOC’s “*Fit for the Future*” process. The IOC praises its new policy to be based on the latest scientific evidence. However the policy **lacks**, like other documents published during the process, **methodological transparency**. It also does not give any insight about the scientific research consulted by working group, which even a group of UN experts have called out in a recent statement². Convenient omissions in the IOC’s definitions linked to the policy, like, e.g. the one of the simple fact that variations of the so-called XX and XY sex-chromosomes exist in humans, set the stage for a guideline that, contrary to what it asserts, is based on a biased perspective on the topic and seems to **deliberately neglect the diversity of already existing academic research**.

As previously pointed out by OII Europe in a statement from April 2025³, following similar announcements around eligibility criteria for the female category by World Athletics, **SRY gene testing**, now celebrated in the policy as the epitome of fairness, **is flawed**: On one hand the SRY gene does not only appear on Y-chromosomes, it can also occur, in rarer cases, on XX chromosomes; it can be active in its function of initiating testicular cell growth but it can also appear without this function being active⁴.

¹ Joint statement by Sports & Rights Alliance, ILGA World and Humans of Sport, *Olympics: Sex Testing Harms All Women and Girls*, March 17 2026. Signed by over 200 civil society organisations worldwide.

<https://sportandrightsalliance.org/olympics-sex-testing-harms-all-women-and-girls/>

²In a statement published on February 25th 2026, a group of UN experts called in their Joint Statement on Fairness, Inclusion and Non-Discrimination in Sport raised concerns over the transparency and governance of ongoing deliberations within international sporting bodies on eligibility in the women’s category, including the establishment and operation of expert or advisory groups whose composition, mandate and working methods have not been publicly disclosed.

³ OII Europe statement *World Athletics to mandate sex testing for women athletes*, April 15 2025.

<https://www.oiiurope.org/world-athletics-decides-to-mandate-sex-testing-for-women-athletes/>

⁴ Information on the SRY gene -

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/biochemistry-genetics-and-molecular-biology/sry-gene#:~:text=SRY%3A>

Exclusion based on the presence of the SRY gene - a single biological marker - rather than being based on peer-reviewed research demonstrating that intersex or trans women athletes have any sort of disproportionately unfair competitive advantage, let alone pose a safety risk in sports, is discriminatory.

With the **absence of referenced scientific evidence** the policy relies on proof by assertion to make the case for a further tightening of the exclusionary criteria. The IOC states in its policy that “the SRY Gene, which is a segment of DNA that is almost always on the Y-chromosome, initiates Male sex development in utero, and signals the presence of testes/testicles.” Furthermore, they state that “XY transgender athletes and athletes with XY-DSD typically have [...] testosterone levels in the Male range [...]. The policy continues to state that this means “that their bodies are receptive to and make use of that testosterone during growth and development and throughout their athletic career.”

However, research shows that levels of testosterone don’t predict how the human body uses them, nor how much of it is used, as already pointed out by Åsa Ekvall and Dr. Sandra Meeuwssen in their 2023 research document for the Dutch Olympic Committee⁵. The new IOC policy does not seem to make room for accounting for these differences nor how they may or may not impact athletic performance.

Research indicates that bodies are complex systems, and **there is not one biomarker that determines performance**. Instead, scientific evidence shows that a multitude of factors inform and impact athletic performance. Testosterone is only one of many factors (e.g. oxygen uptake, capillary density, or the ability to tolerate high levels of lactic acid) that impact performance.

There is absence of scientific consensus, ignored by the policy, on whether higher exposure to testosterone in one phase of a person’s life indeed provides a life-long performance advantage in trans and intersex women, or whether there are any supposed advantages resulting from trans women athletes having undergone male puberty. Just recently, in a May 2025 paper, it was again established that **trans women exhibit no comparable advantage to cis women athletes**.⁶ The paper concludes that current evidence is limited but does not

[%20The%20Critical%20Y%2DLinked%20Testis%2DDetermining%20Gene&text=Approximately%2C%2080%25%20of%20these%20XX,\(46%2CXY%20DSD](#)

⁵ See Åsa Ekvall en Dr. Sandra Meeuwssen, Research Document on Sex, Gender & Inclusion in Elite Sport, by ESPRIT and the Dutch Olympic Committee * Sports Federation, 23 February 2023, p.4. Available at:

<https://www.eur.nl/en/news/research-document-sex-gender-and-inclusion-elite-sport>

⁶ Sofia Mendes Sieczkowska, et al., *Physical Fitness and Body Composition in Transgender vs. Cisgender Individuals: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis*, 6 May 2025. Available here:

<https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2025.05.05.25326994v1>

justify blanket bans based on assumptions of inherent athletic advantages for trans women over cis women athletes.

