



## Women's sport and media: a call to critical arms

David Rowe & Kelen Katia Prates Silva

**To cite this article:** David Rowe & Kelen Katia Prates Silva (2023) Women's sport and media: a call to critical arms, *Feminist Media Studies*, 23:2, 729-733, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2023.2201663](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2201663)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2201663>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 14 Apr 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 474



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



OPEN ACCESS



## Women's sport and media: a call to critical arms

David Rowe  and Kelen Katia Prates Silva 

Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University, Sydney, Australia

### ABSTRACT

After many years of struggle, women's sport is experiencing an upsurge around the world. This advance means, given the co-dependent relationship between sport and media, greater coverage of women's sport. These are positive developments regarding gender equality, especially given the socio-cultural power of the "media sports cultural complex." It is important, though, not to exaggerate the institutional success of women's sport and media that has begun from a low base and encounters continued resistance. Improvements are also globally uneven, being more evident among relatively affluent, culturally advantaged communities, especially in the West, with compounding intersectional disadvantage for women in poorer, racialized and religiously oppressive contexts. Where successes have been achieved, they should be subject to the same kind of critical scepticism applying to wider sport and media-related issues such as the environment, "sports-washing," sport diplomacy, capitalist exploitation, and challenges to sport's traditional binary gender order. This article, while noting an increase in feminist media research and scholarship applied to sport, argues that it is still under-represented in communication and media studies. It constitutes a call to this field for greater analytically reflexive attention to an area of popular culture that consumes enormous media space in a critical cultural-political moment.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 February 2023

Revised 12 April 2023

Accepted 6 April 2023

### KEYWORDS

Media sport; gender inequality; women; sportswashing; global culture

Observing that sport is traditionally an area dominated by men is banal. More incisively, it is a social institution and cultural form that has historically defined and celebrated masculinity and marginalised and denigrated femininity. As in other social institutions ranging from the legal system to the workplace, women have struggled to achieve equality in the domain of sport (Cheryl Cooky and Michael A. Messner 2018). They have long demanded the right to be allowed to play at all; gain equal access to public funding and space; receive comparable support from sponsors and advertisers, and equal pay, prize money and conditions; be promoted within sports organizations, including in senior executive, management and coaching roles (not least in women's sports); and, of particular importance to this journal, be accorded more and better media coverage and a more

**CONTACT** David Rowe  [d.rowe@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:d.rowe@westernsydney.edu.au)  Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University, Sydney, Australia

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

prominent role in its production within the sport media, including journalism, labour force (Susanna Hedenborg and Gertrud Pfister 2017).

The media as an institution is especially important to sport because the “media sports cultural complex” (David Rowe 2004) makes information and an entire system of signs surrounding it widely available. Without both media exposure and the money that it provides, sport would be constrained by physical and social space. The media, especially television, revolutionised sport by making the stories and sights of sport contests and sportspeople available across the globe. Starved of media attention, sportswomen would be consigned to the cultural margins—as, indeed, many have been irrespective of their athletic accomplishments.

After centuries of slow progress and some dispiriting reverses, there has been a sudden, rapid advance in women’s sport. It is no longer overly reliant on the Olympics for a temporary boost to media coverage of women in sport (albeit unevenly across the globe - Juana Salido-Fernández and Ana M. Muñoz-Muñoz 2021), only for it to recede between Games. As women’s sports leagues and tournaments have proliferated and expanded, so has the media visibility of women in sport. For example, a UK report found that women’s sports media viewership has grown by a factor of seven in the last decade (Women’s Sport Trust 2022). This statistic is especially ironic given the long-held, circular logic that women’s sport is not extensively covered because few people want to watch it, and that even women prefer to watch men’s sport (Sarah Leberman and Rachel Froggatt 2019).

In recent years there have been many cases of women’s sporting events being watched by huge co-present crowds and dispersed media audiences. For example, 86174 people attended the 2020 T20 World Cup final between Australia and India at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, while the global television and digital audience for the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup in France was estimated to be 1.475 billion. The value of the newly-established Women’s Premier League cricket in terms of franchises, sponsors, salaries and media rights exceeds US\$1 billion. It is important though not to reduce sport to a simple artefact of the media or to overemphasise the rate of progress from a low base while ignoring issues relating to the quality of media coverage of women’s sport, such as sexualization and identification with traditional gender roles (UNESCO 2021). But, as the sport and media fields are deeply entwined to the point of co-dependency, especially at the professional level, it is important that feminist media scholars engage constructively and critically with sport.

