

THE RISE OF WOMEN'S CRICKET:

Breaking Boundaries and Shattering Stereotypes

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Cricket has long been dominated by men, but in recent years women's cricket has seen a meteoric rise in popularity and participation. This increased interest has been driven by greater focus and investment from cricketing bodies like the ICC, exponential growth in media coverage and broadcasting of matches, as well as the consistently outstanding performances of female players on the international stage. Stars like Ellyse Perry and Mithali Raj have inspired greater uptake of the sport amongst girls while high profile leagues like the WBBL have provided a viable pathway to professionalism.

THE BEGINNINGS

Women have been playing cricket since the 18th century, but it was not until the 20th century that it began to gain recognition. The first recorded women's cricket match took place in 1887 between two English county teams. The first Women's World Cup was held in 1973, which helped raise the profile of the women's game. For many years, women's cricket lived in the shadow of the men's game, lacking proper funding, media coverage and access to facilities. But the 21st century has seen dramatic changes in attitude and support for the women's game. The creation of domestic T20 leagues like the WBBL provided pathways to professionalism. Stars like Mithali Raj, Sarah Taylor and Meg Lanning have inspired greater participation. Today women's cricket is broadcast globally, with high profile World Cups and international matches gaining huge viewership. While progress is still needed, the women's game now commands far more visibility, participation and respect.

INCREASING PARTICIPATION

All the major cricketing nations - Australia, England, India, New Zealand, Pakistan, South Africa, Sri Lanka and West Indies - now have established women's cricket teams. The International Cricket Council (ICC) took over the governance of women's cricket in 2005, helping provide funding and resources to expand the game globally. There was a 200% increase in female participation in cricketing nations affiliated with the ICC from 2013 to 2018. Almost 10% of all registered cricketers are now female. India has led the way, with female participation growing exponentially from under 5% in 2013 to over 15% by 2018. The establishment of domestic

leagues like the Women's Big Bash League and the emergence of superstar players like Ellyse Perry, Harmanpreet Kaur and Alyssa Healy has inspired more girls and women around the world to take up the game recreationally. Cricket is steadily shedding its outdated image as a predominantly male sport. The greater focus on the women's game has sparked a cricketing renaissance.

EMERGENCE OF SUPERSTARS

Ellyse Perry, Mithali Raj, Sarah Taylor, Meg Lanning and Harmanpreet Kaur are some of the superstar players who have driven interest and participation in women's cricket. Their athleticism, skill and dominance on the field serves as inspiration for aspirational young female athletes globally.

Ellyse Perry from Australia is considered one of the greatest female cricketers of all time. She is the only player, male or female, to have represented their country in both cricket and football World Cups. Her exceptional all-round abilities and consistency has made her the undisputed face of women's cricket.

India's Mithali Raj is the leading run-scorer in women's international cricket. She led India to the final of the 2017 Women's World Cup at the age of 34, earning new fans worldwide through her calm and steely leadership.

These women have become idols and role models for the next generation. Their stardom has attracted greater sponsorship and media coverage, accelerating the growth of women's cricket.

TELEVISION COVERAGE AND SPONSORSHIP

Women's cricket is now televised more than ever before. Major broadcast and digital streaming deals have brought matches to millions of viewers globally. Cricket highlights shows frequently showcase clips and analysis from women's international and league matches. Top players like Ellyse Perry, Mithali Raj and Heather Knight now enjoy huge social media followings of over 1 million each, increasing their visibility and brand

value. Cricket journalists and pundits are also accorded more airtime and column inches to discuss the women's game.

More money is coming into women's cricket from several sources. In 2017, Cricket Australia granted professional contracts to its top female cricketers, a landmark move towards making women's cricket a viable career. The ECB followed suit in 2020 by offering full-time domestic contracts to 40 elite English women's players. Other cricketing nations are now looking to follow this lead and professionalise the women's game.

Corporate sponsorships have also grown substantially. Barclay's Bank sponsored England's Women's Super League while automobile giants like Toyota and Commonwealth Bank sponsor Australia's national women's team and domestic competitions. This increased investment allows for better facilities, coaching structures and player wages.

While progress is still needed to achieve pay parity and viewership numbers, women's cricket is firmly in the ascendancy. The growing broadcast and commercial interest will only accelerate its rise.

MAJOR TOURNAMENTS

World Cups and other ICC events have been vital for the growth of women's cricket. The 2020 ICC Women's T20 World Cup final between Australia and India set a record for the highest attendance at a women's sporting event in Australia with large numbers of fans at the MCG.

The ECB hosted the hugely successful 2017 Women's Cricket World Cup, which saw unprecedented television coverage by broadcasters and high fan attendance. The final at Lord's between England and India was a sell-out, reflecting the growing popularity of the women's game. Domestic T20 leagues like the Women's Big Bash League, launched in 2015, have also seen tremendous support. The WBBL has developed into one of Australia's most followed sporting leagues with average crowds of over 5000 fans per match. England's new regional leagues are also gaining good traction with supporters. India, cricket's largest market, is set to host the 2025 Women's Cricket World Cup, reflecting the rising stature of women's cricket globally. The growing interest from Indian fans and corporations will provide a further boost to the women's game.

The soaring crowds, TV viewership and commercial success of recent ICC and domestic tournaments underline how women's cricket has entered the mainstream. If this momentum continues, gender parity in cricket may not be a distant dream.

A BRIGHT FUTURE

The future of women's cricket appears brighter than ever. The sport continues to evolve, with innovations such as the Women's T20 World Cup capturing the imagination of fans worldwide. The inclusion of women's cricket in future Olympics is also being actively pursued, which could provide another major platform for the sport to shine. With greater investment and professionalisation, female stars emerging as household names and the spread of participation globally, women's cricket is firmly on the ascent.

The rise of women's cricket is a testament to the indomitable spirit of women who refused to be confined by traditional gender roles. From humble beginnings to the global stage, women's cricket has come a long way, breaking down barriers and shattering stereotypes along the way. It is a story of determination, resilience, and triumph against all odds. Generations of female cricketers pursued their dreams and never gave up, despite facing questions about their suitability for the sport. They paved the path for cricket to finally open its doors to women. As women's cricket continues to grow in popularity and stature, it serves as a powerful reminder that no dream is too big and no boundary is insurmountable if you have passion and perseverance. The rise of women's cricket is not just a sporting phenomenon; it is a symbol of progress, empowerment, and the limitless potential of women in the world of sports and beyond. It represents the struggle for equality and the push for progress across all fields.

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