

Masculine cultures of sports journalism production: A case study of Irish sports journalists' approaches to gender equality in sports coverage

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Abstract

This paper examines sports journalists' understandings of the gendered aspects of producing sports content for Irish media. Using a small-scale qualitative study, with a purposive sample of 15 journalists, the paper explores whether journalists see the masculinist culture of sports news production as a key site of gender change. The findings note that respondents saw gender inequality in sports media as a historical legacy issue. Barriers to more equitable coverage were described in terms of practical challenges, available space and resources, legacy practices, knowledge-deficits and a dependence on individual advocates. Respondents did not name a masculinist culture of sports production as a key barrier to change. The mechanisms that sports journalists believed were needed to promote gender equality were located in factors that were extrinsic to the masculinist culture of the newsroom. Respondents flagged the importance of social media activism, women's sporting success and investment in infrastructure as relevant to change. They highlighted roles for NGBs, sources, sponsors, and male allies. Despite some adjustments to include more women the masculinist culture of sports journalism largely goes unquestioned and so women in sport remain the exception to the rule of sport journalism as inherently masculine.

Keywords

Gender inequality, masculinist culture, representation, sports journalism, visibility

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Introduction

The overlap of sports with gender and with journalism has proven problematic for women for decades (Bruce, 2016; Liston et al., 2024). The sports arena has long been dominated by male athletes and journalism too has been a male-dominated sector (Sheehan and Kitching, 2024). It is unsurprising then that the portrayal of women in sports media has been both quantitatively and qualitatively problematic. Women are generally under-represented and misrepresented, their sporting achievements are marginalised and their stories often go unreported (Ada-Lamerias and Rodríguez-Castro, 2021; GMMP, 2020). Despite some improvements in recent years (Liston and O' Connor, 2020), a fundamental gender disparity in sports journalism still persists.

While journalism makes claims to ideals of fairness, truth and objectivity (Muñoz-Torres, 2012), when considered through a gendered lens these claims become problematic because journalism upholds a masculinist culture (Hofstede, 1980). This culture in news production 'privileges issues, interests, and news values that are relevant to men' and which marginalize women's voices and experiences (Sui et al., 2022: 41). This masculine news culture is generated through organisational practices, through the norms or values that underpin sports content creation, which reflect traditionally masculine perspectives. In terms of organisational practices, sports news production privileges men through news room dynamics. As Ross & Carter note the newsroom itself, as well as journalists' socialization within it, is 'deeply gendered' (2011: 1149). Women are frequently absent from sports news production and design, as well as the technical and creative aspects of news making (Byerly, 2013). In addition newsrooms may lack policies that support women, such as parental leave or mechanisms for addressing gender equality (Byerly, 2018). These dynamics serve to push women out of the profession (O' Brien, 2014) thus furthering the masculine culture (Hanitzsch et al., 2019).

In terms of the norms and values that inform sports stories these also reflect traditionally masculine perspectives. The sports 'beat' is considered a masculine area of expertise and overwhelmingly written by male journalists (Sui et al., 2022: 45). Sports news sourcing practices see women less likely to be quoted as experts or subjects of stories (Shor et al., 2015) and almost silenced. These 'masculine' norms and values of journalistic practice 'masquerade as professional routines to which all journalists are expected to subscribe' (Ross and Carter, 2011: 1149). However the gendering of the sports news production culture generally remains invisible to the men who benefit from its gendering. As Ross & Carter observe 'men often simply don't see the newsroom as having a gendered or macho context' they fail to understand that 'they are the "culture", the newsroom is "theirs" and they guard the parameters from "outsiders"' (North, 2009). While some women are allowed in, they 'rarely gain access to the core, where power is experienced, wielded and often homosocially shared' (North, 2009: 214) and women rarely have an opportunity to challenge the masculinist culture of sports news production. This paper adopts this theoretical framing of the culture of sports news production as masculinist, and from that departure point aims to understand how journalists respond to the question of improving gender equality in sports news production, do they see that the

masculinist culture of sports news production needs to change or do they locate the locus of change for greater equality elsewhere?

