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## **This sporting life: Why so few women sports writers? What can be done?**

**Deirdre O'Neill, independent researcher and Suzanne Franks, City University**

### **Abstract**

Sports journalism has traditionally been seen as a male domain, and a number of researchers suggest that this tradition has not changed (Strong, 2007). Sports reporters in the United Kingdom remain predominantly male, and despite increasingly more women having entered sports journalism since the women's movement of the 1970s, the number of women sports writers remains relatively low (Franks, 2013; Chambers *et al*, 2004). In recent

years there has been some considerable progress regarding the visibility of women in *broadcast* sports journalism and in particular the London Olympics in 2012 was a watershed for UK broadcasting, but there are still very few women sports writers in the UK newspaper industry, and sports journalism remains a largely male-dominated area in countries all over the world (Hardin & Shain, 2005).

## Introduction

**Most of the sport that is reported in the media, certainly in high profile outlets, is played by men. There is a growing literature about the lack of reporting of women's sporting activity (Boyle and Haynes, 2009; Godoy-Pressland, 2014; O'Neill and Mulready, 2015).**

It highlights factors such as the marginalization of female sporting achievement and the imbalance in the way that women's sporting events are reported compared to men's (Bruce, 2015, Schmidt, 2016). Recent studies in the UK have found that women's sports coverage languishes at around a dire four percent (Godoy-Pressland, 2014; O'Neill and Mulready, 2015). However, since then, and largely instigated by public service broadcasters such as the BBC, anecdotally, at least, some UK newspapers, particularly the quality press, appear to have paid attention to what broadcasters are doing and have slightly improved their coverage. For example, broadcasters and some papers gave prominent coverage in July and August 2017 to the Women's Cricket World Cup, Rugby World Cup and to women's football with coverage of Euro 2017. It would be interesting to carry out some more up-to-date research on coverage. A recent Australian study also gives grounds for optimism; researchers found that some newspapers were slightly improving coverage of women's sports (Sherwood *et al*, 2016). And in a study of the *New York Times* (a paper read by men and women equally) over a 30-year period, Schmidt (2016) found some signs of improvement in that the reporting trend was upwards, although coverage was still pitifully low at five percent.

Nevertheless, the successes and achievements of half the population continue to be downplayed and audiences are denied the spectacle of sporting successes. In addition, girls and women are not provided with strong role models that may encourage them to participate in sport, important for health and well-being, as well as for uncovering the potential top women athletes of the future (O'Neill and Mulready, 2015). This is particularly important when, as Whannel (2008, p84-85) points out, women face more obstacles to becoming involved in sports, for example, cultural expectations about femininity; a lack of sporting facilities for women; fewer women involved in sports organisations and policy making; and women often having less spare time for leisure and sports activities, since they usually have the greater role in domestic and childcare duties.

It is generally acknowledged that a journalism workforce that is representative of the population is more likely, in turn, to produce content more representative of the views, issues, concerns and achievements related to the wider population. Sherwood *et al* (2016) state that, along with assumptions about readership and the systematic, repetitive nature of sports news, research attributes the media under-representation of women's sports to the male-dominated sports newsroom. Schmidt (2016) found that women wrote proportionally more stories about women than men. Therefore, research was needed about the gender of who is *reporting* about sport. This is an area that has also been the subject of specialist research, but less so in the UK. For example, Schoch has examined this issue in the Swiss press (Schoch, 2013), whilst Schmidt has focused upon the absence of women in student newspaper sports reporting in the USA (Schmidt, 2013) and more recently on the *New York Times*. The most comprehensive research on the gender of sports reporters was carried out by Horky and Nieland in 2011. This was a wide-ranging German survey of sports writing across 22 countries that examined 80 newspapers and coded a total of 11,000 separate articles. The study found that the overall average proportion of articles by female journalists was eight percent (Horky & Nieland, 2011).

