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THE INVISIBLE WOMAN?

A comparative study of women's sports coverage in the UK national press before and after the 2012 Olympic Games

Deirdre O'Neill and Matt Mulready

While the coverage of women's sport in UK media rises to comparable levels to that of men's sports during big sporting events like the Olympics, academics agree that "routine" women's sports coverage is under-represented. According to the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation, "81% of people think that the female athletes at London 2012 make better role models for young girls than other celebrities." This article examines the representation of women in sport and compares routine coverage of women's sports in the UK national press across a week in February 2012, six months before the London Olympics, with coverage in a week in February 2013, six months after the Olympics, to see if there has been an Olympic "legacy" that increased coverage. It also examines coverage at the same time of year a decade earlier, to see how far, if at all, women's sports coverage in newspapers has progressed. The results suggest that there has been minimal change in everyday coverage of women's sports after the Olympics, and that female athletes continue to be hugely under-represented in the UK press.

KEYWORDS coverage; equality; gender; journalism; newspapers; Olympics; representation; sportswomen;

Introduction

London's successful staging of the 2012 Olympics demonstrated that there was a real appetite amongst the public for women's sports. In the wake of the Games, the (then) Culture and Equalities Minister Maria Miller wrote to broadcasters to congratulate them on their coverage, but asked that they give more prominence to women's sports coverage (Wright, Independent, September 15, 2012). Under the headline "Keep the spotlight on girls in sport" (Sun, September 16, 2012), Clare Balding called for "equal coverage for women in press and on telly". The sports presenter wrote, "At the moment, women's sport doesn't get the coverage, so it doesn't get commercial support, so it can't gain an audience." Less than a year before the London Olympics, the Commission on the Future of Women's Sport produced a report showing that sponsorship of women's elite sport in the UK amounted to just 0.5% of the total market between January 2010 and August 2011 (Gibson, Guardian, November 5, 2011).

In 2006 the Women's Sports and Fitness Foundation (WSFF) found that women's sport received just 5% of coverage (see WSFF website and Peacock, Daily Telegraph, October 24, 2012). The Foundation called for increased media coverage that reflects the growing demand for women's sport. Eight years on, this study seeks to find out whether female sport is now better represented. Much has changed since then. Many sportswomen and women's teams are highly successful, even in sports traditionally dominated by men. In

women's rugby, England won an impressive seven successive Six Nations crowns (between 2006-2012). The national women's cricket team won the 2009 World Cup; England's women's football team has qualified for the FIFA Women's World Cup three times, reaching the quarter final stage on each occasion (1995, 2007 and 2011). And most significantly, London has hosted the 2012 London Olympics, where female Olympians won 11 gold medals. Why would the public not welcome these female sporting achievements being given a high profile?

The Olympic legacy has been high on the UK government's agenda (BBC, August 12, 2012). Besides economic regeneration, part of this legacy, according to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport's website, should be that the public are inspired to participate in sport and adopt a healthier lifestyle. And given the UK's celebrity-saturated and sexualised culture, young women arguably need positive role models more than ever.

The 2006 WSFF report looked at a range of media, both broadcasting and print. However, since media is not entirely homogeneous, this study focusses on newspapers, and asks to what extent is women's sport marginalised in the UK national press, where the sports pages, at least on the face of it, appear to present a football-saturated "boyzone"? Has much changed since the 2012 home Olympics? And, using semi-structured interviews with journalists and media personalities, the study considers the underlying reasons why women's sport tends to be undervalued. Are there more complex reasons than simple blind prejudice and sexism?

Literature review

Certainly a great deal of academic literature supports the notion that women's sport is marginalised in the media. Scraton and Flintoff (2002), Gilbert (2005), Raney and Bryant (2006), and Boyle and Haynes (2009) agree that female sport and its participants are under-represented. Brookes (2002, 128) claims that in general terms, studies on gendered sports coverage shows that everyday coverage of women's sport amounts to less than 10 per cent of total coverage, though he notes that this moves nearer to equal coverage when big events like the Olympic Games are covered. "But in a way the extra attention on such occasions as the Olympic Games only serves to reinforce the message." (*ibid*). A more recent study of UK Sunday newspapers suggests that Brookes's figure of less than 10% is wildly optimistic: data from five Sunday papers over a two-year period averaged just 3.6% for routine coverage of women's sports (Godoy-Pressland, 2014). Furthermore, when female sport is covered by the media, female participation may be sexualised or trivialised (Choi, 2000; Brookes, 2002; Aitchison, 2007; and Magee *et al*, 2008).

Women make up half the population, so in terms of equality it seems curious to be downplaying the achievements of so many, while denying audiences the pleasure of what could be, if the Olympics can serve as any benchmark, great sporting performances. Second, female sports coverage provides strong role models for girls. This is particularly important when considering the wider social factors that Whannel (2008, 84-85) points out can act as barriers to female participation in sport: notions of femininity linked to passiveness; the myth of feminine frailty; an education system that treats boys and girls differently; sporting facilities often designed without consideration of female participants; fewer women involved in sports organisations - and consequently less involved in policy making; and women usually having the greatest burden when it comes to childcare, meaning they have less spare time for leisure and sports pursuits.