Literature review

Research shows that women are still marginalised in sports media, but there have been some improvements in recent years. Various international sports bodies have created effective strategies to promote women's participation and visibility. The [International Olympic Committee \(2021\)](#) declared gender equality to be a top priority, with the aim of ensuring equal representation and opportunities for women. Subsequently, female athlete numbers grew to parity at Paris 2024 ([IOC, 2025](#)). Similarly, in the Irish context, Sport Ireland's 'Women in [Sport Policy](#)' (2019, 2023a) saw increased female participation and a narrowing gender gap. By 2023 The Irish Sports Monitor noted participation amongst women had reached an all-time high of 46% ([Sport Ireland, 2023b](#)). The state of women's sport in Ireland at the time of data collection in 2024 can be characterised as one of long overdue growth. The Irish soccer team participated in the FIFA Women's World Cup in 2023, a sporting mega-event with an increasingly prominent place in the global sporting landscape ([Beissel et al., 2023](#)). National games such as Ladies Gaelic Football (LGF) and Camogie regularly see final match attendance of over 30,000. LGF is one of the fastest growing female sports in Europe, with almost 200,000 members ([LGFA, 2025](#)), while Camogie has over 100,000 players ([Oireachtas, 2021](#)). Women track and field athletes and Irish women boxers are household names.

These changes in women's participation in sport have been mirrored since the late 2010s by increased attention for women's representation in sports media ([Antunovic and Cooky, 2025](#)). The European Broadcasting Union Handbook 'Reimagining Sport' focused on increasing the 'volume and continued presence of women's sports coverage on our screens and airwaves' and advocated for bias-free portrayals ([Arapi, 2021: 4](#)). Changes to the context in which Irish journalists operate with regard to women and sport were underscored by the 20 × 20 initiative. In 2018 the Federation of Irish Sport, working with creative marketing agency, Along Came A Spider, secured commitment from sixty-five National Governing Bodies and Local Sports Partnerships over a 2 year period to support a 'powerful social and moral message' promoting women in sport ([Liston and O' Connor, 2020: 145](#)). The campaign raised awareness of bias and committed NGBs and LSPs to a '20% targeted increase in one or more of the three action areas-media coverage of women's sport, participation levels and live attendance figures' ([Liston and O' Connor, 2020: 145](#)). Media partners included national public sector broadcasters RTÉ Sport and TG4, commercial radio programme 'Off the Ball' on Newstalk and online outlets SportsJOE and her.ie, each of these committed to increase their coverage of women by 20% before 2020 ([Liston and O' Connor, 2020: 146](#)). Commercial sponsors were key to the success of the campaign. While benchmark data had indicated that only 3% of print and 4% of online coverage was dedicated to women's sport, by 2020 a Behaviour and Attitudes survey found that 80% of Irish adults and 84% of Irish men – said that they were more aware of women's sport than before the initiative launched ([FIS, 2020](#)). In terms of media impacts, there was an overall increase of '2% in coverage, 5% for online and 6% for

print... Audiences for women's sport on TV grew from 7% in 2018 to 18% in 2019' (FIS, 2020).

Despite the immense efforts of 20 × 20 and the gains made, Rojas-Torrijos and Romon subsequently showed that female athletes in Ireland received less than 9% of coverage on RTE's twitter account (2021: 233). This persistent under-representation is not unique to Ireland. UNESCO (2018) established that while 40% of all sports participants internationally are women, their sports receive only 4% of all media coverage. Cooky et al. (2021) reveal little change in the quantitative apportionment of television coverage by gender over the past 30 years. Patterns of marginalization, trivialization, ambivalence, stereotyping, gender-marking and sexualization of sports women (Bruce, 2016) still endure in various ways and have become embedded in the process of sports content production. Dashper (2018) noted ongoing processes of 'gender-marking' where in-depth analysis creates buzz around male competition, but the same efforts are not applied to women's competitions. Romeny and Johnson note women are still stereotyped, shown as more likely 'to appear alongside a male and more likely be shown in culturally "appropriate" sports and in nonathletic roles' (2020: 738). Descriptors of femininity, sexuality, emotions and appearance are often used to describe female athletes (Smith, 2016: 284). Frequently, sportswomen's appearance is emphasised over their skill (Heffernan and Taylor, 2024) an issue that arose again in the 2024 Paris Olympics (Le Monde, 2024; The Guardian, 2024).