Our own work, published in 2016, also focused in detail on the question of female sports *writing* in the UK press. While we recognised there had been an increase in the visibility of women reporting on sports in broadcasting, we wished to establish the situation on national newspapers and to establish a baseline figure for articles produced by women from which future progress could be measured, since this had never been carried out and recorded. In order to find out who was writing about sport we conducted a number of byline surveys in the UK press over recent years. Our article, published in *Journalism, Theory, Practice and Criticism*, gives a detailed breakdown of all the data we found in the various byline surveys (Franks and O'Neill, 2016). It used a range of surveys across different broadsheet and tabloid papers to analyse who was writing about sport. Overall some 10,000 different articles were coded for the gender of the author across four different time periods to provide a comprehensive overview of who was reporting and writing about sport.

UK national newspapers fall into three categories, the quality press, the mid-market titles and populist red-top newspapers. We carried out surveys from 2012-13 of sports articles (before and after the London Olympics) noting the gender of the byline. We also recorded by-lines according to gender from a sample in 2002 to see whether the situation had changed.

We had obviously expected the outcome to show that sports journalism is dominated by men, but the results were more stark than we had anticipated. At no point in any of the periods we examined was the proportion of female bylines higher than three percent. There were occasions where the female contribution on one newspaper (*Guardian* and *Daily Mail*) for one week reached just over four percent, but the averages were well below this. Over all the periods we studied the average proportion of stories written by women was a mere 1.8 percent. Two other factors struck us as especially surprising. Along with women's sports coverage, which remained routinely low (O'Neill and Mulready, 2015), the impact of the 2012 London Olympics on female sports writing was negligible, despite the relatively high profile of women in sport and sports broadcasting over that period. The figures for female bylines in 2013 were barely changed from the previous year. And indeed they were barely different from 2002. Furthermore the UK results were considerably worse than the international survey results mentioned earlier from the work of Horkey and Nieland.

Using the data established by Franks and O'Neill (2016) in 2012-13, the same research into UK newspaper bylines was repeated by another researcher in 2017. Once again the sports news in six UK newspapers (*Guardian*, *Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Mail* and the *Sun*) over two weeks in March and April was analysed with respect to the gender of the byline (Edwards, 2017). Over a thousand articles were coded over that period. The results were almost identical to the same research conducted in 2012-3 (Franks and O'Neill, 2016). Overall the proportion of female bylines in 2017 was 2.53 percent. This was a marginal increase on the comparable data from 2012-13.

The paucity of women writing about sport continues to be of wide concern. Surveys in the US reinforce the same lack of female sports editors and reporters and indicate that there is still some prejudice faced by those women who do become sports journalists (Women's Media Center 2015, p. 21). Journalism education can make an important contribution towards addressing this issue and enabling more young women to become sports writers and reporters. There are sports journalism courses and modules at a number of institutions and an awareness of the imbalance within current sports writing combined with strategies for encouraging women to take these courses is a way of increasing the overall representation of women within the field.

A recent report published by the UK Government's *Women and Sport Advisory Board* (2015) concluded that more needs to be done to encourage women into sports reporting. If this is to be done, it is incumbent on journalism academics to examine *why* there are so few women in sports reporting in order to provide a better understanding of what, if anything, can be done to improve the situation in the UK. One way of contributing to our understanding is to share some of the experiences of women writing on newspapers and the possible obstacles they might have faced, or continue to face. Thus, this article builds upon our earlier quantitative work that highlighted the issue of the dearth of female sports writing. It focuses on the possible reasons which may account for the under-representation of women in the sports sections of UK national newspapers through exploring the experiences and views of women working in this field, conducted through a series of interviews.

## Method

There are only a handful of women sports writers whose by-lines regularly appear in the UK national

press, and we interviewed a substantial proportion of them by phone or email. They write for the *Times*, the *Guardian* and *Observer*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Mail on Sunday*, and the *Sun*. In the papers we examined, no women's by-lines regularly appear in the *Mirror* titles, the *Express* titles, the *Telegraph* titles or the *Independent* titles. As far as we are aware, there are no female sports writers on the *FT* or *Star* titles. Furthermore the only female writer on the *Times* said she preferred not to provide an interview and one of the writers on the *Guardian* did not reply to requests for an interview. We also interviewed a former national newspaper sports journalist who is now an academic and wished to remain anonymous.

