

Chapter 7

Media Sport, Women and Ireland: Seeing the wood for the trees

Katie Liston and Mary O'Connor

Introduction

Think of what it is to a young woman to grow up to adulthood today – in an era of burgeoning participatory social media especially – in the belief that without any merit or any fault of her own, though she may be the most committed, able and the most stalwart of sportspeople, by the mere fact of being born a female she is the inferior of her male sporting peers. That this woman does not conform to traditional sex roles often makes her the recipient of micro aggressions, including the assumption of inferiority and her objectification in media portrayals of her achievements. Consider, too, those women who, bolstered by the increasing support available to them, gain access to the boardrooms

of professional and high-ranking amateur sports teams and franchises, and to the dressing rooms for players and officials that initially were not sex-segregated or designed for access by and to women, with varying degrees of success. They experience physical-body, oral-language and communication forms that accompany male exclusivity. Body shaming was/is a norm for women in sports, as was changing/locker-room ‘banter’, which reinforced implicit and explicit sexism and misogyny. Serena Williams, for instance, is treated differently because of her ‘race, her physique and her talent’, and her sister Venus has sought to reclaim her right to be physically strong. In 2015 Venus Williams spoke about her focus on being strong on court and enabling her body to perform well, rather than public perceptions of how she looks.³⁷³

In the context of sport the historical legacies of exclusion from modern competitive forms around the world, especially those associated with more traditional forms of masculinity, have meant that, today, girls and women are usually underrepresented at all levels of sports relative to boys and men: for instance, as participants (athletes and officials) on the playing fields and courts (Cooky, Messner

373 Ruth Hall and Carole Oglesby, ‘Stepping Through the Looking Glass’, *Sex Roles*, vol. 74, nos. 7–8, 2016, p. 271; Valerie Siebert, “‘I’m proud to be strong!’”, *Daily Mail*, 17 July 2015.

and Hextrum highlight that females comprise forty per cent of participants but less than five per cent of televised media coverage),³⁷⁴ on the sidelines, whether as coaches, managers or trainers (for example, Reade, Rodgers and Norman highlight disproportionate gender ratios in high-level coaching positions in Canada);³⁷⁵ behind the scenes in policy-making and decision-making roles, such as team owners, executives, leaders on boards, sports journalists, and so on. No real progress has been made with regard to the number of women on international sports boards, there being varied progress across countries and within individual sports.³⁷⁶ In the mediated sports world, too, women are a minority in traditional and newer forms of media coverage of sport.

This chapter considers the social and cultural issues relevant to the relationship between mediated sport

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- 374 Cooky, Cheryl, Michael Messner and Robin Hextrum, 'Women Play Sport, But Not on TV: A Longitudinal Study of Televised News Media', *Communication & Sport*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2013, pp. 203-230.
- 375 Ian Reade, Wendy Rodgers and Leanne Norman, 'The Under-Representation of Women in Coaching: A Comparison of Male and Female Canadian Coaches at Low and High Levels of Coaching', *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2009, pp. 505-520.
- 376 Women on Boards, *Gender Balance in Global Sport Report*, 2016. Available at https://www.womenonboards.net/womenonboards-AU/media/UK-PDFs-Research-Reports/2016_Gender-Balance-in-Global-Sport.pdf.

and women. In the complex interplay between mass communication and sport, continuities and some changes can be seen in media coverage of sportswomen, which have implications for women's sense of place and belonging in the field of sport. Drawing on the authors' cumulative extensive personal and professional roles in sport (as former high-performance athletes, as a senior academic and sports administrator respectively, and as professionals who are consulted by, and contribute to, traditional and new sports-media outlets), the chapter first examines the paradoxical marginality of Ireland from the growing research on sport and gender. This is followed by a brief discussion of why media sport matters, conceptually and in practice. Attention is then given to various sociocultural and media sport dynamics that are shown, through empirical research, to lead to the reproduction of (mediated) sport as a largely male preserve, internationally. Thereafter, the empirical focus shifts to the 20x20 campaign. Launched in October 2018 to generate a cultural shift in gendered perceptions of sportswomen, its founding premises and early reception are examined. The closing section focuses on the future challenges associated with such cultural change, and on the interplay between conformist and challenging voices, and

offers commentary on the potential for mediated discourses to reframe our understanding of women and sport.