While research has established a gender bias in media sports coverage, there has been less research on journalists' attitudes towards sportswomen in media. Organista et al. (2021: 372) noted the opinions of male and female Polish sports journalists regarding the 'inferior status of women's sports and women's sports coverage, a negation of need to realign the inequitable coverage of women's sports and the perception that sports are a neutral institution with respect to gender'. The investigated female sports journalists, who hold minority status in the occupation, presented more negative views than their male peers, which Organista et al. attributed to their lower status and their socialisation in the profession by men (2021: 373). In a subsequent study of sports editors-in-chief in Polish media Organista and Mazur (2022: 126) found that the superiority of men's sport was again a given and 'editors did not feel obliged to promote women's sport'. In a similar vein, the Swiss context mirrored Poland's horizontal gender segregation of journalists. Schoch noted a greater number of male journalists 'cover the most prestigious subjects and produce greater numbers of technical match reports', or what are considered to be the 'hardest' news stories (2022: 746). Women are restricted to covering less prestigious and women's sports, or 'soft' stories (Schoch, 2022: 746). Subsequently Guyot et al. (2024) found that journalists were a hindrance to gender equality or specifically the recognition of female footballers in Switzerland. In the Irish context Liston et al. (2024: 869) observe transformational institutional change around gender equality during the 20 × 20 initiative but also a reversion to practices reducing equality, such as the number of television sports programmes presented by the same female presenters increasing, alongside a reduction in the overall number of female experts in front of the camera, they ultimately confirm the ongoing institutionalisation of sexism in sport.

In these various ways the literature points to the ongoing and fundamental relevance of what has been theorised as a masculinist culture of news production (North, 2009). This paper adopts that theoretical framing in order to explore how Irish journalists respond to the challenge of improving gender equality in sports news production, examining whether or not they see the masculinist culture of sports news production as key to change or whether they locate the sources of change for greater equality elsewhere? To that end the article explores three sub questions; firstly, how do journalists account for how sports content is currently produced in gendered ways, secondly, what do they see as the barriers to more gender-equitable coverage and thirdly, what do sports journalists believe needs to happen for gender equality to be facilitated. The findings are outlined in detail below following an account of the methodology used.

Methodology

The research adopted a qualitative case study approach in order to 'explore and understand the meaning' that sports journalists ascribe to gender equality within their work (Creswell, 2014: 4). The methodology allowed for data to be gathered across a bounded number of cases and in-depth analysis of that data helped to identify the key factors that characterise gendered perceptions amongst sports journalists. Semi structured interviews were the methodological tool used to generate data (Tuckman, 2000) and were conducted with a purposive sample of 15 professional sports journalists in late Spring and early summer of 2024, just ahead of the Paris Olympics. The gender breakdown of respondents was 11 male and 4 female, all participants were white. Five respondents worked in television, six in print and four in online outlets. A few held tenure as freelancers but the majority were permanent staff. In terms of their roles, nine worked as journalists or reporters, two in editorial and four in senior decision making roles. None of the respondents were early career, five were mid-career and eight were advanced-career. Ethical approval was received from the author's university and informed consent was obtained from participants. Each interview was conducted during a single session, lasting from 1–1.5 hours. Questions addressed visibility, gender inequality and barriers to increased sports coverage for women. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and anonymised through letter codes. Any potential identifying information was removed such as workplaces or reference to specific outputs.

A thematic approach was adopted for analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013) each interview transcript was coded by the author for initial repetitions of concepts. Once all interviews were initially coded the author reviewed the transcripts to look for repetitions across transcripts. Once those repetitions were identified the author used these as a basis to establish patterns in the data. Each pattern was examined for how it related to the key theoretical concerns of identifying journalists' perceptions of: gender inequality; barriers to improvements; and potential solutions. The author reviewed and refined themes, merging some and removing extraneous codes or material that did not relate strongly to the key theoretical issues of the masculinist culture of production the newsroom. For example, codes relating to historical legacy issues and unconscious bias were merged under the shared heading of explaining gender inequality. Material that was removed

included references to the role of the audience in sports journalism as this was outside of the scope of a study of production cultures. Each theme was considered in relation to the literature and its unique contribution outlined. The process of analysis was concluded once the key themes relating to the concepts were established with attendant subthemes. The findings are outlined in detail in each of the three sections below. However, the relatively small scale of the study means that findings are not necessarily generalisable, but nonetheless they offer insights into real lived experience and the views of sports journalists on the challenges of creating greater gender equality in sports content.