The respondents were:

**Alison Kervin**, the first and only female sports editor on a national newspaper in the UK when the *Mail on Sunday* appointed her as recently as March 2013

**Martha Kelner** of the *Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday*, currently the youngest female sports writer and winner in 2012 of Young Sports Writer of the Year award

**Laura Williamson**, another young sports journalist on the *Daily Mail*

**Vikki Orvice**, a football and athletics reporter for the *Sun*, and the first female football writer on a tabloid. She is also on the board of Women in Football

**Janine Self**, a freelance journalist who also worked on the *Sun* for many years

**Anna Kessel**, who regularly works on the *Guardian* and *Observer*

**Amy Lawrence** who works on the *Guardian* and *Observer*

**A female former national newspaper sports reporter** who worked on the *Guardian* and *Observer* (both as a member of the online sports staff and later as a freelancer)

The interviews with a range of women sports writers featured here highlighted a range of possible explanations for the very low proportion of female bylines in the UK press:

#### **Gender balance in print and broadcasting**

All agreed that print lagged behind broadcasting in terms of women's progress. **Anna Kessel** of the *Guardian* said:

*"Print is the most traditional medium for sports journalism, so perhaps it's no surprise that it's been slowest to change. Women have been involved in sports broadcasting for a couple of decades. Sky Sports has had a woman as director for 20 odd years, whereas in print we've only just had Alison Kervin appointed as sports editor on the Mail on Sunday, a comparable position."*

One of the reasons is the notion of public service broadcasting in the UK, and the public funding of the BBC by licence fee, leading to an expectation that the BBC, at least, has a public duty to educate and reflect diversity, not merely entertain, and this has a knock-on effect on other broadcasting outlets. **Laura Williamson** of the *Daily Mail* said:

*"As a publicly-funded organisation, the BBC has needed to address the issue and has led the way on this, with women such as Gabby Logan, Clare Balding and Hazel Irvine working hard to earn their positions as respected broadcasters. Sky Sports [a dominant satellite pay-TV channel] has followed suit."*

Anna Kessel of the *Guardian* and *Observer* endorsed this view about gender and the BBC, and explained how technology may stir print editors out of their complacency about the male to female ratio in newspapers:

*"Broadcasters - the BBC in particular - are under more pressure to be diverse. At a sports media diversity event at the London College of Communications last year all of the major sports editors from ITV, Sky, BBC and BT Sport attended and joined the panels. Not one newspaper editor from sport came along. Meanwhile, the TV execs seem to be falling over themselves to attend ministerial meetings and conferences about women and sport."*

*"Perhaps it's because newspaper sport sections are thought to be mostly read by men, leading to the view that there's no additional consumers to pick up because women already buy the rest of the paper for the other sections. In TV, however, it's all about people buying Sky Sports or BT Sports [sports subscription channels], or viewing figures for sport. I think that may begin to change now for newspapers as we go into the online era and things are measured in terms of hits. For example, we now monitor how many people read each article, rather than just units sold of the entire newspaper."*

While the interviewees were all positive about the changes in broadcasting, particularly at the BBC, some also noted that some channels cast women in different roles than men. While acknowledging some outstanding women journalists, they all pointed to a tendency for Sky to favour young, attractive presenters over journalists with more substance. As one journalist said:

*"TV work can be studio-based and reading off autocues so it's possible to have a job in sports without the*

*same depth of knowledge. Working in print means doing a lot of stuff on the ground – going to sporting events, writing and turning copy around quickly, attending less glamorous press conferences.”*

And another added:

*‘We’ve not always seen women on TV used in the way everyone might like – certain channels use extremely attractive women as newsreaders but are reportedly more reluctant to give them reporting or directing roles.’*

Nevertheless, she pointed out that it creates an opening for women to then sidestep in to other areas or channels.