With the rise of childhood obesity, it can be argued that all children – whatever their gender – should be encouraged to adopt a love of healthy sporting activity they can take into adulthood. Research by the University of California has found that teenage obesity has more impact on increased blood pressure in girls than boys (BBC, October 14, 2011). Taking up an activity proves more difficult for girls if they are not exposed to female role models. According to the WSFF, there is a crisis in women's sport (see website for 2011/12 Annual Review, March 31, 2012); 80% of women are not active enough to remain healthy; girls leave school half as active as young men; there are too few women in senior positions on sports' governing bodies, and the potential of top sportswomen as inspiring role models is not being harnessed.

Writing about the 2008 Beijing Olympics, *Guardian* journalist Kira Cochrane noted the vital role of the Olympics for women and pondered whether those Olympics would lead to a general increase in women's sports: "Olympic events have always been important to female spectators, partly because we see so little women's sports the rest of the time." (*Guardian*, August 12, 2008). Daily Mail sports reporter Martha Kelner believes "a lot of young teenage girls drop out of sport because of peer pressure; it is seen as uncool and unfeminine to do sport. The media have a part to play, in that they value male sporting achievements more than female." (Interview by email, April 30, 2013). This view is shared by the WSFF (Peacock, Daily Telegraph, October 24, 2012). "Currently we have a.....prevailing culture where girls grow up wanting to be thin rather than active and healthy."

Brookes (2002, 128-130) identifies a series of issues arising from existing literature about media coverage of men's and women's sport: stereotypical assumptions are made about what is "male-appropriate" and "female-appropriate" (Brookes, 2002, 128). For example, women's rugby is likely to get less coverage than gymnastics. Women's sports may be marked as "other", as in Messner, Duncan and Jensen's 1993 study of TV coverage of basketball: the sport was referred to as "basketball" when played by men but as "women's basketball" when played by women, marking out women's sports as unusual (in Brookes, 2002, 129). Sportswomen may be sexualised or infantilised, often labelled as "girls" or called by their first names, or their achievements trivialised (*ibid*, 130).

Like other cultural pursuits, it is important to understand the manner in which sport and its depiction, usually in the media, reproduces or challenges male hegemony in wider society. Dunning (1999), Carrington and McDonald (2001), Houlihan (2003) and Kirk *et al* (2006), influenced by Gramscian analysis, offer sport as the last male bastion where men can dominate women. Theberge (2000, 323) highlights the work of Susan Cahn and suggests that beneath the surface of the debate about women's athleticism was the "nagging question of power" (Cahn, 1994, 208). Brookes (2002, 130) believes it is important to grasp the concept of "hegemonic masculinity" in society, since it underpins much of the research around sports and gender. He highlights the work of Connell (1995) who argues that male hegemony exists as a cultural ideal that can only exist in contrast with femininity. In defining it in opposition to femininity, hegemonic masculinity works to legitimise the subordination of women, and to marginalise other manifestations of masculinity that deviate from this masculine ideal, including gay men. In contrast, the concept of femininity is not constructed in an oppositional or dominant way to the other sex. As already mentioned, the feminist critique of sports journalism, in particular photography, is that women are presented as sexualised or as subordinate. Studies from the 1980s and 1990s demonstrate sexualised depictions of sportswomen that mask their elite athletic status (Heaven and Rowe, 1990, in Rowe, 1999, 128). However, sportswomen may use this to their advantage. As Rowe points

out, sportswomen will often seek to capitalise on the commercial advantage that such a profile can provide, appearing on magazine covers, posters and publicity shots. In 2012 Jessica Ennis appeared on magazine front covers (for example, Podium magazine, April 2012) and in advertisements (see Olay advertisement in, for example, Glamour magazine, 2012) and many of the female gold medallists appeared in the press after the London Games dressed glamorously, emphasising their femininity. In an article on glamour in sport, (London) Times journalist Simon Barnes makes some interesting points about female athletes: “You can win glamorously or unglamorously as personality dictates. But if you want to pull off the win-double of sporting success and wealth, then a woman must do glamour as well as victory....I’m not entirely comfortable with that...It is never the woman that is demeaned in such transactions. It is always the client. Us.” (Times, February 24, 2012).

Nor do men necessarily escape – or seek to escape - this sexualised depiction: one just has to think about photoshoots of David Beckham. And Hargreaves and McDonald (2000, 55) acknowledge that women can collude in this process of sexualisation and male hegemony – high jumper Yelena Isinbayeva said in a Times interview that female athletes have a “duty to be beautiful” (Broadbent in Barnes, Times, February 24, 2012) - and that the situation is more complex than a simple male versus female opposition.

Whatever the current situation, women in the past, have had to battle with preconceptions arising out of a patriarchal society in order to participate more fully in a sporting life. Sport was generally seen as strictly a male orientated activity, created by men for men (Yiannakis and Melnick, 2001; Tomlinson *et al*, 2002) and suggesting that sport required physical and psychological attributes “unnatural to women” provided a useful means to control women in a male-dominated society such as Victorian England (Mangan, 2006, 146).

