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CHANGING THE GAME: THE GROWING PRESENCE OF WOMEN IN SPORTS

Women's Day gives us an opportunity to recognize the strength and achievements of women in every field, including sports. For many years, sports were seen as a male-dominated area, and women had to struggle for equal opportunities and recognition. Despite facing challenges like limited support, unequal pay, and social stereotypes, women continued to work hard and prove their abilities. Athletes such as Mary Kom, P. V. Sindhu, and Serena Williams have shown that talent and determination are not defined by gender. Their success has inspired many young girls to step forward and participate in sports with confidence. On this Women's Day, it is important to celebrate these achievements and continue promoting equality in the world of sports.

WHEN GENDER BECOMES A DEBATE INSTEAD OF TALENT

In recent times, Algerian boxer Imane Khelif became the center of controversy during the Paris 2024 Olympics. In one of her matches, Italian boxer Angela Carini forfeited the bout within 46 seconds. What should have remained a sporting moment soon turned into a social media storm. Instead of focusing on her performance, many people began questioning Imane's gender and accusing her of being "biologically male." The situation became more complicated because in 2023, she had been barred from competing in the Women's World Championships in New Delhi after failing to meet the eligibility criteria set by the International Boxing Association (IBA), which included gender-specific testing. However, it is important to note that Imane Khelif was born female and identifies as a woman. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) also clarified that the athletes' official documents recognize them as women. This is not the first time a female athlete has faced such scrutiny. Years earlier, Indian sprinter Dutee Chand went through a similar experience. In 2014, just before the Commonwealth Games, she was declared ineligible due to hyperandrogenism—a condition related to naturally higher testosterone levels. The news spread rapidly, and her identity as a woman was publicly questioned. For Dutee, it was not just a professional setback but also an emotional one. Instead of remaining silent, Dutee challenged the decision in court.

In the case of Dutee Chand vs Athletics Federation of India and IAAF, she fought against the rule that restricted women with higher testosterone levels from competing. Her legal battle became a turning point, and the regulation was eventually suspended. Through her courage, she not only defended her own career but also stood up for many other athletes facing similar discrimination.

Recently, amid the controversy surrounding Imane Khelif, Dutee Chand openly supported her. She pointed out that Olympic athletes undergo several tests and that creating narratives on social media without proper understanding is unfair. Having experienced public humiliation herself, Dutee emphasized how damaging such accusations can be. Interestingly, Dutee's struggle also inspired the 2021 Hindi film *Rashmi Rocket*, starring Taapsee Pannu. The film highlighted the emotional and social challenges faced by a female sprinter whose gender comes under question. These incidents show that even today, women in sports are often judged beyond their performance. Instead of celebrating their achievements, society sometimes questions their identity. True equality in sports will only come when athletes are respected for their talent and hard work—not scrutinized for their biology.

WHEN CONTROL TURNS FATAL: THE TRAGIC STORY OF RADHIKA YADAV

The story of Radhika Yadav is a heartbreaking reminder that for many women, the struggle is not only on the field but also within their own homes. Radhika Yadav, a 25-year-old tennis player from Gurgaon, was shot dead in July by her father, Deepak. What makes the case even more disturbing is the atmosphere of control and restriction she was reportedly living under. According to the police charge sheet, Radhika had shared with her friends that she felt like a "prisoner" in her own house. She was allegedly not allowed to step outside alone, and her movements were closely monitored. Even small choices—such as wearing makeup or sports skirts while playing tennis—were objected to. A fellow player mentioned that her parents often accompanied her everywhere, including early morning practice sessions. The case sparked strong reactions on social media, where many people highlighted how control, societal pressure, and concerns about "family honour" can sometimes lead to extreme and tragic consequences. Radhika's story is not just about a crime—it reflects the larger issue of how some women are denied independence, even when they are talented and self-made athletes. Her death raises an important question: how long will women continue to fight for basic freedom and respect, even within their own homes?

On Women's Day, remembering stories like Radhika Yadav's reminds us that empowerment is not just about success in public life, but also about safety, dignity, and freedom in private life.

SUCCESS UNDER SCRUTINY: WOMEN AND THE SHADOW OF PATRIARCHY

The stories of Imane Khelif, Dutee Chand and Radhika Yadav may seem different, but they are connected by one common reality—even successful women are not free from patriarchy. Imane Khelif represented her country at the Olympics, yet instead of her performance being the focus, her gender became a topic of debate. Social media quickly questioned her identity, as if her achievements were less important than proving she "belongs" in women's sports. Years before that, Dutee Chand had to fight a legal battle just to compete. Her natural hormone levels were used to question her eligibility, and her identity as a woman was publicly discussed. She had to prove herself not only as an athlete, but as a woman. Radhika Yadav's case shows a more painful side of the same mindset. She was talented and independent, yet reportedly faced restrictions and control within her own home. Her success did not protect her from suspicion, monitoring, and pressure. Instead of being trusted, she was questioned. These cases show that patriarchy does not disappear when a woman becomes successful. In many situations, it simply changes its form. Sometimes it appears as online trolling. Sometimes as institutional rules. Sometimes as family control. But the message remains similar—a woman's success is still expected to stay within boundaries set by others.

It is troubling that women who win medals, represent nations, and build careers still have to justify their identity, character, or freedom. Why must a woman constantly prove that she deserves the space she has earned? Why is her independence seen as something to regulate?

True empowerment will come only when a woman's success is respected without conditions. When her talent is discussed more than her appearance. When her freedom is not treated as rebellion. Until then, these stories remind us that breaking records is not enough—society must also break its outdated mindset. On Women's Day, celebrating achievements is important but challenging the mindset that limits women is even more important. Only then will success truly mean freedom.

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2024-28

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