

Women, sport and the media

Television, radio and the print media play a central role in informing our knowledge, opinions and attitudes about women and sport. This is achieved through both the amount of coverage and the language used.

The under-representation of sportswomen in all forms of media, together with the under-representation of women involved in the production of sport-related media, has implications for the visibility of women's sport.

The media can play an important role in raising the public profile of women's sport.

Visibility – how often do we see our top sportswomen?

Evidence shows that the visibility of women's sport is far less than men's, and fewer sports are covered. On satellite television, the top sport shown by Sky and Eurosport is men's football, while on terrestrial television men's football and men's cricket dominate. In 2006, an evaluation of seven national and regional newspapers found that the average space dedicated to women and girls' sports was 4.8% of the total, and that only 5.2% of all articles were devoted to female sports.¹

When sportswomen do appear in the media, an athlete's profile may reflect her image rather than her history within a particular sport, paying less attention to her athleticism, skill and achievements. This, in turn, undermines the status of women in sport. A study on the coverage of the 2000 Olympics found that, while male and female athletes received a fairly balanced amount of coverage, women were more likely than men to be infantilised and be portrayed in emotive terms.²

Reporting women's sport in a way that reinforces stereotypes and trivialises women's achievements could be more damaging than not covering it at all.³ Certain forms of referencing within women's sport may serve to reinforce traditional patriarchal notions. These include the identification of the sports as 'women's sports', implying that 'the norm' is the men's game and that women's sports are therefore abnormal.⁴ As another example, women are often referred to as 'girls' or 'ladies' while men are not referred to as 'boys' or 'gentlemen'.

There are fewer role models for sportswomen and potential sportswomen than for men.

Sponsorship of women in sport is lower because women's sport receives less media coverage. However, a recent survey by the Sports Sponsorship Advisory Service reported that sponsors felt that women's sport would attract increasing attention over the next five to ten years.

¹ Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation, Britain's best kept secret (2003) and Playing Catch-Up, (2006).

² Dianne Jones, Half the Story? Olympic Women on ABC News Online, Media International, Australia, vol. 110, pp 132-146, (2004).

³ Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee, (2006), About time! Women in Sport and Recreation in Australia, Senate Committee in Australia in 2006.

⁴ Matheson, H and Biscoomb, K (2005) Is Appearance More Important than Performance? A Study of Sports Language in Six British National Newspapers a Decade Apart, University of Wales.



Working in sports media

One of the reasons women receive little media coverage lies in the attitudes of media and sports organisations. Most sports reporting is carried out by men, under male editors. In early 2007, it was estimated that of the 610 members of the Sports Journalist Association of Great Britain, around 10% are women.

Increased representation of sportswomen by the media requires increased involvement of women in the production of the media – for example, producers, photographers and presenters. Research suggests that if women were more involved in sports journalism, this would result in better coverage of women's sport.⁵

Improvements

However, there have been some improvements in the media's representation of women's sport.

Some media are better than others. In television and radio, for example, female sports reporters regularly appear on our screens. The BBC estimates that a quarter of the journalists, producers and editorial staff in its sports department are now women. This represents a substantial improvement over the last 20 years.

In 2006, the number of dedicated sports channels provided a larger than ever platform for women's team sports to be showcased. The 2006 Rugby Women's World Cup was televised live on Sky Sports 2 and 3, with highlights also being shown.

Late in 2006, English Netball secured a landmark deal with Sky Sports to show weekly coverage of the Netball Superleague.

England Women's football team's successful qualification for the 2007 World Cup was also featured on a number of BBC channels.

A final word: big improvements... but a long way to go

Women athletes are no different from men athletes in the skill, dedication and courage they bring to their sports. There is no doubt that over the past few years there have been big improvements in the coverage of women's sport and the types of images shown, but we still have a long way to go – especially in the sports pages of national newspapers.

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Registered charity number 1060267

The work of the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation is motivated by our vision of a nation of active women, where sport and exercise is an integral part of everyday life.

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Published by **sportscotland**

ISBN: 978 1 85060 526 3

WISF3 1108 1M

5. Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee, (2006), About time! Women in Sport and Recreation in Australia, Senate Committee in Australia in 2006.