Nevertheless, there were serious challenges to these attitudes. The first female football match was played in 1895 and, according to Williams (2003), Britain pioneered the first phase of women’s football around the time of the First World War, when British women’s football led the world. The eminent women’s team, Dick Kerr Ladies, played to audiences of tens of thousands, not just at home but overseas. “The considerable spectator support and media interest from that period is noticeably absent from the present” (Williams, 2003, 4). Yet despite this success, by 1921 The Football Association had banned women’s football from Football League grounds, effectively marginalising the sport on the grounds it was unsuitable for women (Kassouf, 2011). It took the FA 50 years to lift this ban and a further 37 years to apologise in 2008 (Murray, 2010).

Despite the fact that the founder of the modern Olympic Games, Pierre de Coubertin, said women should be spectators rather than participants (Gems and Pfister, 2009), the Paris 1900 Olympic Games saw the first female competitors, with 19 participants (Mallon and Heijmans, 2011). However, women were not allowed to run further than 800 metres in the Games until 1972; the first women’s 3000 metres, 400 metres hurdles and marathon were in 1984; and women were barred from the pole vault and throwing the hammer until 2000 (Whannel, 2008, 224). Female participation rose to over four thousand by the Sydney Olympics in 2000 and nearly 5000 in the London 2012 Olympics. Yet it took until London 2012 for all 204 nations to be represented by athletes from both genders. Wodjan Shaherkani made history by being the first female Saudi Arabian Olympian when she competed in the judo contest, while Qatar and Brunei entered female athletes for the

first time. According to the *Guardian*, 36% of all Team GB medals were won by female athletes (Rodgers, August 9, 2012).

So women are no longer on the sidelines of sport, they are breaking through into sports that were previously seen as solely appropriate for male involvement. Hartman-Tews and Pfister (2003), O'Reilly and Cahn (2007) and Cashmore (2010) suggest that increased female participation and performance has begun to challenge men in sport, possibly threatening the status quo. Whannel (2008, 84) argues that sport is still dominated by masculine values but that advances in women's sports, both in terms of numbers taking part and in the standards of performance, are challenging notions that women's sports are in some way inferior to men's. Yet on the face of it, sexism – either direct or indirect - appears to be a regular occurrence in sport and this, together with its coverage (or lack of it) would seem to chime with academic concepts about dominant gender roles.

Prior to the Olympics, a number of events brought the issue of gender equality in sport to the fore. In January 2011, sports commentators Andy Gray and Richard Keys were fired from Sky Sports after making sexist remarks about a female assistant referee Sian Massey and West Ham vice-chairman Karren Brady. This was no isolated incident: ex-Manchester City manager Joe Royle and ex-Luton manager Mike Newell have both previously aired their views about female officials. In 2007 Luton boss Mike Newell was fined £6,500 by the Football Association over his comments regarding female assistant referee Amy Rayner the previous November. Newell said after the match with QPR that the appointment of women referees was “tokenism for the politically-correct idiots”. (BBC, February 13, 2007). Just for good measure he added, “She should not be here. I know that sounds sexist, but I am sexist.” (Culf, *Guardian*, November 13, 2006). Following the Gray and Keys affair, insult was added to injury in December 2011 when, astonishingly, no female sports stars were nominated for the BBC Sports Personality of the Year award.

Despite the female England football team's impressive 6-0 win over Croatia (qualifying campaign match for the 2013 European Championships on April 5, 2012), only the *Observer* and the *Sunday Express* covered the result. On the same day as Balding's article appeared in the *Sun* (September 16, 2012), *Private Eye* pointed out that the same paper made no mention of the England's women's cricket team beating the West Indies (an unbeaten run of 21 matches) nor the British Women's Open, the only major championship in ladies golf to be held in this country (*Private Eye*, September 21–October 4, 2012). So, on the face of it, there appears to be inequality in the media coverage of male and female sport, despite the enormous growth and success of women's sport over the last three decades. It is important to investigate the real picture since media coverage and representation have the power to reinforce or challenge outmoded relations, stereotypes and even prejudices, as well as providing encouragement to other women. Given Clare Balding's and Maria Miller's endeavours to keep female sport in the public eye post-Olympics, this article compares the amount of coverage of female sport and sports women in the UK press six months before the London Olympics (which started on Friday July 27, 2012, and ended Sunday August 12, 2012) and returns to look at newspaper coverage six months after the Olympics to see if there has been any effect in increasing “routine” coverage of women in sport. In addition, the amount of newspaper coverage given to women's sports 10 years before the London Olympics was also recorded to see if there had been any improvement in routine coverage across the last decade. Finally, sports journalists were interviewed for their views on the findings and on female sports coverage in general.