Findings

The findings outlined below describe four key themes. Firstly, respondents' insights on how gender inequality is generated in women's sport are described. Secondly, the findings outline how sports journalists perceive barriers to greater equality in women's representation. Thirdly, the findings note how respondents perceived initiatives for change in recent years. Fourthly the findings observe the ongoing obstacles to greater equality, this last finding is described through three sub-themes, relationships with NGOs, the role of sponsors and support from male allies.

Explaining gender inequality

Respondents accounted for gender inequality in sports content by referencing factors that were largely external to the masculinist culture of sports journalism. They proposed that inequality was created in part through a societal unconscious bias against women but also through a protracted history of women's sport not being valued socially, whereby women's participation was limited, which in turn marginalised their place in media content. They proposed that this history set in train patterns of inequality in media representation that have created a deep-rooted legacy that impacts still today. As one respondent explained 'Women's sports generally would have been underfunded, under-supported and... there really weren't huge opportunities to play at an elite level' (B). They argued that because of the dearth of women playing and the lack of public interest in women's sport, women did not get the same sports facilities. The 'Sporting infrastructure both globally and locally was designed by men for men to be enjoyed by men principally' (L). This deficit in facilities also had a direct and negative impact on journalists' coverage of women's sport.

From a TV point of view, it was just so difficult to make it visually interesting when you're shooting a game and you're looking at players of outstanding fitness and quality, and in the background there's a few sheep in shot and not even a full stand of supporters (G).

As a result of history favouring male sports, the media audience 'is still skewed towards male because it always has been' (L). Journalists framed the media's under-representation of sportswomen as caused by a historic lack of infrastructure and interest in women's sport on the part of Irish society.

Although respondents saw the roots of the problem in Irish societies past, they also understood that inequality continued because of gender bias. However, they did not locate the bias in structures and cultures of male privilege rather they saw it as simply 'unconscious'.

I think the thing with bias - a lot of it is unconscious and that's the problem. It's not that people are outright saying "Sure, why would we cover the women?". Nobody thinks like that... it's actually more that it just goes completely unnoticed.... (N).

This privilege of failing to even notice the exclusion of women is direct evidence of a masculinist culture of gatekeeping, where men simply 'own' sports journalism and output. However this invisible gendered practice of gatekeeping is not overtly acknowledged, rather the masculinist culture is presented as simply accidental or normative. A respondent noted that coverage of sports women 'still depends on whoever's working that day and whether or not they have an appetite to cover women's sports... and there's no policy or strategy around how these sports are covered... it's not systemic' (O). What respondents were pointing to here was a clear understanding that gender inequality is a significant, complex and ongoing problem for contemporary sports journalism. However, this acknowledgement did not stretch to them seeing the cause of inequality as lying within the masculinist culture of sports journalism itself. If the 'system' was seen to be at fault this was accounted for as a historic legacy or simply a normative fact, the role of masculine privilege within journalism went unnamed as a key cause of inequality in sports content.

Barriers to improvement

Respondents saw the key challenges to increasing representation of sportswomen in terms of a constellation of practical constraints such as available space and resources, overcoming ongoing legacy practices, a knowledge-deficit amongst journalists, and a dependence on individuals to 'favour' women's sports rather than having systemic policies in place. Here again respondents did not 'own' any larger problem with the masculinist culture of sports production, the problem of women's disappearance is one of practical challenges rather than a sexist ideological orientation. A key constraint named by many respondents, particularly those working in print, was that there was not enough space or resources to cover everything they wished to cover. 'By the time publications complete their absolutely essential obligations, covering the big stories, posting social media content, planning, having meetings, "unessential" content, which isn't expected to hit big numbers, is forgotten about' (M). Here the gendered ownership of sport as a topic is signalled, the assumption is that covering male sport is the 'essential.. big story' and women are relegated to unessential content, thereby ensuring that masculine privilege remains unchallenged.

