

BULLIED IN PARIS

Targeting of Imane Khelif, Lin Yu-ting in Olympics 2024 shows sports is still a long way from equality, on field and off it

THE 2024 PORTRAYAL guideline of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has a section on the treatment of sportspeople who do not conform to stereotypes: "Women, like men, are not a homogenous group, nor are they solely defined by their gender identity... Balanced portrayal practices should ensure that the diversity within and among different groups are both considered and reflected... Every person, irrespective of their gender identity or sex variations, has the right to practise sport without discrimination and in a way that respects their health, safety and dignity." Yet, on all these counts, Algerian boxer Imane Khelif as well as Taiwan's Lin Yu-ting have repeatedly been let down at the Paris Olympics — from opponents refusing the basic courtesy of a post-match handshake to celebrities, ranging from former US President Donald Trump to writer J K Rowling to entrepreneur Elon Musk, dismissing their victories. The reason: Khelif had failed to pass the gender tests conducted by the now-derecognised International Boxing Association last year, details of which have not been made public, and because neither conforms to the traditional imagination of a female athlete.

This disregard of the distinction between biological sex and gender identity is of a piece with the disinformation and ignorance that shroud conversations around women's sports in general. Since 1936, when the first gender test was conducted at the Olympics, the criteria for classification and rule-setting have been as much about culture, race and prejudice as they have been about science. The current controversy, for instance, stems from a section of people, including feminists such as Rowling, arguing that such a distinction negates the battle for the recognition of women's rights, insisting on a binary rather than a spectrum to fix identities. For athletes such as Khelif, a biological woman with XY chromosome and high testosterone, or Indian athlete Dutee Chand whose hyperandrogenism led to a long battle to clear her name or the demonisation of multiple Asian Games and Commonwealth Games medal winner Pinki Pramanik in 2012 for being of intersex variation, this means a protracted battle for dignity, acceptance and, recognition both on the sporting field and off it.

In any sporting arena, even in ones as vaunted as the Olympics where the focus is on participation and solidarity, victory remains a key arbiter of merit. At the same time, an excessive focus on matters of chromosomes and gender identity cannot — and must not — reduce performances and participants to uninformed conjectures and casual bullying. As Khelif has appealed, "It can kill people's thoughts, spirit and mind". That goes against every notion of fair play and sporting spirit.