

Put Her In, Coach: Female Sports Journalists' Role in Women's Athletic Coverage in the Media

By Jamie Cummings

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The Chicago newspaper's infamous Twitter headline read "Wife of Bears' lineman wins a bronze medal today in Rio Olympics."¹ Corey Cogdell-Unrein had just won her second Olympic medal in trap shooting only to have her name and success attributed to her spouse's athletic career. Unfortunately, microaggressions such as this one are not uncommon in the media's coverage of women's sports. Moreover, the coverage itself is problematic, as it is nearly non-existent compared to the attention men's sports receive. Society has arbitrarily placed sport within the domain of men. The debate is often framed by the claim that insufficient interest in female athletics makes them unprofitable. The real question is whether or not the reason behind the lack of interest is the

lack of coverage. Evidence suggests the market of female audiences is growing all the time.² The solution to the disparities faced in coverage and microaggressions may rest with female journalists who are more likely to quote and report on women than men.³ In a vicious cycle, gender hiring practices in sports journalism are unequitable, perpetuating the media's problematic limited attention to female sport. Media organizations must support women in editorial and leadership roles if they wish to avoid sexist culture and the estrangement of female fanatics.

Coverage (or Lack Thereof)

Women's sports across the board receive far less than equal media coverage around the world. In the United States, women make up about forty percent of athletes but

approximately two to four percent of all coverage.⁴ Televised sporting displays a particular disparity for females where just 1.5 percent of all programming is dedicated to women's athletics.⁵ The lack of coverage reinforces the societal belief that sports are the realm of men, because that is the only gender displayed time and again across the screen. Cheryl Cooky, an associate professor of women's gender and sexuality studies at Purdue University, has been studying televised sports news for more than twenty years and claims she has witnessed a decline in the coverage of women during her research.⁶ Others have gathered evidence to suggest coverage has increased to some capacity.

Increased coverage in recent years may appear to have occurred, however, the content and sports

categories are more isolated than statistics suggest. In the 2016 Rio Olympics, women's sports surpassed men's receiving 58.5 percent of the competition broadcast time on NBC's telecasts.⁷ Digging deeper, mid-way through the Olympics the network was revealed to have registered over two hours dedicated to women's beach volleyball and nearly three hours to women's gymnastics.⁸ It would be remiss to ignore the fact that these two sports require particularly revealing uniforms. Additionally, it is common that Olympic coverage is dedicated to traditionally feminine sports such as figure skating and gymnastics indicating the tendency to support women in high-level sporting only if they fit into the "feminine mold."⁹ Furthermore, Olympic reporting of female athletes in the media often includes in-depth backstories with more about their familial relationships, spouses, and life outside of sports.¹⁰ While these stories are interesting, they are not an equal statistic to be compared with the time men's pure on-court, athletically competent action receives. By covering select feminine sports and female athletes' non-athletic life, the increased content is essentially just more of the same. Other defenders of increased—though still nowhere near equal—coverage point to websites specifically devoted to women's sports like ESPN-W. Platforms such as these are "a double-edged sword" as they do generate more content

about women's sports but simultaneously "compartmentalize it away from the mainstream of sports coverage."¹¹ Exacerbating the problematic unequal coverage of female sports are the microaggressions that often appear in the media when content is devoted to women.

Microaggressions in "Girls" Sports

Microaggressions in women's sports media are a manifestation of socialized sexist biases in which our culture is entrenched.¹² It should not be discounted that biological differences between male and female athletes exist relevantly in the context of sport. However, gender norms have been constructed as attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors about how men and women should conduct themselves. These conventions are social concepts with no biological backing that are further fortified in the microaggressions presented by the media. Microaggressions are usually not intentional, rather automatic statements or actions occurring often enough that they may even be overlooked or informed as harmless jokes.¹³ The repetition is part of the socialization cycle which must be addressed to stop problematic comments, headlines, and articles. A 2010 study created a taxonomy for the types of microaggressions female athletes face most frequently including the "assumption of inferiority, sexual objectification, and restrictive gender roles."¹⁴

Assuming women are inferior or revolves around the notion that they are less capable mentally or physically compared to men.¹⁵ The lack of media coverage indirectly is evidence of the conviction that men's sports garner more interest due to their strength, speed, and excitement. Referring to females as "girls" or "ladies" while rarely terming males "boys" or "gentlemen" in sports broadcasting also assumes a woman is meant to view the male in authority or behave within a certain polite confines while men are allowed to be more aggressive and rowdy. One study analyzed the entire ESPN Sport Science series, a collection of videos that assesses performance in terms of biomechanics, to find differences between how women and men were portrayed. Researchers found female athletes were often compared to their male counterparts while the males were never compared to females. This approach was seen as a way to "legitimize female sports accomplishments as athletic."¹⁶ Here male athletes are the standard to which all athletes are compared, which further entrenches the notion of male athletic superiority.¹⁷ One-way physical comparisons are another familiar example of inferiority microaggressions.