There has been a notable increase in articles focused on sport, especially women’s, in *Feminist Media Studies* and in other academic outlets. In 2022, for example, ten articles were principally concerned with sport culture and media in the seven so-far published issues of *FMS*. This commentary and criticism article encourages even more research and scholarship on a subject that is still generally under-represented in communication and media studies. Perhaps some feminist media scholars see sport as something of a lost cause, an irrevocably hyper-masculine pursuit. From such a perspective, even the growth of women’s sport and media coverage can be read as signifying women following men’s cultural agenda, measuring them according to criteria set *for* not *by* them. There is also good reason for suspicion that women’s sport is being cultivated only for its commercial potential because the male-oriented “mediasport” market is exhausted by overproduction, the inflated cost of rights, and diminishing returns (Paul Lee, Kevin Westcott, and

Suhas Raviprakash 2020). While such critically sceptical perspectives are necessary and valid, they tend to discount the deep investment of many women in sporting practice, organization, infrastructure (including crucial support in the domestic and voluntary spheres) and spectatorship (Justin Wolfers and Erin Riley 2018). As in other areas of popular culture, it is necessary to understand pleasure while practising critique, and to celebrate progressive change while being alive to its limitations.

With women's sport and media belatedly beginning to flourish, albeit still in the context of a pronounced asymmetry of gender power (Győző Molnár and Rachael Bullingham 2022), there will inevitably be greater critical scrutiny of this domain, including of the price and maldistribution of success. For example, much of the advancement has occurred among relatively affluent, culturally advantaged communities, especially in the West, with compounding intersectional disadvantage placing women in poorer, racialized and religiously oppressive contexts at the base of a steep hierarchy (Aarti Ratna and Samaya F. Samie 2018). Improvements in the condition of women's sport in some countries should not obscure the global unevenness of resources and opportunities.

To take the case of South America, a continent that receives far less attention than its northern neighbour, gender inequality in sport is pronounced. Nonetheless, as in other parts of the world there is growing awareness and criticism of it and a corresponding rise in the visibility of women's sport. In its largest country, Brazil, for example, this improvement is propelled by so-called alternative media rather than by the mainstream media (major newspapers, magazines, television networks, and news websites). Media coverage of women's sport continues to be largely limited to, and dominated by, mega-events like the Olympics. The quadrennial FIFA Women's World Cup also gets considerable media coverage, mainly because association football (soccer) is far and away Brazil's most popular sport. This temporary attention, though, does not extend to women's domestic football in a country where the construction of football history and memory is a potent means of reaffirming ascribed masculine characteristics such as strength, virility, and agility (Kelen Silva 2022). Authoritarian populist former president Jair Bolsonaro's use of the famous yellow Brazilian football shirt illustrates this symbolic resonance (Peliipe Tirado 2022).

However, alternative media, organised fan movements, and contributions by sport studies academics have all helped to make the individual and collective achievements of women in sport more conspicuous in Brazil's public sphere. Digital media have helped spread this counter-hegemonic discourse. "Dibradoras" (a play on the football term "dribblers"), a project created in 2015 by a group of Brazilian women with the goal of exposing gender inequalities in sport through digital content production, is one example of such feminist mobilization in the media (Cecilia Lima, Soraya Januário, and Daniel Leal 2022).

Initiatives like Dibradoras repudiate, as noted above in the UK context, the baseless claim that there is no public interest in women's sports news. The problem is a lack of news about women in sport. According to a survey conducted by Soraya Januário and Ana Veloso (2019) of four major Brazilian sports newspapers (*Globo Esporte*, *SporTV*, *ESPN*, and *UOL Esporte*), the 2014 FIFA Men's World Cup resulted in 1,175 news stories, while the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup produced only 69 in their respective sample periods. This gender gap was paralleled on broadcast television, the most widely available medium.

In 2015, only TV Brasil and TV Bandeirantes broadcast the FIFA Women's World Cup, the latter showing just the match between Brazil and Australia in the round of 16. TV Globo, the most popular free-to-air television network, belatedly broadcast the FIFA Women's World Cup for the first time in 2019 (Rodrigo Capello 2019). Increased coverage on free-to-air and subscription television networks has predictably increased interest in women's football and enhanced media access to other sports involving women.

There are many other subjects that can be addressed concerning sport, gender and media around the globe. These include the: influence of a capitalistic ethos on media sport consumption; environmental impact of staging global events that consume vast resources to build venues, transport players and spectators, and enable massive use of institutional and social media (Toby Miller 2018); enlistment of mediated sport spectacles as vehicles for various forms of "sportswashing" and sport diplomacy by nation-states and corporations; and the challenge posed to sport's institutionally ingrained binary gender order by the assertion of transgender rights. Feminist media studies research and scholarship can assist greatly in the task of understanding the social, cultural and political implications of both change in women's sport and resistance to it.