Furthermore, as already pointed out by numerous human rights and civil society organisations worldwide, and even acknowledged by the IOC themselves in the new policy, “Human rights experts, including UN Special Rapporteurs, disagree on the legitimacy of sex-based eligibility rules in competitive sports.” On 25 February 2026, 8 UN experts published a *Joint Statement on Fairness, Inclusion and Non-Discrimination in Sport*⁷, affirming that indeed genetic sex testing and medically unnecessary interventions are **discriminatory, unethical, and harmful**. A decade ago, in 2016, during the 33rd session of the Human Rights Council, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Health already affirmed that “there is insufficient clinical evidence to establish that those (intersex) women are afforded a ‘substantial performance advantage’ warranting exclusion”.

The IOC tries to position itself as the guardian of safety and fairness, however with this new policy, it not only **ignores the calls by numerous UN experts to abandon sex testing**, but also alarmingly fails to recognise that for many intersex women who are assigned female at birth and live their entire lives as women, a ‘once in a lifetime cheek swab’ potentially revealing the presence of an SRY gene can out them as being intersex, with potential repercussions for the rest of their lives, far beyond their career in sports.

In addition, and equally concerning, is the policy’s claim that “athletes who screen negative for the SRY gene permanently satisfy [the] Policy’s eligibility criteria for competition in the Female Category” and that “unless there is reason to believe a negative reading is in error, this will be a once-in-a-lifetime test.” The policy does not concern itself nor give any guidance on how this “belief” may be established. Already in the past, and most prominently recently during the 2024 Paris Olympics, athletes competing in the female category have been scrutinized based on their appearance and their performance results. The policy **leaves the space wide open for scrutinizing athletes with a negative SRY test** at any time of their career, should a doubt about the validity of the test be raised.

The IOC’s new rules lead us down what many civil society organisations have already called out as being a **slippery slope of controlling and policing all women’s bodies**⁸: The impact of this new policy will not only impact trans and intersex women, but endosex women too, because they are founded on historically patriarchal structures that have used the concept of strict binary sex categories to assert white supremacy, relegating anyone who falls outside

⁷<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/discrimination/260225-joint-statement-on-fairness-inclusion-and-non-discrimination-in-sport.pdf>

⁸ Joint statement by OII Europe, ILGA World, TGEU, GATE, Sports & Rights Alliance, Outright International, InterACT and others, *Trans, Gender-Diverse, And Intersex Inclusion In Sports Is A Human Right*, 8 October 2024 <https://ilga.org/news/trans-gender-diverse-intersex-inclusion-in-sports-human-right/>

the narrow definition, to a lesser category of womanhood. These boundaries are upheld by violently enforcing them upon the bodies of any person who is seen as ‘non-conforming, and **hold serious repercussions for endosex ciswomen too.**

The new eligibility criteria completely dismiss this reality, insisting that intersex women who have not been found to be eligible for the Female category as a result of the SRY gene test, should compete with men, on the only basis that their sex characteristics happen to differ from endosex women (in this case because of the SRY gene/XY chromosome). Forcing these women to compete as men, due to higher testosterone levels or the presence of XY chromosomes is a violation of their human rights.

Additionally, the tightening of rules trickles down directly to grassroots sports, and to youth participation in sports, in that it keeps intersex as well as trans children and teens from sports, including from pursuing a career in professional sports. The IOC claims that it “recognises the importance of widespread participation in grassroots and recreational sports programmes, to which this Policy does not apply,” seemingly failing to acknowledge the enormous widespread impact of and therefore responsibility that it bears by enacting their new rules, which will have **devastating impacts on grassroots and amateur-level sports**, where the majority of sports participation lies.

Most worryingly of all, the misrepresentation of trans and intersex women as a threat to women’s rights and their safety in sports, carries the high risk of **diverting attention from the critical issues of abuse**, including sexual abuse and physical violence, experienced by women athletes at the hands of endosex male coaches, which continues to be dismissed and ignored by major sports organisations.

We therefore **join the call made today by over 60 international legal experts** that “States [should] urgently review the legality of mandatory sex testing policies that are being applied to athletes and/or at competitions within their jurisdictions. We also call on athletes to challenge the national or regional implementation of mandatory genetic sex testing, demanded by the IOC or International Federations, before domestic courts, by invoking national or regional laws protecting human rights, prohibiting anti-discrimination, and regulating the use of genetic testing and genetic data.”⁹

⁹ Joint Statement from Legal Experts on Genetic Sex Testing in Sport, 26 March 2026. Available here: <https://www.icj.org/joint-statement-from-legal-experts-on-genetic-sex-testing-in-sport/>