Methodology

The main focus of the study was to examine the main national UK newspapers in the period six months before the 2012 London Olympics and six months following the 2012 Olympics to establish if there was any difference in the number (quantity) of female-related sports stories. Given the interest that the London Olympics generated in female sports and sportswomen, this study aimed to discover whether there was at least a possible short-term increased effect on the amount of coverage, which might bode well for a longer-lasting legacy. It is, of course, recognised, that this study is limited to a snapshot of the state of play, and that future studies would need to be conducted further away from the 2012 Olympics to ascertain any lasting influence on women's sports coverage. Seven UK national newspapers, and their Sunday equivalents, were used in this study, covering a range of political allegiances and readerships. These were the Daily and Sunday Telegraph (part of the Telegraph Media Group and owned by brothers David and Frederick Barclay); the Guardian and Observer (part of the Guardian Media Group and owned by the Scott Trust Ltd) and the Times and Sunday Times (part of News Week, owned by Rupert Murdoch), representing the quality press. The Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday (part of the Daily Mail and General Trust PLC, a company that has Lord Rothermere as chair and controlling shareholder), along with the Daily and Sunday Express (part of the Express Group, a subsidiary of Northern and Shell, which is wholly owned by Richard Desmond) representing mid-market titles, and the Sun and Sun on Sunday (also part of News Week and owned by Murdoch) and the Daily and Sunday Mirror (part of the Trinity Mirror Group plc), representing the red-tops. The study focussed on the sports pages, but if any sports coverage appeared elsewhere in the paper, this was noted, though this was found to be negligible, with the exception of the occasional photograph and caption. The prominence of stories covering women's sports was also noted.

Since the intention was to compare like with like, the last full week of February in each year was examined (Wed-Tues inclusive). The week-long period six months before the London Olympics was February 22 - 28, 2012, while the period six months after was February 20 – 26, 2013. In addition, a week's worth of the same papers were examined in the same way from February 20 – 26, 2002 (substituting the News of the World for the Sun on Sunday, which was not published in 2002) to measure any changes in reporting in women's sports coverage over the previous decade.

Before embarking on the main study, a pilot content analysis was conducted, which focused on two days of coverage of sports articles in two of the sample newspapers (the Times and the Daily Mirror), to see how relevant stories were presented, whether to include only lead stories, and to establish a clear definition of what constitutes a sports article. From the pilot, for the purposes of this study an article was defined as containing some text about the sport. Fixtures and match score results were *not* included, although match reports were. Sports supplements were also included. The decision was made to record *all* articles (including news in briefs) because the pilot revealed that many articles about women were extremely short. If only lead articles were included, the results would have been even lower. The brevity of many articles about women's sports as seen in the pilot study also led us to believe that if column inches were recorded the results were likely to be lower and we wanted to ensure the study captured all mention of women's sports, no matter how minimal. The number of stories relating to women's sports was calculated and recorded as a percentage of the total number of sports stories. Percentages were rounded up to the

nearest 0.5%. In total, 4,576 articles before and after the Olympics were recorded; this number increased to 7,107 when articles from February 2002 were also included.

There was originally an assumption that the Olympics would have minimal effects on the results six months beforehand, but counter intuitively, the pilot study revealed that a few stories were already linked to this major event in six months' time, often discussing athletes' preparation and potential. Similarly, towards the end of February 2002, the Winter Olympics were taking place in Salt Lake City. Thus, for 2013, 2012 and 2002, the results were recorded *including* all articles relating to both Games, and noting the effect on women's sports coverage, and subsequently *excluding* any articles relating to the Olympics, to record routine coverage. However, in 2013 there were no stories directly about the Olympics (unsurprisingly, since they had finished), though the Games were sometimes given a passing reference within an article, so two sets of results did not need to be recorded for 2013.

In many of the stories, women were mentioned along with men or just in passing (and in these instances 0.5 of a story was recorded). There were a couple of pictures and short gossipy items about footballers wives (like Victoria Beckham) but as these were not about sport they were not recorded either as sports articles or as being about women athletes.

Once the data had been collected, we carried out semi-structured interviews with four sports journalists. These were former Young Sports Journalist of the Year, Martha Kelner of the Daily Mail, one of the few female sports writers on the national press; Sue Mott, one of the earliest women to be appointed as a sports writer on a UK national newspaper; Oliver Kay, chief football correspondent for the Times; and Tanni Grey-Thompson, former paralympian and sports broadcaster and campaigner. It was made clear to interviewees that they would be named in the article, and in two cases the selected quotes to be included were provided to interviewees who requested that they see what was going to be published, and they provided agreement to allow publication by email. Questions about the coverage of women's sport were also put to Stuart Rowson, BBC Sports Editor Interactive. Thus we attempted to canvass male and female views on our results, as well as recent and pioneering journalists, and relevant responses were included at appropriate points in the article, mainly under the heading, Discussion of Findings.

Findings

All the findings are presented as percentages of all articles covering sports on sports pages. All percentages have been rounded up to nearest half a per cent. In February 2013 just one set of figures is provided since there were no articles focussing exclusively on the Olympics (see Table 1). The results are also presented in a bar chart (see Figure 1).

[Table 1 here]

[Figure 1 here]

The results show that average coverage of women in sport is less than 5% of total sport's coverage for any of the years analysed. There has been little change in more than 10

years, with the fact that the London Olympics has taken place merely bringing the results nearly up to the average in 2002 when the Winter Olympics was taking place. However, if a major event like the Olympics (Winter or Summer) is put aside, then there appears to have been an increase of 3% (from 1% to 4%) before and after the London Olympics, and an increase of 2% from 2002 (2%) to 2013 (4%). Whether this slow upwards trend is permanent remains to be seen, and will need follow-up studies over longer periods of times and more remote from the London Olympics in terms of elapsed time. But however the results are viewed, coverage of women's sports has not changed significantly in more than a decade.

