



**Panellist statement:
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**HRC56 panel discussion
Promoting inclusiveness in and through sport
Monday, 1 July 2024, 10am to 12pm
Room XX, Palais des Nations, Geneva**

**“A WHOLE DIFFERENT BALLGAME”
INCLUSION, DIGNITY AND RIGHTS OF ATHLETES IN GLOBAL SPORT GOVERNANCE**

Excellencies and esteemed colleagues. It is a privilege to join this discussion.

As we have heard, we are at a decisive point in the experiment of human rights in and through sport. Despite some headway, we are still trailing on key measures of progress.

“ATHLETES REALLY DO HAVE THE POWER TO CHANGE THE WORLD”

Of course, in human rights work, we are all familiar with the tension, the hope, the determination to turn the tide. I suspect that’s why many of us are here. We are drawn to sport because we believe it can help us when we are down to come from behind and achieve our goals. Even **Kofi Annan** admitted that “The World Cup makes us at the UN green with envy”.

Who here hasn’t heard and longed for **Nelson Mandela’s** vision of the transformative force of sport?

Sport, **Mandela** said nearly a quarter century ago, has the power to change the world, to inspire, unite, connect with youth, create hope, breakdown racial barriers and laugh in the face of all types of discrimination. These are our goals, too. Are they not?

But what we leave out are the words he uttered next, surrounded on stage by athletes and other sports figures. *“The heroes standing with me are examples of this power. They are valiant not only in the playing field, but also in the community, both local and international. They are champions and they deserve the world’s recognition.”*



So, why then do we allow others—institutions, corporations, politicians—to claim this power as their own and tell athletes to ‘stick to sports’?

Athletes prefer to stick to **Mandela’s** vision. Just listen:

- Listen to professional footballer and indigenous Australian, **Lydia Williams**, who said athletes are more than their sport. *“It’s important”* she said. *“To have our own voice in things that need to be improved, not just in the sporting world but also what we see and can be part of elsewhere; creating better opportunities for the generations to come.”*
- Listen to **Layshia Clarendon**, the first out trans and nonbinary player in the history of the Women’s National Basketball Association in the U.S., who said athletes really do have the power to change the world and that *“we will never shut up and dribble because we refuse to be just used as entertainment .”*
- Listen to **Azeem Rafiq**, the professional and international cricketer, whistleblower and author who left Pakistan for the UK as a child fleeing violence with his family, only to now face death threats for exposing racism in his sport and society. He said he has found a sense of purpose far bigger than himself: *“I want to represent the normal person in these rooms—[those who] will never get here—and fight for their rights.”* He said these words in this very room last year.

Each of these athletes has been exposed to the inordinate imbalance of power in sport that left them vulnerable.

World Players’ research published last year documents the significant harms that arise from these power imbalances and demonstrates the win-win benefits when athletes are free to enjoy their human rights, including those under the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, which the International Labour Organization affirms.

STATES: ENSURE ATHLETES CAN EMPOWER THEMSELVES

Athletes are ready to play in a different world. They need a level playing field. Are States ready to support them?

We call upon States to:

- Ensure that athletes are allowed to be independently represented without fear of reprisals. States must make social dialogue a criteria for their sport policy and funding programs, and verify that athlete representatives are accountable only to the athletes.
- Recognise athletes’ roles as human rights defenders when they put their selves and their careers on the line to support a cause. Ensure that sport governing



bodies' policies on athlete expression, such as the IOC's Athlete Rights and Responsibilities Declaration, align with international standards on freedom of expression and global commitments to protect rights defenders.

- Guarantee for all athletes the right to access to effective remedy. Start by ensuring that the current system of global sports arbitration does not deprive athletes of access to judicial bodies and mechanisms available for cases involving human rights violations.

In short, athletes deserve the same rights and protections as everyone and anyone else.

THE LEGACY OF ATHLETES

In closing, let us remember that every match has its turning point – that moment when everything changes, when hope is reignited, and victory becomes possible. Today, we have that chance to create such a turning point with athletes who are empowered and able to empower themselves.

As **Mandela** concluded in his speech—speaking, as we now know, about athletes: *“Their legacy will be an international community where the rules of the game are the same for everyone, and behaviour is guided by fair play and good sportsmanship.”*

It is our role, then—including States, especially States—to stick with athletes who don't stick to sport, so that they can fulfill the legacies that **Mandela** envisioned.

Look no further than South African runner **Caster Semenya**, also a champion activist and author valiantly racing to leave her legacy in and through sport. *“I played my role as an athlete. Now it's my job to make sure that I fight for what is right.”*

This, excellencies and colleagues, is the power we seek and why we are all here.

I look forward to your questions and reflections, and I thank you for ensuring these athletes are heard.