



Opinion: Media missed the real scoop about Caster Semenya

By Glenda Muzenda

After a whirlwind media frenzy, the Caster Semenya headlines finally died down. Yet in many ways media missed the scoop reporting on this issue; misinformation and stereotypes characterised most coverage surrounding the controversial gender test. What was missing was the bigger picture – how her story relates to the thousands of other women out there who do not conform to what society thinks women should look and act like.

course, some were present more for spectacle than support. One ignorant person even said they came to the airport to check if she was truly a man. On seeing Semenya this same person commented that she was too small to be a man.

Yet, not all the media headlines and attention have been so supportive. *Prove your not a boy!* challenged Semenya on the front page of the *Daily Sun*. Speculation of Semenya's sex and gender

Headlines from many local newspapers were raised high when she arrived back in South Africa at OR Tambo airport from Berlin, Germany. Some of

the headlines read: *Welcome our golden girl, Golden Beauty, You simply the Best, Bring on the gold,* etc.

It was great to see people gather for this event at the airport, some chanting political slogans, singing, dancing, and waiting for her arrival. Of

PROVE YOU ARE NOT A BOY!

TRIUMPHANT: SA's 800m gold medal winner Caster Semenya after the race. Photo by Getty Images

Anger over sex-test for Caster ...

By SUN REPORTERS IS she a girl or a boy?
 There's a mighty storm raging round the braided head of Caster Semenya, the 18-year-old from rural Limpopo who won a gold medal at the world athletics championships.

WORLD ATHLETICS BOSS-ES SAY CASTER MUST PROVE SHE'S NOT A BOY!
 But at home her gogo, her dad and even the ANC say: Leave our golden girl alone! Caster - from Fairlie in the Polokwane region - scored her

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(and they are different) was central in the media, a spectacle for all to read and see. As a media-monitoring organisation, the Gender and Media Southern Africa Network, we were quite perturbed at how this unfolded.

The images and photos of Semenya seemed geared to raise questions about the controversy, her celebration forgotten. At the same time, media treated consumers to a host of images of other such "gender questionable" athletes, maybe intended to show that this is not the first such controversy in world sport, but which only perpetuated stereotypes of women such as Caster Semenya.

Amid all the noise, media failed to mention that Caster Semenya does not even make it in the top ten fastest women's 800m world runners. So what is the problem? I would have presumed the media would speculate this issue

further and educate us all. Rather, print media featured offensive and degrading cartoons of her being a boy and people at the airport calling her a sheman. This is not right.

What does a real woman look like anyway?

Women come in all shapes, sizes, and shades; some are bold, dreadlocked, weaved and braided hair wearers.

Media coverage locally in South Africa and internationally showed big confusion - what is sex and gender? Sex is described as the biological difference between women and men. For example, men produce sperm while women become pregnant and breastfeed. Gender is socially constructed differences between men and women, which can change over time and can vary within a given society from one generation to the next.

Just how far must one go before their actions are deemed offensive? Who defines offensive? That must have been the question on most motorists' minds as they drove along Johannesburg's Rivonia Road where they encountered a Teazers billboard depicting a naked woman with super sized breasts lying on her back with the off line 'No need for gender testing'.

Lolly Jackson, owner of the erotic club, unashamedly denied that this line has anything to do with Semenya's agonising ordeal at the International Athletics Federation and subsequently after the athletics event.

- Sikhonzile Ndlovu



CONTROVERSIAL: The wording on new Teazers billboard is a coincidence, Lolly Jackson says. PICTURE: ANTOINE DE RAS

If sex is the issue, then we know to date that Caster is a young woman, who physically looks like a woman, and has bought menstrual napkins on a monthly basis because she actually has periods. She does not have a full chest, but that does not make her less of a woman. In another juicy media detail, we all know that she has bathed with women who witnessed her genitalia. So the sex issue is definitely not an issue.

Athletic South Africa (ASA) admitted that they had no idea of what a gender test consisted of. I would think that there are policies governing all sports associations to protect their own athletes; you participate as either a woman or a man. In fact, a high-level person in that office was quoted saying that they are mandated to train the athletes only, thus their wellbeing is not their problem to deal with. However, now that the media has unfairly brought this to the world, will they reevaluate their role in such circumstances?

In the aftermath, and before we begin again with the test results, I challenge the media to probe some of these questions. What should the role of the ASA be in making sure that Semenya, and others like her, are treated with respect and that her rights are not violated. What is a gender test? How do national sports treat women?

Meeting the President, women's league and youths of political parties to have a press conference of refuting the charges made by IAAF does not end the issue. It also does not end with Semenya – in reality, there are many other women like Caster chastised for looking like men.

Long before Caster Semenya made world headlines, she has dealt with these gender questions as a small girl growing up in Limpopo. In fact, there are many other women in her shoes. Many women have been brutally attacked for looking like men and raped to see if they will get pregnant. Others have suffered "corrective rape" in an effort to correct their womanliness,

especially lesbians, who have also been killed for looking and acting like men. Where is that media coverage?

Many of the brutal killings that have happened in the past to women are symptoms of a society that does not want to accept those that are different. There is need for gender equality within the media and stop perpetuating the stereotypes that are very dangerous to our society.

As an agenda-setter, the media has a duty to portray not just what is, but what could be; to be exemplary in its own practices; and to open debate on the complex issues surrounding gender equality.

I am proud to know women of all shapes, sizes, six-packed or not. Alex Wek is a Sudanese supermodel, gorgeous and she has a flat chest too. Imagine, there is great variety of beauty out there.

● **Writers Bio**

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