Prominence and photographs

Women appeared in about 2% of photographs, and never made a lead story on the sports pages, but on 22nd February 2013 victorious women cyclists were featured in a large *front-page* picture with a caption in the Times and the Daily Telegraph, referring readers to the main coverage on the sports pages. The cyclists also made the back (lead) page of the Guardian sports pages (but as the second story) on the same day. This trend appears to have continued in some of the quality papers: for example, a photograph of victorious female cricketers (England won the NatWest Women's Ashes series) featured on the front page of the Times on August 20, 2013. But what is apparent is that this only happens in victorious circumstances; women only get prominent coverage when they are winners. Routinely, they still get little or no coverage. But limited as they are, routine photographs of women athletes are not particularly sexualised these days; there was no evidence of pictures in the style of one report from the News of the World in 2002, which depicted a scantily clad female cyclist showing off her "boob job".

Discussion of results

Despite females making up half the population, the amount of media coverage of female sports and stars recorded over the given periods was incredibly low (between 3% and 5%; and even lower when the Olympics were excluded: between 1% and 4%). Our research shows little has really changed over a decade, confirming O'Reilly and Cahn's (2007) claim that sports media remain one of the last bastions of male domination. Nor has there been much change since the 2006 findings of the Women Sports and Fitness Foundation (see WSFF website and Peacock, Daily Telegraph, October 24, 2012), when women's sports coverage in all media was found to be just under 5%, close to the average 2013 findings (4%) in this study. The WSFF looked at a greater range of media, though fewer newspapers, albeit for a longer period (a month). The organisation also analysed local papers, where coverage was routinely higher for women's sports, and this possibly contributed to the slightly higher overall average of around 5%.

In 2002 a total of 2,531 articles were analysed. The total average in all papers of women's sport coverage stood at just 5%. Even more depressing is that without the Winter Olympics coverage, where women were the main GB medal winners, women's sport coverage was just 2%.

In 2012 a total of 2,321 articles were analysed. The overall average went down to just 3%. Even with London 2012 just around the corner, the media failed to shift their news agenda to help build the female profile, despite it being a home Olympics, an Olympics that was promoted on the grounds it could inspire the next generation of athletes, as well as widening sports participation amongst the general population. When articles referencing

the London Olympics were omitted to focus on routine reporting of female sports, this coverage stood at a mere 1%.

In 2013 a total of 2,255 articles were analysed. The total average went up to 4%; an improvement, but from a very low baseline. The findings clearly show that despite constituting half the adult population, women in sport have failed to make significant inroads onto the news agendas of national newspapers. The average percentage of coverage actually *fell* over a decade, between 2002 (4.5%) and 2012 (3%)/2013 (4%). This is especially disappointing given the fact that London has successfully staged an Olympic Games, where women excelled. GB women amassed a total of 36% of Team GB's London 2012 medal haul. Given this, they can no longer be portrayed as the "other sex".

Arguably, women may no longer face the restrictions they once confronted in participating in sport, and enjoy more opportunities, but it would seem they are not being given the platform necessary to promote female sport effectively. This lack of coverage effectively renders women's sport as barely-existent, which must impact on the public perception, situating top sportswomen as outside the norm, views that in 2013 should be confined to the past.

Differences between newspapers

In general the quality papers were better than the mid-market or red-top papers (the Telegraph is perhaps the exception) in the amount of coverage they gave to female sports. At the very least, the Times/Sunday Times and Guardian/Observer have increased their coverage since the Olympics. It ought to be pointed out that with the exception of the Sun on Sunday/News of the World, all the Sunday papers had increased their women's sports coverage, and that the Observer and Sunday Times both had 8.5% of articles devoted to women's sport (as opposed to 4% in 2002 for the Observer; and 3% in 2002 for the Sunday Times). The Sunday papers were marginally better than the daily papers but it is a matter of between 0.5% and 2%, which is hardly noticeable to the average reader.

The quality papers did give good coverage to the Track Cycling World Championships at Minsk in February 2013, where women won gold in both individual track events and team events, and this may have been because of women's cycling successes in the London Olympics. The quality press also tended to do some long interviews with female athletes (such as with pole vaulter Holly Bleasdale in the Guardian on February 26, 2013) and the Times ran three stories about curling on its news (not sports) pages on February 26, 2002 after the women's curling team won a gold at the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics. Overall, in 2013, the Guardian/Observer (at 8%) and Times/Sunday Times (at 6%) gave the best coverage, followed by the Mail/Mail on Sunday (at 4%).

Bottom of the league post-Olympics were the red-tops and Express newspapers. The Sun/News of the World/Sun on Sunday was the worst offender in 2013 at 1.5% (and averaged 1.5% over the three years sampled); the Express/ Sunday Express devoted just 2% of coverage to women's sports in 2013, while the Daily and Sunday Mirror achieved a mere 2.5% of coverage in 2013. In 2012, when any reference to the Olympics was excluded, the Express group did not manage to mention women in *any* of the sports articles sampled.

The Telegraph/Sunday Telegraph also made for interesting reading. In 2002, they were by far the most "accepting" of female sport, as their coverage stood at 8.5% and double the average total (even without Olympic coverage it was at 3.5%, higher than other newspapers). However, in 2012, a decade later and six months before the Olympics they seem to have changed their tack. They were now down at 2.5%. In 2013, six months after

the London Olympics, women's coverage went up to 3%. So over a decade, the Telegraph, went from one of the best performing newspapers to one of the worst.