Another respondent explained the lack of space or resources allocated in terms of a commercial impetus to capture attention. As one respondent explained 'Editors will always gravitate towards what they think will get the most eyeballs, the most

interaction' (H). However this rationale was somewhat illogical as another respondent noted, women make most household consumption decisions 'Advertisers should invest in women and they'll make an absolute fortune' (O). But women's sport was not seen to garner large-scale attention, as an editor said 'In that scenario the preliminary rounds of the Women's Football or Camogie Championships, they just don't rate and it's as bald as that actually' (H). He argued women's sport didn't 'rate' because of the absence of crowds at events, as he said 'The crowds would be small, so that's hard to justify as a national media outlet...' (H). And yet, interestingly the editor also noted a discrepancy between this commercial logic of large crowds 'owning' space for coverage and news outlets' willingness to cover a low-crowded sport such as horseracing. He explained the logic of this contradiction in terms of a 'total fear of alienating or losing readership' (H) it seems readership was equated exclusively with men. This points directly to how norms of male interest in sports journalism, such as horseracing are protected, even if there is no crowd or commercial imperative attached but this logic is not applied to women's sport, if no crowd is attached it is not represented. Interestingly, the gendered nature of this double standard is rendered invisible, which again highlights how men simply don't see the newsroom as having a 'macho' context and how they fail to see the ways in which they guard against access by outsiders (North, 2009).

Many respondents described how resources were more limited now than in the past. 'Traditional media is shrinking... If we were living now with the media workforce of 15 years ago, I think women's sport would have a better chance of getting more coverage because there would have been more resources' (D). Resources were allocated carefully 'We have quite a small team, in an independently run media company so we allocate resources strategically because it's impossible for us to cover every sporting event' (B). Here the implication was that women's events were the ones that were 'impossible' to cover, but yet again the gendered privilege that presented masculine narratives as dominant and the gendered power that gets to decide what was or was not 'possible' went unnoticed and unstated.

However, some respondents offered an apparently opposing view, that they were allocating a greater proportion of their resources to covering women's sport, particularly the Irish soccer team. As one respondent noted 'Ireland v England in the Aviva, we would have had two reporters there... historically, we've never sent a reporter. We invest more now than we would have' (B). And similarly 'We invest quite a lot... we would have had two journalists at the World Cup in Australia last summer' (E). In short, while the overall media resource package may have shrunk, respondents argued that women were getting a greater proportion of those resources, but this increase was from such a low base that the improvement seemed larger than it was in absolute terms. This continuing low base points to the maintenance rather than disruption of the masculine news values, women are included but not so far as to completely disrupt the norms or culture of production.

A further challenge to the production of women's sports stories noted by respondents was a knowledge gap amongst journalists regarding women's sports. As one respondent said

They might be very across the men's hurling but they're not confident in their knowledge when it comes to camogie. They might feel bad saying "I'm really sorry but I haven't seen you play, I don't know anything about you". It's that knowledge gap, which again comes from lack of coverage. But that's chicken and egg because if you don't send them to cover camogie matches, then they're never going to know who the players are (A).

However, there was also a sense that journalists could get up to speed quickly when required. As one editor noted

One of our journalists now does the women's soccer team. And you can see how much more into women's soccer he's got as a result. And so he's watching the WSL games in the States to try and get more involved and more of an in depth knowledge (A).

However this willingness to 'get up to speed' was generally left to individual journalists' discretion rather than being part of a current policy or strategy oriented towards improving gender equality in reporting. The culture of masculinist news production remains dominant with women as additional rather than core to sports reporting. In sum, respondents saw the barriers to gender equality as located in issues that were presented as outside of journalism's core business, women were minoritized because of legacy practices, and knowledge deficits and inadequate resources, but at no point did respondents point to the over-representation of men and their privilege within gendered cultures of sports production as the key causes of women's exclusion. In a similar way when asked how equality could be achieved suggestions spoke to factors extrinsic rather than intrinsic to the masculine culture of sports journalism.

Initiatives for greater equality

Respondents noted that some changes towards greater equality in sports journalism content began in the last decade. Change was due in part to changes within media but also due to factors that were external to the media, such as societal pressures in the form of social media activist campaigns. As one respondent explained

There was quite a large push seven or eight years ago, mostly driven by... people with large followings on social media, trying to flag the problem that women's sport really wasn't getting anywhere near the prominence it deserved, so from that there was the start of a conversation (B).