Ireland, sport and media

In the expanding research on media sport and women internationally, Ireland is noticeable by its relative absence. Yet it is home to one of the largest national women's sports organisations in Europe, the Ladies Gaelic Football Association (LGFA), formed in 1974. By 2018 the LGFA had approximately 188,000 youth and adult members, all amateurs, which represented an estimated increase of more than 80,000 since the mid-2000s. Attendance at the finals of the LGFA's premier competition – the All-Ireland Championship – reached a world-record figure for attendance at a national or international women's sports event of 50,141 people in 2018, and the match, broadcast live on TG4, the national Irish-language station, took a twenty-six per cent share of the television audience.³⁷⁷

Individual sportswomen from the island have also achieved considerable success nationally and on the world

377 <https://www.rte.ie/sport/gaa/2018/0916/994137-record-breaking-crowd-attends-all-ireland-final/> ; <https://ladiesgaelic.ie/tg4-ladies-football-finals-weekend-audience-viewership/>. Accessed 24 May 2019.

stage in their respective areas of expertise: individually, Michelle Smith, Bethany Firth and Mona McSharry (swimming); Olive Loughnane, Sonia O’Sullivan, Derval O’Rourke, Mary Peters, Ciara Mageean, Maeve Kyle and Catherina McKiernan (athletics); Natalya Coyle (pentathlon); Katie Taylor and Kellie Harrington (boxing); Kelly Gallagher (skiing); Rosemary Smith, Nicole Drought and Danielle Murphy (motorsport); Leona and Lisa Maguire (golf); Wendy Houvenhagel and Caroline Ryan (cycling); Rachel Blackmore, Nina Carberry and Katie Walsh (horse-racing); Annalise Murphy (sailing); and Sanita Puspure (rowing). In team sports – such as rugby union, soccer, hockey, basketball and Gaelic games (football and camogie) – there are cross-sport honours for those such as Cora Staunton, Katie McCabe, Sarah Rowe, Lynsey Peat, Claire Molloy, Nora Stapleton, Brieger Corkery, Hannah Tyrell, Yvonne Bonner, Ailish Considine, Lucy Mulhall and the two authors. Prominence has also been achieved by female sports presenters on popular television channels: Marie Crowe, Rachel Wyse, Jacqui Hurley, Joanne Cantwell, Sinéad Kissane, Máire Treasa Ní Dhubhghaill and Grainne

McElwain.³⁷⁸

Ireland is of considerable interest given the social changes that have taken place in gender relations more widely, especially in the roles fulfilled by women. Having transformed from a largely conservative society in the Republic, in which women's (especially mothers') bodies and minds were, to a large degree, controlled by the Catholic Church's teachings on sex, fertility control and motherhood, today Ireland is a multinational, cosmopolitan, globalised society. Regarded internationally as having introduced progressive social change – including same-sex marriage by referendum, a relaxation of restrictions on abortion (in the Republic), an Electoral (Political Funding) Act that incentivises political parties to select at least thirty per cent female candidates for general elections, an active female caucus in the Stormont Assembly in Belfast, two female presidents since the 1990s, and female leaders of political parties – a space has been opened up for women's experiences to a degree not seen previously. Research from

378 Chapter 11 in this collection features a round-table discussion involving two of these presenters (Jacqui Hurley and Sinéad Kissane) in conversation with the two authors here, as well as freelance sportswriter Cliona Foley (also presenter of women's sport podcast 'Off the Bench') and academic Niamh Kitching (co-author of Chapter Ten).

a range of organisations, such as the Rape Crisis Centre, the National Women’s Council of Ireland, Women’s Aid (North and South), and various efforts, including business,³⁷⁹ Women for Election, #WakingTheFeminists, and so on, has crystallised attention around this social space. There is now, more than ever before, a greater desire to hear from, and listen to, women about their experiences.

The media landscape, too, has changed quite significantly since the early twentieth century. But, as O’Connor has suggested, middle-class, white men have managed, through their dominance of this and other key social institutions – such as Churches, state and schools – ‘to get a stranglehold on *meaning*. What it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman.’³⁸⁰ Discussions abound regarding the nature, control and function of media on the island. The emergence of new newspaper titles, including tabloids, in the 1970s contributed to a sharpening of competition in the media landscape. This was the same decade in which the marriage bar was finally removed for women working in the Irish civil

379 Joan Ballantine and Pauric McGowan (eds), *Women into Business in Northern Ireland: Opportunities and Challenges* (2018). Available at <https://www.businessfirstonline.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/REPORT-Women-into-Business-in-Northern-Ireland-Final.pdf>.