Interviewees also wondered if women were more attracted to broadcasting than print. ‘There are very few role models for women in print media,’ said Laura Williamson. ‘I think a lot of women (and men) interested in working in the media want to be on TV because it is seen as more glamorous than print,’ suggested Vikki Orvice of the *Sun*, a view shared by others, like Anna Kessel:

*“There’s less obvious inroads for women in print. This has a knock-on effect in terms of aspiration – it’s that “see it to be it” thing. When teaching part-time on a sports journalism course, I had a student whose ambition was to be a “Sky Sports newsgirl”. When she began to learn about writing and interviewing she fell in love with it. It made me beam when she subsequently said, ‘I really want to be a journalist now, not just someone who reads the autocue.’ Prior to this, it hadn’t occurred to her.”*

## A lack of women applicants or a lack of jobs?

Anna Kessel’s observation is a crucial point. According to many of our interviewees, it seems that women are not necessarily showing the same degree of interest in a career in sports writing or applying for jobs. As *Mail on Sunday* sports editor **Alison Kervin** said: ‘Women are not necessarily coming forward to work in sports journalism. In my times as sports editor, I’ve only received one CV from a woman and that was only after giving a talk where I mentioned that at the time I’d never had a woman’s CV.’

And Kervin went on to say:

*“The base further down the chain is not wide enough. There are mainly men working in the sports industry as a whole and this is true of the media. On regional and local newspapers, where people cut their teeth before applying to coveted jobs in the national media, most of the sports journalists are male. They are then in a better position to obtain scoops that might get them noticed at a national level. For example, a local sports reporter might have a good relationship with a footballer from a local team and who has then risen to the national team, and this reporter can then get an exclusive. It can take a lifetime of building such relationships to get top exclusives, and therefore, unless more women come into sports journalism on regional and local papers, they are not necessarily going to be in a position to get scoops.”*

And the openings are not necessarily available today to those wanting to break in to sports via local or regional press. **Vikki Orvice** of the *Sun* explained:

*“I had hoped that we would see more women coming through local papers. [But] print journalism is a declining industry and the traditional training grounds of local papers are shedding staff or cutting back to weekly rather than daily. Many experienced sports writers, including men, have been made redundant.”*

Kervin, along with most of the other interviewees, also emphasized that national newspapers are contracting:

*“There are simply fewer print jobs than there used to be. For instance, a sports desk of 20 years ago that might have had 20 journalists will now have 15. Print media is shrinking, shedding staff. Many people had hoped to see more female sports coverage and female staff after the 2012 London Olympics, but we’ve lost journalism positions on newspapers since then.”*

‘Getting into journalism is hard; getting into sports journalism is even harder,’ explained veteran freelance sports reporter **Janine Self**. **Amy Lawrence** (*Guardian* and *Observer*) acknowledged that the numbers of women have not changed much over the years. She explained that a handful of women got jobs on newspapers a few decades ago at a time when there was a cultural shift in how soccer wanted to present itself.

*“The appointment of a group of us [women] coincided [not accidentally] with a period in history when the game was trying to change its image in the wake of the Hillsborough and Heysel stadium disasters and the move to all-seated stadia. Alongside this, there was an attempt to rip football away from the clutches of hooliganism and to make the game appear less macho. There was also a recognition that was a significant percentage of female fans.”*

But she felt that the impetus for this shift had passed. In the mid-1990s she found getting a job on a sports desk relatively easy: ‘I was in the right place at the right time.’ However, as Lawrence and others explained, ‘This is not an industry with a rapid turnaround of staff. With so few opportunities in sport [particularly at a national newspaper level], there is tiny movement. Once people get a job on a national, they seldom move.’

## Unsocial hours and family life

At a 2016 conference in London on encouraging women in sports journalism, run by the campaigning group *Women in Journalism\**, the issue of balancing family life – particularly motherhood – with a career in sports journalism was a recurring theme. Not all of the interviewees were mothers but most believed this is a factor in recruiting and retaining women, as well as playing a part in the roles they are able to take on within sports journalism. Laura Williamson agreed:

*“It is definitely an issue. How do you balance motherhood with the unsociable and unpredictable hours, travel and pay? I have had to change jobs, leaving my role as athletics correspondent to become news editor in the office, whereas my male counterparts have just carried on after becoming fathers. My newspaper have been very understanding but many women I know have been treated very poorly and effectively been forced out after becoming mums.”*

This view was echoed by Anna Kessel:

*“It’s fair to say that becoming a mother is extremely challenging in an industry which operates 24/7, usually in anti-social hours, and often involves travelling away from home, and working at short notice. Arranging childcare around these requirements is almost impossible. ...Going part-time is unusual, and difficult to justify when jobs are like gold dust.”*

Vikki Orvice added:

*“I didn’t have children. I’m not sure I would have been able to do my job over the years with children given I spend long periods abroad or have lasted so long. I have step-children (now grown-up) and my husband is a sports writer so we managed to juggle things at weekends with their mum when they were younger.”*

Amy Lawrence said she chose to go part-time after she had children. ‘My employer has been pretty flexible and understanding with me; I’ve found a rhythm that seems to work. It’s very difficult and challenging but it can work. But you need great back-up at home.’ Other women chose the freelance route for flexibility. Alison Kervin, the most senior woman interviewed, said, ‘I didn’t take this particular job until my son was 13, so I could fit in around him. His dad has him at weekends. Before then I was freelance.’ It is obvious why, when you learn that Kervin, who is sports editor on a Sunday paper, does a 21-hour shift every weekend. ‘I start at 6am on a Saturday morning and finish on Sunday at 3am. The job eats into your social life.’

The youngest interviewee, **Martha Kelner** of the *Mail on Sunday*, doesn’t have children, but assumptions have already been made about her in some quarters.

*“A photographer put it to me that I wouldn’t be thinking about promotion because ‘you’ll be going off having babies’. I am aware that it’s a difficult job if women have kids, but it’s difficult for men too. I know fathers who find it emotionally hard to be away from their children for periods of time.”*

### Misogynist attitudes

Some of the women interviewed were trailblazers, pushing at closed doors at a time, decades ago, when sports desks had little or no experience of women and sexist attitudes were prevalent and overt. Interestingly, the women who had worked in the industry for a long time generally felt there was no longer any major gender bias or misogynist attitudes, and generally played down sexism. ‘There are fewer dinosaurs now,’ explained **Janine Self**, who has been a sports reporter for decades.

*“I started in the 1980s on a local paper in Sheffield and it was awful, like the Stone-age. I think some people thought I was a freak. To be a woman in sports journalism then, you needed a rhino’s hide. I think I naively went into it – I just loved sport, like my brother and father who were obsessed by it, and I was good at English. There were a couple of female pioneers, great writers and commentators, but next to no ‘foot soldiers’, reporting on the ground.”*

Self described what it was like working with all men all of the time:

*“[It was] like being at a stag do – lots of talk about sex and bodily functions. Women in this environment have just two options: ignore it or object. The minute you take the second route and object, you’re dead. You’ll have no friends.”*

Kervin also believed the situation had improved a great deal:

*“25 years ago it was rare to see a woman in the press box. I never saw women on rugby tours. And when I submitted stories as a freelancer, my by-line would always be A. Kervin rather than Alison Kervin because I knew it would put editors off...Women are not quite the same novelty and talking point as they might have once been.”*

There was a certain reluctance to discuss contemporary sexism; instead it was expressed as an historic concern. It is possible that women who have made their way in such a male-dominated environment are more inured to what others might perceive as sexist or biased attitudes, and the sexism they experienced in the past was more noticeably overt. These are women, after all, who are working in a man’s world, and who

have batted away any possible prejudices in order to succeed. Highlighting the fact that they are at the receiving end of sexism may be perceived as a sign of weakness or they may prefer to downplay it for the sake of good working relationships. ‘I may have had *different* experiences to men as a woman, but I wouldn’t say I have had a *greater amount* of difficult experiences because I was a woman,’ said Amy Lawrence. ‘I can count on one hand any uncomfortable experiences. And men also experience bullying or demeaning behavior. My experience is that if you demonstrate what you can do, any opposition dissipates and you don’t get any problems.’

However, Alison Kervin conceded there probably is a bias that makes it harder for women. She acknowledged she occasionally got comments such ‘are you sure you understand the game?’ But, as Martha Kelner pointed out, such comments are not confined to men: ‘I have been asked by other women if I actually *like* football. I think some wonder if I’m only after a husband. But if anyone [male or female] finds out what I actually know about sports, I can get past any barriers.’

