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POWER OF SPEECH

The willingness of athletes past and present to fight their corner has undoubtedly had a bearing on World Athletics' ruling on transgender and DSD athletes

WORDS: EUAN CRUMLEY

The momentum took a while to gather pace, but there can be no doubting the role that a collective voice has had in shaping the future of athletics for women.

The recent announcements from World Athletics that transgender women who have gone through male puberty are now excluded from female events is precisely what campaigners had been calling for. The regulations around DSD (Differences of Sex Development) athletes being sharply tightened has been welcomed, too.

For this to have become reality, however, has taken work. A lot of work. The likes of swimmer Sharron Davies has been at the forefront of speaking up for the protection of the female category and it was a tweet by the former Olympic swimmer which another Olympian, marathon runner Mara Yamauchi, admits sparked her into action.

"It read 'if you are silent, you are complicit in the damage being done to women's sport'. And I thought 'she's absolutely right. I can't with good conscience

stay silent on this any more'. So I started speaking up," says Yamauchi.

Both have continually aired concerns and highlighted issues around athletes who have gone through male puberty, but now identify as women, being allowed to compete in the female category. It wasn't an objection to how such athletes identify, but that it made for a very unlevel playing field for female athletes.

Transgender activists and athletes have, not surprisingly, reacted with dismay and an insistence of being excluded from the sport. But in fact it is exclusion from just one category of the sport, the female category, and World Athletics are setting up a working group to assess how best to create a pathway towards transgender inclusion.

A *YouGov* poll, an *AW* Twitter poll and other surveys in recent months have overwhelmingly backed up the conclusions which have now been reached by the global governing body, but the emotive nature of this debate has made many current athletes afraid to say what they think. It's not just the potential of the abuse they could face, but also the potential loss of contracts and earnings. The likes of

World Athletics' policy

- Transgender women who have gone through male puberty are excluded from female events.
- DSD athletes will be required to reduce their testosterone levels below a limit of 2.5nmol/L for a minimum of 24 months (or six months for currently competing DSD athletes) to compete internationally in the female category in any event, not just the events that were restricted (400m to one mile) under the previous regulations. The principle of restricted events has been removed from the regulations.

Amelia Strickler, Beth Dobbin, Emily Diamond, Ellie Baker, Kylie Grimes, Abigail Irozuru, Jade Lally and Kirsty Law were placing themselves firmly at risk, therefore, by speaking out. From the non-elite side, so too was the athlete who identifies as @femalerunner on Twitter.

"I have nothing but admiration for all the athletes speaking up because it does take some courage, especially the younger ones who are still competing," says Yamauchi. "It's great that they're speaking up and I hope others will have the courage to do so. This isn't transphobic, it's just asking for fairness in the female category."

As things stand, there are no trans-identifying male athletes competing at world level in the female category – it is the DSD changes which will have the biggest impact at this level given the number of elite competitors it will affect – but Yamauchi insists the powers that be are correct to have acted now, for a number of reasons.

"I think World Athletics have done the right thing to act early rather than waiting for a high profile case to emerge in athletics," she says. "But also the fact that we haven't had one at world level is beside the point to me. The damage is done by the discouragement it [inclusion of trans-identifying males in the female category] will cause for girls and young women at all levels.

"Parents of athletes also commit masses of time, money and energy to helping their children excel in sport and parents of daughters might be thinking, 'well, what's the point?'. Ditto for coaches of female athletes."

The World Athletics regulations have also been adopted by UK Athletics for events it licenses, and are expected to filter down into the lower levels of the sport in Britain. That does raise questions around how much pressure it might put on local



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event organisers in terms of administration and enforcement. Yet professor Alice Sullivan, a running club volunteer, believes the clarity around this issue will make a big difference.

"I think, for grassroots sports, simplicity is really important," she says. "If you're organising a local 10km, you can't get into testing people's testosterone levels and I think there's [now] an assumption of honesty. If you say the female category is only for people who have not been through male puberty then I really think the vast majority of people will respect that."

While there is now more of a sense of optimism, Sullivan admits there is also a feeling of an opportunity having been missed.

"I think the one thing that has been a bit disappointing is that the sport – both elite athletes, and grassroots athletics – has never been consulted on the issue," she says. "I think more could have been done [by authorities] to lead a discussion and to try to enable people to have it in a civil and respectful way."

International shot putter Strickler, who has found herself featured across the media when airing her views in recent months, confirms she was never asked for her thoughts from those within the sport. That, and a reluctance from some of her higher profile peers to use their platform and offer more public support, does rankle.

So does the fact that, for all the apparent progress in women's sport, it still feels like an almighty scrap simply to stay afloat.

"I still go to competitions and earn half the prize money that the men do so we've still got a long way to go," she says. "I feel like women throughout history have had to fight for things and this is just another one of those things on the list."

There is certainly no overriding feeling that the work is done.

"I think people are taking women's sport for granted," says Yamauchi. "This threatened the entire existence of women's sport and I don't think we're out of the woods, to be honest. This is a very big step forward but I don't think the battle is won by any means in other sports and in other countries."

Sullivan concurs. "I think that's been a bit of a shock," she adds. "You assume a certain level has been reached and that people understand women and girls have a right to sport as well. I think this has shown that it's not a given at all." **AW**

BELOW: Amelia Strickler was unafraid to air her views