Female athletes are sexualized in the way the media portrays their personhood as reminiscent of the catch-phrase "sex sells." Objectification involves minimizing the value

or whole being of a woman to her body or body parts.¹⁸ Female athletes are frequently posed in sexual ways with revealing clothing, or none at all, in sporting magazines. These star athletes have the right to pose in whatever way and outfit they please if it makes them feel empowered. Their motivation should be driven by internal desires though, not the societal or industry pressure to appear sexy and feminine despite being an athlete. Serena Williams, Jennie Finch, Danica Patrick, and Lindsay Vonn were all granted Sports Illustrated covers only after they posed for the (SI) swimsuit issue of their respective years.¹⁹ This pattern of receiving rewarded recognition for the professional's sport after their bodies were revealed, also reveals the objectifying expectations of mainstream media companies. Being a powerhouse athlete and being a woman do not have to be mutually exclusive characteristics.

More broadly than sexual objectification, gender roles are overly emphasized in sporting media restricting women to narrowly defined acceptable behaviors and images. For example, commentators have remarked about elite athletes' tennis grunts or arguments with the officials referring to them as "ritualized yelling."²⁰ The aggression and strength behind these actions are deemed too masculine for women who are expected to always embody the delicate and soft nature that has been arbitrarily attributed

to females. In addition to the Sports Illustrated swimsuit sexual objectification editions, Brittney Griner, who is arguably one of the greatest female basketball players ever, remains without a cover likely because she does not fit the feminine mold.²¹ Griner has been unapologetically herself, embracing her sexuality, height, and strength since entering the WNBA but those characteristics do not fit the framework society shaped and the media upholds.

Globalized from Washington to Sydney

Similarly horrendous discrepancies in coverage and instances of microaggressions are common throughout the world. In the United Kingdom and Australia, less than ten percent of televised reporting and newspaper stories are focused on women's athletics.²² According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on women and the media, the sporting situation could be argued as even worse-off in other non-English-speaking, smaller nations across the globe.²³ Throughout the report, it is constantly cited that women's sports and female sporting journalists are underrepresented.²⁴ UNESCO has created a search-engine extension called "Her Headline" which searches and highlights online media for gender stereotypes that many have become desensitized to as the norm. As Schmidt concludes, "the hegemonic mascu-

linity of sports, and sports media, is not associated with any particular national identity or bounded by any geographic border,"²⁵ meaning the issue of sexist sports exists globally.

The Chicken or the Egg

The golden question around the discrepancy in the attention given to men and women's competitive sport is whether it is the lack of interest leading to the lack of coverage or the lack of coverage leading to the lack of interest. Valid arguments from both market and normative frameworks can be made, but this paper is focused primarily on the media's role as gate-keepers. Greater exposure could be the key to changing norms. Data collected across the UK, US, and Australia demonstrated that female journalists were significantly less likely to perceive the current level of women's sports coverage appropriate and adequate than male journalists.²⁶ Further, scholars have evidence that interest in female sports increases when women are presented with images of fierce and competent athletes.²⁷ In other words, perhaps the truer story is that society requires a mindset shift that could result from an increased publicizing of impressive women in sport. After all, the 2015 Women's World Cup final game is the most-watched soccer match of any gender in United States history²⁸ and that is due in part to the intensive coverage. A potential market of untapped interest lies beneath the surface.

Female Fandom

The number of female sports fans across large English-speaking countries is increasing each year.²⁹ Specifically in the United States, as of 2018, women comprised forty-six percent of the entire NFL fanbase.³⁰ During the last summer Olympic games, women made up more than half of the NBC prime-time viewers.³¹ This proof of interest does not automatically mean that the same populations would show-up to watch more women's athletics, but it does provide a market opportunity for capitalizing organizations. If media companies continue to televise or publish microaggressions, maintain strict gender barriers, and refuse to increase the streaming of women's competitions, they could be alienating a growing audience.³² Alongside expanded female interest in engaging with athletic media, women's desire to directly participate in sports journalism has evolved as well.