The academic said that while her day-to-day experience was generally fine because her colleagues got to know her and the standard of her work, she nevertheless worked for someone ‘who couldn’t seem to get over the fact I was a woman.’

*“When I suffered sexist abuse from readers, he said I shouldn’t complain because “don’t you think you probably get more praise than you deserve, just because some people fancy you?” He would openly say, in front of me and others, that he wished a young male writer had been around when I was appointed. Sexism from readers is always more offensive than from elsewhere, but it’s arguably more damaging when the gatekeepers to a sustained career treat you like a curiosity.”*

All the women stressed that most of the misogynist attitudes they have experienced recently were not from within the journalism industry but from those working in sport, especially football. As Williamson said: ‘Any sexism I have encountered has very much been in the field and not from colleagues from other newspapers, co-workers or bosses.’ As the first and still the only female sports editor on a national newspaper in the UK, Kervin has not experienced problems from male staff, probably because she’s in a position of power. ‘They may say things behind my back, but I don’t care about that.’

Vikki Orvice pointed out that sexism is hard to prove and may be mixed up with other prejudices, something that a number of women alluded to. Williamson said, ‘I’m never sure if certain comments were because I was young, female or a northerner working in London, but I felt I had to do “extra” to prove my worth.’ And Martha Kelner said, ‘If someone is rude or offhand, I can’t always tell if it’s because I’m a woman: it could be because I’m young or I’ve asked a silly question.’ However, she acknowledged she had had comments about her appearance and she can often be in a no-win situation, when getting comments like ‘That’s a short skirt’ or ‘Oh, she’s not wearing a short skirt.’

*“This can make me feel uncomfortable, and I’m certainly more visible in a press conference. If I ask a question, and everyone hears a female voice, they all turn around. There is a feeling of ‘otherness’ if you are the only woman. I’ve sometimes wondered when I get a smirk from [football] managers at a press conference in response to one of my questions, “would a man get that response?” but nothing has ever happened that made me want to stop doing my job. And I’ve rarely experienced overt sexist or nasty comments.”*

The fact that sexism is not usually overt does not mean it doesn’t exist. Turner’s experiences are worth noting:

*“Reporting on men’s matches I’ve had some nice experiences, particularly as I’ve got older, but I’ve generally found the atmosphere in the press room to be quite closed, if not hostile. I’ve rarely been able to strike up a conversation with male reporters, who’ve often closed ranks. Although it grates to have people walk into the room and say “Right, chaps...”, the more alienating stuff is directed right at you. I’ve had stadium staff ask me what I’m doing in the press corridor, despite the fact that I had my press ID hanging around my neck. I’ve had people mistake me for someone there to serve tea.”*

Speaking at a 2015 event in London on getting women into sports journalism at the London Press Club<sup>1</sup>, Jessica Creighton, a journalist and writer for BBC Sport, also highlighted this sense of ‘otherness’ as a black woman working in sports reporting. ‘When I walk into the newsroom, no one looks like me. It can be quite intimidating and daunting to get over that before you can even think about doing your job.’

This sense of ‘otherness’ was also raised by the academic.

*“Being ‘the other’ is wearing, and I left the profession, as have a number of the (few) women I know who came through at the same time as me; it’s hard to stick around long enough to overcome the everyday micro-aggressions, let alone rise to a position of power from which you might influence the make-up of the staff.”*

And despite stressing the improved attitudes in the field towards women, Janine Self, who worked for the *Sun* for many years, sued the newspaper for sex discrimination and unfair dismissal when she lost her position there five years ago. She won her case for unfair dismissal, but as has been pointed out by a number of interviewees, proving sexist motives is harder and she did not win on this point.