The Times/Sunday Times seem to be the most positive towards women's sports coverage over the last decade. In 2002, the paper's coverage was 5th lowest out of the seven newspaper categories at 4%. In 2012, six months before the Olympics, the Times/Sunday Times went to the top, producing 5.5% of women's coverage (21/373). In direct contrast to the Times/Sunday Times, the Express stable consistently went down. In 2002, their women's coverage was at 4.5%, in 2012 it went down to 3.5% and it further slumped to 2% in 2013. The Mail/Mail on Sunday also demonstrated a downwards trend.

In contrast, the Times/Sunday Times amassed 3%, even without Olympic coverage, again first out of all the newspaper groups, rising to 6% six months after the Games in 2013. The Guardian/Observer jumped from 2.5% in 2012 to contain the most coverage of women's sports in 2013 at 8.5%. While these figures are low, the Times and Guardian group are at least showing an upwards trend.

No individual newspaper exceeded 8.5 % for women's sports coverage, which is rather shocking, given the successes at the (home) Olympics. The *average coverage* of women's sport for the seven newspapers for any of the three years didn't exceed 5%, which shows a severe imbalance that has been present in the last decade and looks set to remain.

Celebrity or sports role models?

Given the way in which women are usually depicted in the media, images of skilled and successful sports women are more vital than ever. Writing in the Guardian about the Beijing Olympics, Kira Cochrane (August 12, 2008) celebrated the positive image that female athletes offered women:

The women we have been thrilling to [at Beijing] aren't in our eyeline because they happen to be the offspring of some 1970s rocker, or because they've bagged a multimillionaire boyfriend. They aren't on screen because they have starved themselves to a size zero – instead, their bodies are a celebration of strength.

Cochrane goes on to hope that the Olympic coverage of sportswomen will leave a lasting legacy. And according to the WSFF, "81% of people think that the female athletes at London 2012 make better role models for young girls than other celebrities...However, we need to make sure that young girls and women are given more opportunities to see their female sports heroes in action to inspire them to get active." (Peacock, Daily Telegraph, October 24, 2012). However, such opportunities and legacy have not materialised, if this study is representative. In February 2012, if any Olympic coverage is excluded, routine coverage of sportswomen averages just 1%. By 2013, after the London Olympics, coverage has, at least, increased to an average of 4%, but this cannot be said to be very significant, and shows no improvement on the WSFF findings of 2006 (ibid).

Why is there poor coverage?

So what is the reason for the lack of coverage? Sue Mott has been a sports journalist for 30 years, and was one of the first women to report on sport in a national newspaper (Sunday Times from 1986-1994). If women's sport is not as popular with audiences as men's – and this *may or may not* be the same as women's sport not being as *good* as men's - she points to historic reasons, including past bans on women competing in the Olympics or in football.

Men's sport has completely dominated the calendar for the past 100 years or so: football, the Six Nations, major golf tournaments, F1 racing, boxing.....these block out the annual calendar....There is far less history, and [therefore less] folklore or myth attached to modern women's sport; there are fewer heroines.

(Interview by email, April 30, 2013.)

But for Oliver Kay, chief football correspondent on the Times, women's sport does not have to mean a second-rate experience. Speaking about his Olympics memories, Kay said,

You'll think I'm being politically correct, but I would say the highlight in terms of anything I attended was the women's match between Great Britain and Brazil.it was a great moment for women's football.

(Interview by phone, April 9, 2013.)

But Kay acknowledges that women's sport does not get equal treatment in the "other 47 months out of a four-year cycle".

As Balding says, a virtuous circle exists for male sports – if covered in the media, the sport gets a high profile, thus receiving funding to develop more. Both Sue Mott and former paralympian and sports broadcaster Tanni Grey-Thompson agree that the media can't be entirely blamed and that part of the problem lies with sports organisations: "Women's sport can promote itself far better." (Sue Mott, interview by email, April 30, 2013). "Governing bodies could do a better job putting out news about their female performers." Grey-Thompson adds: "The governing bodies have to make sure they use their female athletes, making sure there is equal branding on their posters and tickets." (Interview by phone, June 13, 2013). Mott and Grey-Thompson also point to a gendered power imbalance, with a preponderance of men on newspapers, sports websites and governing bodies.

I think the reality is that most editors are men and football dominates our culture in terms of sport. We need more female involvement in all sectors. Jess Ennis has a female agent, but there are not many of them.

(Grey-Thompson, interview by phone, June 13, 2013.)

Oliver Kay of the Times thinks the public also has to take some responsibility for the current situation.

It is market driven; the media have an obligation to keep alive the post-Olympic legacy of the promotion of women's sport and minority sport, but there is only so much blame they can be attached to the media. People say they want to read about minority [and women's] sports, but the evidence simply isn't there.

(Interview by phone, April 9, 2013.)