Women Want to Take the Lede

Women are increasingly interested in becoming professional sports journalists. Females make up nearly sixty-five percent of journalism and communications majors across America today.³³ The reality these women face in sports broadcasting and writing, however, is bleak. In the UK, only three percent of sports journalists are women, yet in the United States, less than ten percent

of newspaper sports articles from the last 30 years in total were written by women.³⁴ Hiring practices that have created a significant lack of diversity amongst professionals in the field are due for serious re-evaluation.

Failing Grades in Gender Hires

For the fifth consecutive year in 2018, jobs including sports editors, columnists, reporters, and copy editors received an F for gender hires in the sports journalism industry.³⁵ Overall, hiring practices were not much better according to Central Florida's Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports study, which gave more than seventy-five news outlets a D-plus final grade.³⁶ In fact, ninety percent of all sports editors and 88.5 percent of television sports reporters are men in the US.³⁷ The lack of women in powerful positions in sports journalism is striking and better explains why the disparity in coverage has persisted for decades. Furthermore, newsroom culture for women is notoriously difficult since athletics have been gendered as a male domain by society. Surveys demonstrate male journalists find women as less credible and assume they instinctively know more about sports than women.³⁸ When women are given sports reporting assignments, the types of stories awarded are statistically more often 'human interest' pieces.³⁹ This procedure is likely linked to the belief that fe-

males are sensitive and interested in the emotional side of sports making them better candidates for a fluffier story. The failing hiring practices and difficult work culture are reinforcing factors in the discrimination in coverage and microaggressions women's sports face writ large in the media.

Women's Greatest Advocates: Women

Women are more likely to quote other women, give other women more reporting attention, and cover other women more respectfully than men.⁴⁰ According to recent survey data, 74.8 percent of women believed that female sporting should be given greater media coverage.⁴¹ Women are rarely quoted in articles unless the story is about an all-female sport. In comparison, men are featured in articles about women's sports as cited experts across newspapers in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia.⁴² If women are referenced in a male-dominated sport piece or even in women's sports articles, it is most frequently for their familial or domestic role in the life of an athlete.⁴³ The inequality in quoting demonstrates, yet again, the perception that the female's role is in the home while the male's is in the game.

Terry McDonnell was Managing Editor and then Editor-in-Chief for Sports Illustrated from 2002-2012 where he was named one of Sport's Business Journal's 50 Most Influen-

tial People.⁴⁴ Before his time with SI, McDonnell worked as an editor for the US Weekly tabloid and Men's Journal. His time in these posts "would noticeably influence SI's direction" as more male-driven.⁴⁵ It was under McDonnell's leadership that the aforementioned disturbing female magazine cover practices for Williams, Finch, Patrick, Vonn, and Griner took place. Yet, McDonnell is just one editor out of all the ninety percent of positions dominated by men in sports journalism. If women are to be covered more often in more respectful ways, there must be positions for them in management and editorial boardrooms. The cycle is continued as women are stuck with human interest stories while promotions are reserved for high-profile reporting. Without the opportunity to excel in serious sporting stories, the promotions remain out of reach.⁴⁶ The answer to women's sports equity in the media may rely on hiring women and hiring them to influential positions.

Hear Women, Hire Women

A desire amongst women to see more females represented in sports journalism is exhibited, as sixty-eight percent have reported they feel women deserve a more prominent role.⁴⁷ Not only are women more likely to cover and quote women, but also their image or names on substantive athletic reporting could change the gender culture around sporting altogether as a powerful example to the rest of society. Sexual objectification, restrictive gender roles, and assumptions of inferiority—which can appear without malicious intent—may emerge simply as a result of inexperience in covering women's sports.⁴⁸ Perhaps placing women who have had this experience due to a tendency to quote and advocate for female athletics would mitigate the microaggression culture. Oftentimes, sports broadcasters are retired athletes who have dealt first-hand with their own media portrayal that could give mean-

ingful recommendations from a reporter or managerial perspective. Additionally, hiring former athletes who defy the feminine standard of televised sports would not only offer a more representative portrayal of the female sporting community but also would break through society's conception of gender confines. The problem and solution are best bound together when it is explained that if "the voices of female sportswriters are muted, women's sports and female athletes lose their best advocate."⁴⁹ The lack of female sports journalists mutually reinforces the disparities in coverage and sexist language around women's athletics. Media organizations should fix the failing diversity and inclusion hiring grades by placing more women in professional roles of authority to end the cycle of offensive commentary and increase the coverage of women's sports while also growing the emerging female market.

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