While Anna Kessel stressed that she has not experienced gender bias from all quarters, she does believe that all women have encountered sexism at some point, but like all the women, she pointed out that this is a wider societal issue:

*“It is reflected in societal views of women and exaggerated in football for being so male dominated. What many right-thinking men would not usually say elsewhere in their lives may suddenly feel ok in football or another sport because the environment is so male.”*

## Social media and female sports writers

It appears that the development of social media and reader interactivity has brought about a new arena where women are likely to be targeted because of their gender, albeit from readers rather than co-workers. Vikki Orvice, among others, raised this as an area of concern. At the *Women in Journalism* event<sup>2</sup>, one broadcast reporter said nasty social media can make the job very off-putting and can particularly undermine young journalists at the start of their career. In her interview, Martha Kelner said she believed Twitter had got worse:

*“[Our gender] is an easy stick to beat us with. I’ve been called a slag and told I don’t know what I’m doing because I’m a woman. It’s more common when I write about football than a sport like athletics (which is not a male dominated sport). There are people in darkened rooms spoiling for a fight. We may not get more online abuse than men, but I think it can be more vitriolic and insulting, and our gender is often the first port of call for someone sending an abusive tweet.”*

Alison Kervin noticed that she also got different treatment on Twitter than male colleagues. She tweets on a Saturday evening about articles coming up on Sunday and notices that if the byline is by a man, readers engage about the content – they may not agree or like the reporting, but the debate is about the content. If a tweet goes out in her name, she will often get comments along the lines of ‘Get back in the kitchen’. While it doesn’t put her off, she finds it disturbing that there are people out there with such views and that they now have a platform (Dicaro, 2015). But whether this could be said to be putting off potential female sports journalists is hard to say, since many young women may not be aware that this is going on. And Kervin pointed out that the younger generation is used to using social media, so they may worry about this less. But if they do find it off-putting, she suggests they are unlikely to make it in such a tough business anyway, or that it may not be the job for them.

With broadcasters being so visible, Amy Lawrence thought the situation was probably worse for women on TV. Initially, Lawrence was reluctant to go on Twitter but against her expectations she now loves tweeting, and has found a means of putting off abusive and sexist commentators, while empowering herself. She said that only a tiny amount of responses had been sexist: ‘And when I retweet such comments, there’s usually a deluge of people defending me. I feel like I have an army of people who will tell that person not to be so stupid.’

## Further reasons for the lack of women

Other possible reasons for the lack of women coming through emerged from interviews. ‘It might be down to sports participation by girls at grass roots level, which is less than participation by men,’ suggested Martha Kelner of the *Daily Mail*. Laura Williamson pointed out that a traditional route in to reporting on sport is by playing it at top level: ‘Fewer women have grown up with or played sport to the level where they might be encouraged to report on it.’ And, along with a number of other interviewees, she pointed out that the popularity of football can limit reporting opportunities for women:

*“Men’s football is the dominant sport – and it is played, managed and run by men. This makes it more difficult for a young women to build contacts and network, simply because she belongs to a different demographic [there has never been a female chief football correspondent]. And the readership of sports media is overwhelmingly male, so they are more likely to regard sports reporting as a dream job.”*

Kelner agreed:

*“It’s more natural for men. [Lots of boys] want to be a footballer, and if they don’t make it, they may want to stay close to the sport by writing about it. Because fewer girls play football, this possibility is unlikely to even be on their radar.”*

In addition, in the UK we have only seen women’s football (soccer) taken more seriously and given better media coverage in the past couple of years. However, the popularity of women playing football has markedly increased at the same time. With the growing professionalisation of the women’s game, it is possible

we may in future see more women who have played coming through as football sports journalists.

## Conclusion

There was some difference of opinion: while acknowledging some of the difficulties facing women, Kervin concluded that there was nothing stopping them from breaking into the field but ‘they really have to want to do it’. Nevertheless, this does not really address the reason why the numbers in the UK are so low. While this qualitative research demonstrates that the workplace culture for women in sports writing has improved – though it is by no means a misogynist-free environment and women feel they have to prove themselves more than men to be accepted – the numbers of women working on the sports desks of UK national newspapers has not improved over the decades. As Vikki Orvice said at the 2015 London Press Club event on getting into sports journalism<sup>(i)</sup>.