Stuart Rowson, Editor, BBC Sports Interactive (talk at Leeds Trinity University, UK, February 25, 2013), also claimed that a lack of interest from the public created a challenge for broadcasters. While he believed the corporation should be leading the way in showcasing women's sports, he said the BBC had to strike a balance between covering women's sports –

which he believes are not as popular – and sports such as football. While the public will watch women’s sports during big events like the Olympics, it can be difficult to engage as many viewers longer term. Nevertheless, Rowson believed there had been some legacy at the BBC from the Olympics: “Women’s cricket is not as popular as men’s cricket so we need to educate people. We sent a woman to cover the Women’s Cricket World Cup. We wouldn’t have done this before the Olympics.”

The dominance of football: reflecting or setting the agenda?

Both Kay and Grey-Thompson flagged up another issue: the dominance of football, which in this study accounted for approximately 70% of press coverage. On the Victoria Derbyshire programme (BBC R5 Live, January 10, 2013), Tim Lamb, Chief Executive of the Sport and Recreation Alliance, acknowledged that the media reflected the huge popular interest in football, but added that it hoovered up 90% of TV’s sports budget. “The media also has a responsibility to help set the agenda, not just reflect the reality,” he said, adding that he fully supported the need for increased coverage of a greater range of sport. “We can’t go from a feast to a famine every four years.” However, Sue Mott disagrees:

The media’s job is not to engineer society. They reflect interest and sell themselves on the grounds of popularity. And you can hardly blame humanity for not marching on News International and demanding en masse more female sports coverage.

(Interview by email, 30th April 2013.)

Oliver Kay acknowledges that football coverage has increased, but also points to reader demand:

The number of pages of sport has gone up overall. Football dominates, at about 50% of the Times and probably around 70% for the red-tops. The research shows it’s popular and adds to the circulation figures.

(Interview by phone, April 9, 2013.)

And in terms of expenses, Kay argues that it’s even harder to justify sending reporters to events that aren’t followed as avidly as football when newspapers are struggling financially.

Missing a trick?

But given that interest is closely related to promotion – a chicken and egg situation - Mott suggests that “some members of the media could decide they’re missing a trick and start covering women’s sport” (interview by email, April 30, 2013).

If it proves successful, other media outlets will follow and international governing bodies will prick up their ears. The sound of cascading money always has a salutary effect on the administrators.

(*Ibid*)

Interest and audiences *can* grow with investment and more coverage; media outlets can *build* an audience. Jeff Stelling of Sky Sports pointed to the rise in audiences for darts after Sky invested in and promoted the sport (talk at Leeds Trinity University UK, February

25, 2013). There was also a telling quote in an article about pioneer female motor racing driver Danica Patrick taking part in Nascar's Daytona 500:

'For ten years I have told Bernie [Ecclestone] he is dopey for not getting a woman into Formula One,' Niki Lauder, the three-times world champion said. 'If we could get a woman into the top six, you would have twice as many fans in front of the television.'

(Eason, Times, February 23, 2013)

Female sports writers

While there is obviously a complex interplay of factors affecting the lack of coverage of women's sports, the dearth of female sports writers will be exerting some influence on sports output. Andrews states that there are now more female sports writers and presenters (2005, 78). While the focus of this study was not on the gender of the journalists, it was noted that the situation and opportunities for female sports writers remains disappointing, with an average of 1.5% female bylines in 2013.

No women sports journalists were recorded in *any* editions of the Daily and Sunday Express from any of the samples from any year. There were no bylines by women in any editions of the Daily Mirror over the periods examined. The Sunday Mirror carried two articles on football by a woman 2012 but no female bylines were recorded in 2013, nor any in the Sun or its Sunday equivalents after the Olympics.

In her study of the gender of bylines for different categories of journalism in the UK national press, Franks (2013) found that sports continued to be a field where "female bylines are pretty much invisible", and noted that in the UK in 2012, only two women were listed in the Press Gazette Top 50 Sports Reporters (Press Gazette, 2012 in Franks, 2013, 28-29). A more detailed study of the gender of bylines on the sports pages of the UK national press found that more than 98% were male (Franks and O'Neill, submitted for publication).

On a positive note, women sports writers in this study are not confined to covering traditional women's sports (such as tennis), though, to be fair, in 2002 they were also covering sports such as football. The Mail on Sunday has just appointed Alison Kervin as its first female sports editor – the first on a national newspaper in the UK (Greenslade, Guardian, March 20, 2013) - so it will be interesting to see what effect this has on future coverage of women's sports in this newspaper.

Green shoots of progress?

In 2012 women fared much better in nominations for Sports Personality of the Year, reflecting their success in the London Olympics, with five female nominations. Jessica Ennis finished second to Bradley Wiggins. A female last won the award in 2006 (Zara Phillips). In many ways, broadcasters, particularly the BBC, are making the most positive steps. There is now more coverage of women's cricket and football. BBC Director of Sport Barbara Slater said the response to women's football at London 2012 showed there is a strong appetite for it. It was also notable that ex-England and Arsenal captain Faye White's retirement announcement featured prominently on the BBC Sport website.

Sue Mott (interview by email, April 30, 2013) is positive about change: she points to the launch of BT's new television channels – "fronted by Clare Balding and openly

promoting the best women's sports stories. BT has bought the rights to women's tennis (worldwide) and women's club football in Britain".