Sport's historically unequal gender order is not easily overturned, as was evident in the differential treatment of men and women in many sports during the COVID-19 pandemic (Madeleine Pape and Fiona McLachlan 2020). In 2023, for the first time the hosts of the FIFA Women's World Cup are Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. From the vantage point of Oceania, global, regional and national media treatments of a mega sport event unusually dedicated to women is a particularly compelling object of and for critical analysis. Any sport event, large or small, presents another conspicuous opportunity for feminist media studies to take to the field and help shape the outcomes.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

David Rowe  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5899-2653>

Kelen Katia Prates Silva  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7734-2194>

## References

- Capelo, Rodrigo. 2019. "Copa do Mundo Feminina Mais do que Dobra Audiência de Edição Anterior e Bate Recorde no Brasil." (blog). <https://ge.globo.com/blogs/blog-do-rodrigocapelo/post/2019/07/05/copa-do-mundo-feminina-mais-do-que-dobra-audiencia-de-edicao-anterior-e-bater-recorde-no-brasil.ghtml>
- Cooky, Cheryl, and Michael A. Messner. 2018. *No Slam Dunk: Gender, Sport and the Unevenness of Social Change*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Hedenborg, Susanna, and Pfister Gertrud, eds. 2017. *Gender, Media, Sport*. London: Routledge.
- Januário, Soraya Barreto, and Ana Veloso. 2019. "Gênero, Mídia e Futebol: A Cobertura Midiática Genderificada no Brasil." In *Elas e o Futebol*, edited by Cibele Lima and Luciano Brainer, 50–72. João Pessoa: Xeroca.

- Leberman, Sarah, and Rachel Froggatt. 2019. "Stop Saying No One Watches Women's Sport." *Stuff*, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/sport/115015055/stop-saying-no-one-watches-womens-sport>
- Lee, Paul, Kevin Westcott, and Suhas Raviprakash. 2020. "Women's Sports Gets Down to Business: On Track for Rising Monetization." *Deloitte Insights*. <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/technology/technology-media-and-telecom-predictions/2021/womens-sports-revenue.html>
- Lima, Cecília Almeida Rodrigues, Soraya Barreto Januário, and Daniel Felipe de Oliveira Leal. 2022. "'Dibrando' a Mídia Hegemônica: A Imprensa Alternativa na Propagação do Futebol de Mulheres." *Intercom: Revista Brasileira de Ciências da Comunicação* 45: e2022116. doi:10.1590/1809-58442022116en.
- Miller, Toby. 2018. *Greenwashing Sport*. London: Routledge.
- Molnár, Győző, and Rachael Bullingham, eds. 2022. *The Routledge Handbook of Gender Politics in Sport and Physical Activity*. London: Routledge.
- Pape, Madeleine, and Fiona McLachlan. 2020. "Gendering the Coronavirus Pandemic: Toward a Framework of Interdependence for Sport." *International Journal of Sport Communication* 13 (3): 391–398. doi:10.1123/ijsc.2020-0237.
- Ratna, Aarti, and Samaya F. Samie. 2018. *Race, Gender and Sport: The Politics of Ethnic "Other" Girls and Women*. London: Routledge.
- Rowe, David. 2004. *Sport, Culture and the Media: The Unruly Trinity*. second ed. Maidenhead, UK and New York: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill Education.
- Salido-Fernández, Juana, and Ana M. Muñoz-Muñoz. 2021. "Representación mediática de las deportistas en los Juegos Olímpicos: una revisión sistemática." *Apunts Educación Física y Deportes* 146: 32–41. doi:10.5672/apunts.2014-0983.es.(2021/4).146.04.
- Silva, Kelen Katia Prates. 2022. "Os Silêncios nas Camisas: Onde Estão as Mulheres na História do Futebol Brasileiro?" In *Diálogos Interseccionais*, edited by Ana Maria Colling and Paula Azevedo, 297–312. Porto Alegre: Cirkula.
- Tirado, Felipe. 2022. "Brazil's Iconic Football Shirt Was a Symbol of Bolsonaro – Here's How the World Cup is Changing That", *The Conversation*, December 1. <https://theconversation.com/brazils-iconic-football-shirt-was-a-symbol-of-bolsonaro-heres-how-the-world-cup-is-changing-that-195405>
- UNESCO. 2021. *Gender Equality in Sports Media*. <https://en.unesco.org/themes/gender-equality-sports-media>
- Wolfers, Justin, and Erin Riley, eds. 2018. *Balancing Acts: Women in Sport: Essays on Power, Performance, Bodies and Love*. Sydney: New South.
- Women's Sport Trust. 2022. "Women's Sport Trust Celebrates Tenth Anniversary." <https://www.womenssporttrust.com/womens-sport-trust-celebrates-tenth-anniversary/>