*“I thought when I started out in tabloids in 1995, there would be a trajectory of women starting to emerge in sports writing, but it has not been the case at all. In fact, it has got worse..... Women in sports writing peaked in 2000.....The only females at The Sun are me and two secretaries.”*

And in her interview, Orvice raised another development that has consequences for women: ‘Now, if a woman does write the sport for a national newspaper, they are most probably freelance.’ While this flexibility might suit some women, it does bring with it an attendant lack of job security, though it could be argued that a lack of staff jobs is an issue for all genders working on newspapers at the moment. But, according to one interviewee, women face an additional problem: ‘Pay is, in the main, less for women. They are often overlooked for jobs or promotion too. I am more senior to at least one of my colleagues but know they are paid more than me.’ However, most interviewees could not be sure about differences in remuneration as pay is not usually made public. And while opportunities for career progression may be limited, one interviewee argued that male colleagues can undermine women who *are* promoted by spreading rumours that they only got the position on the basis of being a woman.

The absence of women on about half of national newspaper sports desks highlights a distinct disadvantage that women have to negotiate, according to BBC online writer Jessica Creighton at the London Press Club event<sup>(ii)</sup>. ‘The “Old Boys” network still exists. Nepotism still exists. Middle class, white males hold the power and employ people who look like them.’ This view was endorsed by a number of the interviewees. As the academic explained, ‘An awful lot of work (even shift work) is dished out via contact networks, which excludes lots of people, but more women than men. I’ve also been told by former employees of one sports publication that I applied to that they don’t even read applications from women.’

But there was consensus on many points, namely the decrease in overall jobs on newspapers, the unsocial hours, the lack of role models in print, a lower participation rate in sports by women, the dominance of men’s football, a predominately male audience for sport and, indirectly, the lack of coverage of women’s sports (O’Neill and Mulready, 2015), which all play a part to a greater or lesser degree in flagging up the possibility or attractiveness of a career in sports writing. None of the participants in this study were optimistic about any significant change in numbers in the near future, concluding that it ‘will take years before we see real change.’

The outcome of this research then begs the question about what can be done to ensure that more women are engaged in reporting and writing about sport. The observations made by this group of interviewees who are part of a very small band of successful female sports writers gives some useful pointers to journalism educators who are interested in finding ways to encourage young women to succeed in this field.

The interviews highlighted a number of issues. First, employers need to be more proactive in recruiting women and more flexible in working patterns if they are to attract and retain women, and this needs to start at regional and local newspaper level. As Anna Kessel said:

*“Sports media does need to catch up with the rest of the world. I’ve had conversations with female politicians and news reporters who do job-shares and work part-time, and it’s no big deal. If it’s possible to cover what the prime minister is up to on a part-time basis it’s got to be possible to cover football.”*

*“Ultimately it will probably come down to getting more women in the field: if the demand is there for job shares and part-time work, it will become normalized. But it’s a chicken and egg situation - if the flexibility isn’t there for mums, will women be put off pursuing a career in sports journalism? Or will they drop out?”*

The advice at the London Press Club event was to ‘network as much as possible’, ‘be persistent’ and ‘use social media to help build a profile’ (Dutton, 2015). But there is work to be done by academic staff running journalism and sports journalism courses at universities. Many of the interviewees believed that journalists

and university lecturers needed to go into schools more to promote sports journalism courses and sports journalism as a possible career for young women. Certainly, where there has been a concerted effort to do this by one of the few women who leads a sports journalism programme (Dr Carrie Dunn at the University of East London), there has been a greater take-up of places on sports journalism courses, increasing the percentage of women from a typical 11 percent per cohort (Women and Sport Advisory Board Final Report, 2015) to 20-30 percent. For example, the university holds workshops and events for both primary and secondary school pupils, run by women, to encourage girls and others who would not normally consider a career in sports or sports journalism, including discussion panels on sport, media and gender. But the will has to exist: a concerted and joined-up effort is needed from all quarters - careers advisers, teachers, lecturers and employers - if there is to be any change. It is hoped that this qualitative research, in conjunction with earlier quantitative results, can contribute to future initiatives and enable more young women to enter sports journalism.

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NB: A earlier version of this article appeared in *Media Report for Women* in the USA, 2016

(Endnotes)-----

- 1 London Press Club event on Getting Into Sports Journalism, 10<sup>th</sup> November 2015
- 2 Women in Journalism event on Women in Sports Journalism, 20<sup>th</sup> May 2015.