380 Pat O’Connor, ‘Private Troubles, Public Issues: The Irish Sociological Imagination’, *Irish Journal of Sociology*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2006, p.14.

service (it was lifted in 1957 for primary teachers), when the ‘Contraceptive Train’ travelled from Dublin to Belfast,³⁸¹ and when the LGFA, the Women’s Football Association of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Women’s Football Association were formally established within years of each other.³⁸² Irish national public-service broadcaster RTÉ also set up an internal working group on the issue of a more balanced gender representation. By the mid-1990s, electronic media were opened up to interests, and print-media titles were rationalised at regional and local levels. An Irish-language television station, TG4, was established in 1996, the majority of staff then female, and that became critical to the subsequent success of the LGFA. In the Irish media landscape, the last two decades have been characterised by the emergence of new radio stations and a national commercial-television competitor for the established public-service broadcaster. Globalisation has begun to affect all Irish media, leading to a situation of ‘extraordinary

381 *The Irish Times*, ‘Laying the tracks to liberation: The original contraceptive train’, 28 October 2014. Available at <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/laying-the-tracks-to-liberation-the-original-contraceptive-train-1.1979907>.

382 Katie Liston, ‘Revisiting relations between the sexes in sport on the island of Ireland’, in Tatiana Landini and Francois Dépelteau (eds), *Norbert Elias and Empirical Research* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 197-217.

pluriformity'.³⁸³ Today, the narrative of inclusion prevails in media production and coverage North and South (vis-à-vis women and other minority groups), but questions remain as to whether and how media sport organisations have sought, formally or otherwise, to interrogate the existence of gendered assumptions in their various policies and practices. In light of this, it is claimed, rather unreflexively, that a lack of media coverage of women in sport is an objective reflection of market forces and the public's lack of interest.³⁸⁴ Here, the simplistic premise – that there is a lack of interest in women's sports – is as much in need of deconstruction, and requiring substantiation, as is the naive conclusion that a lack of media coverage is an unfettered reflection of the production–reception chain.

In this context, sports play a secondary but nonetheless important reinforcing role in sustaining forms of male dominance in Ireland. Twentieth-century sport in Ireland was largely a male preserve.³⁸⁵ Noting a paucity of research into

383 John Horgan, *Irish Media: A Critical History Since 1922*. London, Routledge, 2001, p.3.

384 *The Irish Times*, 'If women's sport struggles for coverage it's not because of sexism – it's because you can't make people care', 11 August 2014.

385 Liston, 'Revisiting relations between the sexes'.

the sport–gender nexus on the island, Liston³⁸⁶ illuminated the shifting boundaries between the sexes in sport and, in so doing, observed a slow but gradual accommodation in relations between them. This impacted on the ways in which sportswomen viewed themselves, but also on how men have responded to them. Whereas, in the past, the degree of contempt for women in sport was stronger and more explicit, today this ideological construction is undergoing change. Those sports regarded as traditionally appropriate for males – characterised typically by high levels of physical contact or confrontation, a culture of risk and a ‘mock’ battle – reveal the cutting edge of this shifting boundary. The organisational consciousness attached to sports played by males is that of a group of higher social value, as is the general view of the wider public toward them. Women’s increasing participation in sport has generated various kinds of resistance, involving some formal organisational changes (around funding and the establishment of development roles and women’s sports committees, for instance) as well as informal adaptations by sportspeople, positive and negative. Having been socialised into a position of privilege, any move

386 Katie Liston, ‘Sport and gender relations’, *Sport in Society*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2006, pp.616-633.

towards equality can feel like oppression to some males who cling to sport especially as their primary source of masculine identity. Women, too, have responded in different ways. For example, numerous commentaries – radio, television, print and e-media – on women in sport highlight the ‘good news’ story: that greater resources are now being allocated, comparatively speaking, in line with a value commitment to equality and inclusion. After all, women have now arrived at the sports fields, play courts, sports clubs and commentary boxes on the island of Ireland. But far fewer argue for *more* resources to be given to sportswomen relative to men, in order to attain a measure of gender equity and to mitigate the historical legacy of underdevelopment. This raises the question of how sportswomen are framed: against what standard, and whether and why they might be perceived as having earned the right to some, more, or greater resources.