The "success" of women in sport has led to campaigns from women's magazines to keep this going. *Zest* women's magazine ran a "women in sport" campaign under #keepthemomentum (WSFF), while the *Stylist* magazine's "Fairgame" campaign aims to collect 100,000 signatures for its petition in six months. And in the future, social media may hold the key. For example, the FA Women's Super League launched the Twitter kit initiative (BBC, April 4, 2012): female footballers will be the first to wear their Twitter names on their shirts in the hope of increased coverage (Williamson, *Daily Mail*, April 6, 2013).

Conclusion

In her book on the aftermath of feminism, McRobbie (2009) challenges postfeminist theories, including the "commonsense" postfeminist perception that claims gender equality has been achieved, or at least things are much better now for women. This study lends weight to this challenge. In the sports pages of the UK press, misogyny, conscious or unconscious, appears to be alive and well. What is more, our findings are remarkably consistent with other research into this area (Godoy-Pressland, 2014; WSFF report, 2006, in Peacock, *Daily Telegraph*, October 24, 2012). It is hard not to agree with the WSFF's assertion that our media value male achievements over those of females (Peacock, *Daily Telegraph*, October 24, 2012), and this tendency to confer a lower status to women's sports is reflected across the world (Gallagher, 2006, 37). In the UK, the *Express* and red-top newspapers are the worst offenders. Women athletes are practically invisible in these newspapers. What we appear to be witnessing in newspaper sports coverage is the continuing "symbolic annihilation" of women in the media that was highlighted as long ago as the 1970s (Tuchman, 1978).

However, not everyone is convinced that more coverage of women's sport is being demanded (Kay and Mott) or that the media exists to alter society (Kay and Mott). As *Times*' football correspondent Kay argues, "It's not down to papers to tell us to join a gym; that has to come from the individual." (Interview by phone, April 9, 2013). While there is undoubtedly some truth in the argument that the media can't *make* people change, the relative "invisibility" of women's sports in the press (literally, in some editions) outside of great sporting events *must* have an effect on people's perceptions. If women's sports are not even on the radar of most people, then there is indeed little hope of creating readers' interest and popularising female sports, or encouraging women to change their role models and take up sport. *Omission* from the news agenda (systematic absences) can be as powerful an influence as that which *is* included.

And putting aside the debate about how much the media can or should influence society, its job is most certainly to reflect society; it cannot be argued that average newspaper coverage of women's sports languishing at below 5% in any way reflects the reality of women's sporting achievements. As Gallagher (2006, 18) points out: "The 'mirror' of the world provided by the news is like a circus mirror. It distorts reality, inflating the importance of certain groups, while pushing others to the margins." It is no longer acceptable for the world of newspaper sports' reporting to be one where women are routinely invisible. As the WSFF says, "This has to change or the Olympic legacy will have failed for women." (Peacock, *Daily Telegraph*, October 24, 2012). Nevertheless, the media are just one piece of the jigsaw: sports organisations and the public also have a role to play.

If people want this lamentable level of coverage to increase, readers and viewers need to make their demands known to editors, and to engage with the limited coverage that currently exists. The promoters of women's sports need to reach out more to journalists with limited resources. As for the media - print journalism in particular - while continuing to deprive young girls of positive role models, and routinely missing out on great entertainment opportunities for audiences, they may well be missing out on the chance to increase future revenue by building audiences. Broadcasters are beginning to cotton on to this possibility and newspapers would do well to join in.

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Table 1

Percentage coverage of articles about women's sports (n = 7,107 articles)

	10 YEARS BEFORE LONDON OLYMPICS 20-26 Feb 2002		6 MONTHS BEFORE LONDON OLYMPICS 22-28 Feb 2012		6 MONTHS AFTER LONDON OLYMPICS 20-24 Feb 2013
Newspapers and type of newspaper	Including any reference to Olympics	Excluding any reference to Olympics	Including any reference to Olympics	Excluding any reference to Olympics	No stories directly about the Olympics (though occasionally mentioned within a story) so just one figure recorded
RED-TOPS Sun and Sun on Sunday (NoW in 2002)	2% (9.5/479)	0.5% (2/463)	1.5% (6/423)	0.5% (3/420)	1.5% (7/481)
Daily and Sunday Mirror	3% (10/347)	0.5% (2/337)	1% (3/341)	0.5% (1/332)	2.5% (10/441)
MID-MARKET Daily and Sunday Express	4.5% (15.5/344)	1.5% (5.5/333)	3.5% (8.5/251)	0 (0)	2% (6/323)
Mail and Mail on Sunday	6% (17/288)	2.5% (7/282)	3% (13/412)	1.5% (5/388)	4% (12.5/328)
QUALITY Daily and Sunday Telegraph	8.5% (31/368)	3.5% (12/335)	2.5% (7.5/290)	0.5% (1/274)	3% (8.5/291)
Guardian and Observer	5.5% (13/244)	2.5% (6/223)	2.5% (6/222)	2% (4/217)	8% (14/180)
Times and Sunday Times	4% (18.5/464)	2.5% (11/439)	5.5% (21/373)	3% (10.5/347)	6% (18/302)
Total average of women's sports coverage	5%	2%	3%	1%	4%
Total no. of articles (7,107)	2,531	2,397	2,321	2,240	2,255

Figure 1