This was further underpinned by the successes of teams and sportswomen, which again were events that were external to the culture of sports journalism. As one respondent put it

International women's soccer, in media terms, is a huge success story. Their matches are all televised. They have a commercial sponsor and their main players, the Katie McCabes of this world are probably as well recognised as anybody on the men's team.... international women's soccer in this country is the poster girl for equality (K).

Team successes led to further practical changes in the levels of investment in women's sports and in access to facilities that were previously the domain only of men's teams. While these were also factors external to the gendered culture of journalism they did make quality media representation easier. As one respondent put it 'Success breeds success and investment in competitions, so that they are played in proper, decent, stadiums and look well and you've got big crowds, it becomes a kind of a virtuous circle then...' (K).

Respondents were clear however that some changes had also arisen from overt strategy and ongoing efforts within some media organisations to create change. Numerous respondents referenced interventions by public service outlet Radio Telefís Éireann's (RTÉ) sports journalists and the work of the then Deputy Head of Sport specifically. 'I think RTÉ definitely moved the dial, but with huge, huge effort, from Cliona O' Leary, a constant effort' (C). However this effort towards gender change from the 'inside' was also backed by 'external' sponsors and the involvement of corporates 'There was an organic kind of movement on social media and some brands got behind that' (D). Those initiatives culminated in a broad campaign for change

There was a campaign, "20x20", to really address this and try to drive change. AIG sponsored it and they were specifically focusing on trying to increase the number of females and the volume of coverage (by 20% before 2020) that women sports got (B).

The impact of the campaign was described by one respondent in terms of the focus it brought. 'Certainly within our team it brought a really clear focus, it was definitely to the forefront of people's minds and... we were very proud of our commitment to meaningful, interesting and insightful coverage of women in sports' (E).

While the impact of those endeavours was positive, respondents were clear that the hard-fought gains could easily be lost. As one respondent put it

I think 20x20 was brilliant because it did make all those young girls say "No, we are as good and we do train as hard and we can do brilliant things, so you should be supporting us". I think it did have an effect there, but I don't think it had a lasting effect in media (M).

Another respondent confirmed this sense of the precarity of the changes delivered.

A year after 20x20. I was like, "Oh, why do we bother?" ...I just saw the women's team sport coverage shrinking back again... you turn on the radio and you just hear the lads again. I was kind of a bit depressed at the end of 20x20 because I saw everything dropping back down again. Soccer is the only thing that's gone the other way (C).

That respondent concluded that the bid for gender equality in sports media coverage was 'a constant... battle' (C). What this 'battle' points to is the failure to achieve change at the level of the masculinist culture of sports journalism. While women can be included, following concerted efforts to gain access, the sector as a whole fails to see the extent to which men remain the cultural norm, sports journalism remains theirs, and while women as outsiders are allowed in to some extent, they do not achieve change at the core, they do

not get to entirely redefine the norm of what sports journalism means, that power remains homosocially owned within the masculinist culture of production.

Ongoing obstacles

In order to better contribute to the 'battle' to achieve and secure change in the long term, respondents were asked what they thought were the ongoing obstacles to improving the quantity and quality of media coverage of women's sports. Here again the locus of change was identified as lying outside of the masculine culture of sports journalism. Several respondents proposed that improvements could be made through increased interaction with National Governing Bodies for sport, with sponsors, and through male allyship. What is interesting however is the limited scope of the sense of the scale of change that is needed. Respondents were willing to tweak relationships with NGBs, sources, sponsors, and were even willing to advocate for change but there was no sense from respondents that the entire approach to the culture of sports journalism was gendered and that it needed to change, instead they proposed smaller-scale and externally oriented interventions.

National Governing Bodies have a role to play. Respondents were clear that some sports organisations have made very positive contributions to how women's sport is covered by journalists because NGBs have been very focused on gender balance in their approaches to media. They saw evidence of this in the NGBs webpages 'Some organisations have given their women the same sort of amplification and exposure as they give their male teams...' (C). Many respondents spoke of the benefit to them of NGBs supplying content on women's sports. As one journalist described 'One of the best things they do is they pay freelance journalists to write content for them...' (A). However, respondents did also propose that some organisations needed to improve, that for women's sport there was 'a bit of a vacuum there where it's hard to get information...' (N). The respondent recommended that NGBs create access to that information '...a database that allows you to go to the calendar.... I want to promote them, but trying to chase information about when matches are on and whatever is deeply frustrating' (N). The cost of not making information easily accessible was a disincentive for journalists to cover women's sport 'For journalists, if you don't make it easy for them, they won't bother.... most journalists, are overworked because they're doing too much other stuff' (N). While this request is valid it does still put the onus on external change rather than changes to the culture of sports journalism itself.