Dunne,³⁸⁷ too, has acknowledged a dearth of research, particularly in relation to analyses of gender and media coverage of sport in Ireland. Despite a recommendation from a 2004 Oireachtas joint-committee report on women in sport, which was co-edited by the first author here,

387 Ciaran Dunne, ‘An examination of the photographic coverage of sportswomen in the Irish print media: a study of an Irish broadsheet newspaper’, *Sport in Society*, vol. 20, no. 11, 2017, pp.1780-1798.

there has been no action to instigate longitudinal research into the scope and nature of media reporting of women's sports. Individual research studies are thus the starting point. Free, for instance, highlighted the antinomies of Irish female boxer Katie Taylor in print and broadcast-media representations.³⁸⁸ He provides useful illustrations of the celebration of her combative physicality, speed of punch, and boxing skill/technique on the one hand, but on the other hand her construction as a figure of cultural and gendered conservatism. Equally, the underrepresentation and marginalisation of Irish sportswomen in a major broadsheet newspaper, *The Irish Times*, is confirmed by Dunne elsewhere in this collection, who found that, during a four-month study period, less than four per cent of sports images were of women. He also notes a very heavy bias towards coverage of certain sports in this national newspaper. The overall effect of this was, he argues, that women in sport in Ireland were continually undervalued. When it comes to media sport, then, of what we do know, Ireland is broadly similar to most other countries. This is because the challenges of sexism (overt or careless), stereotyping and gender bias are

388 Marcus Free, "‘He is my strength and my shield’: the antinomies of Katie Taylor as female sporting celebrity in twenty-first century Ireland", *Sport in Society*, vol. 18, no. 10, 2015, pp.1147-1165.

almost intractable ‘across time, space and content delivery platforms’.³⁸⁹

Media sport matters

Media sport refers to the communication of, and through, sports, in which competitions, events, games and matches are not experienced in the immediate space where they take place but, rather, are represented through an increasing variety of media formats – for example, traditional formats such as radio, television and newspapers, as well as via new and participatory media such as online news, live streaming, videos, blogs, communication platforms (for example Facebook and Twitter), and so on. In the sports-media/commercial complex,³⁹⁰ which is increasingly a global economic nexus, media sport has become so popular that even Rupert Murdoch has used it as a ‘battering ram’ to

389 Global Media Monitoring Project Regional Report (2015), p.4. Available at http://cdn.agilitycms.com/who-makes-the-news/Imported/reports_2015/regional/Europe.pdf.

390 Michael Messner, Michele Dunbar and Darnell Hunt, ‘The Televised Sports Manhood Formula’, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2000, pp.380-394.

generate more pay-television subscribers.³⁹¹ Academics generally agree that the overall effect of mediated discourses is to naturalise key identity markers such as gender. In this construction, *who* and *what* counts, as do the *ways* in which they appear to matter. As a result, Toni Bruce has argued that ‘there are strong theoretical and empirical reasons why we should pay attention to how the mainstream and increasingly web-based and social media talk about, write about, and visually represent sport’.³⁹²

Media sport marks women’s bodies and behaviours in various ways – some explicit by their absence – such as their underrepresentation and marginalisation in media reporting. Yet others are more implicit in terms of the quality and types of coverage, such as technical camera work and editing across various media forms or the sexual humour and careless sexism that can accompany such coverage. As a result, ‘regardless of what is actually happening (live in the sports space), it is the media’s interpretation of that event that shapes our attitudes, values and perceptions about the

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- 391 Mark Falcous, ‘Sport/media complex’, in David Levinson and Karen Christensen (eds) *Berkshire Encyclopaedia of World Sport* (Great Barrington, MA.: Berkshire Publishing), p.994.
- 392 Toni Bruce, ‘Reflections on Communication and Sport: On Women and Feminities’, *Communication & Sport*, vol. 1, nos. 1/2, 2012, p.126.

world and about our culture’.³⁹³ In other words, the ways in which the public views and consumes sport is shaped, to a greater or lesser degree, by the manner in which it is framed by various media. Noteworthy in this regard are the latest findings of the Global Media Monitoring Project, which reveals that sport is least likely to be reported by women globally and is among the top three topics in which women are least likely to appear. Women comprise thirteen per cent of the news subjects in sports-related topics, while men make up eighty-seven per cent of the news subjects in sport, worldwide.³⁹⁴ This led to calls to increase media content about sportswomen, not only quantitatively but also qualitatively, in ways that challenge gender stereotypes and the idea that sportswomen are somehow ‘out of place’, and to develop journalists’ awareness of gender issues in reporting.

Sporting women: ‘Not in the right place’?

As the assumption goes, the presence of more women in sport, examples of which were noted above, leads to greater

393 Murray Phillips, *An Illusory Image: A Report on the Media Coverage and Portrayal of Women’s Sport in Australia 1996* (Australia, Australian Sports Commission, 1997), p.20.