Respondents also recommended not duplicating some of the challenges that media producers faced when engaging with men's sports. 'Sports journalism has become very, very difficult in men's sports, controlled access, excessive media training... at the press conferences, I think if I guessed what they were going to say and wrote it down, I would probably be about 80% right...' (D). The approach of team managers to media access was a particular focus. One respondent identified it as a barrier to greater access to sportswomen and in turn to a broader public interest in women's sport. As they observed

I don't understand a lot of managers' attitudes to the media. It's nonsensical. It's very unprofessional. They think, "Oh, we'll keep them away from the media because, you know, it might distract our players..." But women need more promotion, not less. We need to get them out there. We need people to identify with them and young people to get to know their personalities and all the rest. (C).

Throughout their commentary on NGBs as sources for better coverage of women's sport it is clear that the emphasis was on NGBs changing their approach rather than journalists fundamentally acknowledging the masculinist nature of their own approaches and articulating the need for change at that level. Similarly, respondents also argued for better aligning sponsors with the agenda of gender equality in sports journalism.

Sponsors have a role to play. Respondents believed that gender equality in sport matters to sponsors. As they put it 'That philanthropic element to big business, they have to appeal to their female audience... and sport is an area they can use' (C). Many respondents argued that women's sport should be particularly attractive to sponsors because of the relatively lower cost of entry for sponsors. As one respondent commented 'You can't get cheaper.... it was very easy to get into women's sponsorship... and you can grow it. So I think that's one of the areas that again needs to be pushed by NGBs and I think some NGBs are good at this' (C). Many respondents saw that sponsors could have a role intervening to improve the coverage of women's sport. As one observed

Sponsors like Lidl with Ladies Gaelic football have transformed that sport through their marketing smarts because a lot of Irish sport is still amateur run... if you bring the marketing power of a Lidl or an Aldi or a Dunnes Stores or a Vodafone to the table, then you're really putting this sport brand onto a different platform as regards the general public's accessibility (C).

Sponsors were understood to have brought changes to public perceptions of women's sport that were consequently seen as sponsorable.

The business side of it has been a catalyst for change in terms of how it is seen. So you know when Guinness sponsored the Six Nations, they didn't necessarily choose to add on the women's Six Nations. Now they do and it's difficult to conceive that they would choose not to do the women's side of it because of the questions that will be asked of them publicly. The women's product is viable and valuable enough so that it will be able to stand alone (L).

Moreover the campaigns promoted by sponsors were understood to have changed public attitudes to women's sport.

They've totally changed how they promote their product to women. It's not about how you look anymore, it's what your body can do and how powerful and how strong and how fit you are and how healthy you are and how you pass it on to your kids. And we've seen that in multiple ads where, even before the World Cup, girls were featuring in soccer ads, you know, not little boys, they changed it. So that is an area I think that's still to be harnessed (C).

Respondents proposed that there could be an expanded role for sponsors in directly improving media content about women's sport. 'Short-term PR attempts to enhance company reputations fall well short of assuring committed, detailed and genuine coverage - the kind able to dissolve cultural biases towards women's sport' (M). The model of the LGFA providing content was seen as a more impactful initiative that sponsors could take on. 'Pay freelancers to cover the games.... So if you want to get branding out there, this is how you go about it' (C). Clearly respondents were quick to identify sponsors as a potential source of gender change, indeed they offered evidence of where this change had occurred, but again this framing of change was located in forces external to sports journalism rather than locating the need for change in their own masculinist culture of production.

Male allies are needed. Respondents were very clear that improving gender balance in coverage of women's sports was not a task that should be left to women only. As one respondent put it

The only way the women get there is by men giving them a hand up, I only got to where I am because I had some really good men as bosses and during my career, who... started giving me shifts, gave me a job and opportunity. So there's a lot of onus on men to step up... there's only so much women can do (A).

Some respondents explained male allyship as influenced by their personal relationships 'They may have daughters and suddenly they've got more into it that way' (I) or 'I was involved in my personal life in women's sport, So I've been doing more than would normally be done' (D) and 'the fathers of daughters... from a just a purely human level that's probably going to be the beachhead of where this comes from' (L). Arguably however the allyship needs to expand beyond men's relationship to specific women to a broader buy-in as simply a cause of equality, fairness and the promotion of sport for all people. Many male respondents also identified as allies to gender equality 'I mean, look, it's really important to me' (F) and 'It's very close to my heart' (L). Some were allies in ways that were very practical as one respondent described

Last week... the two Ireland teams were playing... and we had somebody at both... due to the fact that one of our soccer writers is really into the women's soccer... out of the team of 20 people there might be four or five who are particularly interested in the women's side of things and they're pushing it to get it onto the pages or the site, you know that's going to help ... They just want to be fair, they're forward thinking (I).

As outlined above, respondents in general identified factors extrinsic to the masculinist news production culture, such as actions by NGBs, sponsors and individual allies, as key to improving coverage for women's sport. Only a minority saw change within their own intrinsically gendered practices of sports journalism as key to addressing inequality.

Something of an exception to this pattern were the female respondents who each individually identified ways in which they were intervening to improve women's

coverage. One insisted on covering matches ‘I argue... and say I want to cover something’ (A). Another approached an online outlet to improve the number of women athletes in their output and started a project with them ‘to get female voices’ (C). Two further female respondents adopted a ‘what would we do for the men rule’ and then did exactly the same for women in their reporting. In addition a small number of the male respondents adopted an intrinsic responsibility for assigning journalists to women’s team games. Unfortunately while the majority of male respondents were keen to support external initiatives by NGBs, sponsors or even the 20 × 20 initiative, they did not generally acknowledge or look to the gendered and masculinist culture of sports journalism as a key site of change for greater equality in gendered representation.

Conclusion

Journalists respond to the question of improving gender equality in sports news production, not by acknowledging the need for change within the masculinist culture of sports news production but rather by locating sources change in external factors. In terms of how journalists account for gendered sports content, respondents saw this as a legacy issue arising from Ireland’s past failures to value women’s sport or provide infrastructure, and in an unconscious bias derived from that past. In terms of what respondents saw as the barriers to more equitable coverage they named a constellation of practical challenges - available space and resources, legacy practices, knowledge-deficits and a dependence on individual advocates. Respondents did not name a masculinist culture of sports production as a key barrier. The mechanisms that sports journalists believed were needed to promote gender equality were located in factors that were extrinsic to the masculinist culture of the newsroom. Respondents flagged the importance of social media activism, women’s sporting success and investment in infrastructure as relevant to change. They further highlighted roles for NGBs, sources, sponsors, and a role for male allies. However, respondents did not propose that the entire masculinist culture of sports journalism needed to change. They do not see that the gendering of sports journalism itself is a key problem or needs to change. Despite some adjustments to include more women the masculinist culture of sports journalism largely goes unquestioned, women in sport remain the exception to the rule of sport journalism as inherently masculine.

Despite a failure to locate change within a masculinist culture of production, it is nonetheless heartening that there was a strong and positive response from the sports journalists interviewed to engaging with the issue of gender and the idea of a change project. They offered a range of proposals to tackle the challenge and there was evidence of a very strong sense of willingness on their part to engage with sports organisations, sponsors and society more generally to bring about change. The lack of focus on the culture of media production itself points to the need for greater critical reflection on media production cultures. Such a project is important for sports media, for women’s sport but also for more generally for the social equality of women in society. The inequality that women experience in sports media goes beyond just the stories that get told, or not told. The disparity also shapes the culture of sport itself, determining who is seen or not seen, who is defined as a legitimate sportsperson, who’s career gets to progress and who is feted

for their achievements – or not. The erasure of women from sports journalism undermines not only sports women but all women and their value in society. This paper offers a call to critical arms and echoes the need for continued research in this vein. Changes to women's representation in sports journalism matters because women should have equal and fair access to media representation and because women in sport matter, not just for sport in and of itself but for culture and social equality more broadly.

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