394 Global Media Monitoring Project Regional Report.

equality. 'Add women and stir' is a liberal-feminist-inspired approach that, put simply, is based on the expectation that women's greater participation and visibility in sport, on and off the field of play and in media sport, will be a force for good, in and of itself. Ergo, in media sport, more women in sports journalism and as topics of sports reporting will bring about positive change. Not to deny the desirability of more coverage of women's sports as a general principle, this assumption takes credulity too far if the implication is that gendered politics would be so easily transformed. Often used as a proxy measure of equality, the increased presence of women in sport is not quite the same as inclusion or equity. Such an increase does not (necessarily) challenge the long-standing historical production of sport: for men, by men, about men. Why? Because, for female journalists in one study,³⁹⁵ the 'macho' habitus that prevailed in sports journalism meant that they felt 'they (were) not in the right place', and constrained to negotiate their sense of place in sport. 'More' is not simply 'better' in the face of the historical consolidation of hegemonic power and privilege of men, which is generally reflected in media sport. As Dunne

395 Lucie Schoch and Fabien Ohl, 'Women Sports Journalists in Switzerland: Between Assignment and Negotiation of Roles', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2011, p.204.

puts it in this collection, ‘a symbiotic relationship exists between the media and sport whereby sport represents a social institution that normalises the hegemonic power and privilege men have historically held over women, which is consolidated by the manner in which sports are reported by the media’.³⁹⁶ The larger questions are whether and how the momentum gaining around women in sport will translate into meaningful changes in policy, in discriminatory practices, and in the social and cultural value systems that operate in the media-sport landscape. This is important because a number of practices have been identified internationally in research into the patterns of media coverage that, considered together, are ‘insidious’ in nature and effect.³⁹⁷ These are: gender marking, which is almost ubiquitous (see also Kitching and Bowes’ discussion in chapter 10); de-athleticisation, also involving sexualisation, infantilisation and idealised femininity; and ambivalence.

When only a women’s sports event or competition

396 Ciaran Dunne, ‘Undervalued and Underreported: The coverage of sportswomen in the Irish print media’, in Neil O’Boyle and Marcus Free, *Sport, the Media and Ireland: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2020), p. PAGE NUMBER TO BE INSERTED.

397 Janet Fink, ‘Female athletes, women’s sport, and the sport media commercial complex: have we really “come a long way baby”?’ *Sport Management Review*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2013, p.333.

is marked, the male equivalent is reconfirmed as the unquestioned norm. This media pattern is generally triggered by the respective organisation/federation in its title or label for the event/championship/tournament. International and Irish examples alike include gender-marked titles such as Women's World Cup, Ladies All-Ireland Championship, Women's Open Golf Championship, Women's National League and Women's Super League (WSL). As Fink argues, similar events for men do not include this gender moniker.³⁹⁸ Woodhouse, Fielding-Lloyd and Sequerra go further,³⁹⁹ using the example of WSL in particular: drawing on critical-feminist literature and theories of organisational change, they demonstrate the English Football Association's shift from tolerance, through opposition, to defining and controlling elite club football for women as 'new' but, ultimately, still shaped by traditional gender conceptions.

When non-sporting aspects of sportswomen's lives (such as personality, appearance, family and personal life) are foregrounded, oftentimes justified by media professionals in search of originality and 'news' for consumers, women

398 Ibid.

399 Donna Woodhouse, Beth Fielding-Lloyd and Ruth Sequerra, 'Big brother's little sister: the ideological construction of women's super league', *Sport in Society*. Online first, DOI 10.1080/17430437.2018.1548612

are positioned as less threatening and more appealing to dominant ideals. Recent studies of online coverage also confirm this pattern.⁴⁰⁰ Related examples include the descriptors of 'girls' or 'young ladies' in sports commentaries, and the use of female athletes' first names far more frequently than those of their male peers.⁴⁰¹

Sportswomen are also subjected to discourses of idealised (hetero)sexual attractiveness, in effect de-athleticising them. Mirroring disagreements in feminisms more generally, researchers continue to debate whether images, textual and online content that emphasise beauty, grace and heterosexuality position sportswomen within a narrow male gaze and/or also offer more opportunities and possibilities for women to challenge these discourses. This has also led to some disagreements between sportswomen themselves concerning idealised expectations of femininity and to whom responsibility falls to challenge such discourses,

400 Adrian Yip, 'Deuce or advantage? Examining gender bias in online coverage of professional tennis', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 53, no. 5, 2018, pp.517-532.

401 Emma Wensing, and Toni Bruce, 'Bending the rules: Media representations of gender during an international sporting event', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 38, 2003, pp.387-396; Karen Weiller, Catriona Higgs and Christy Greenleaf, 'Analysis of television media commentary of the 2000 Olympic Games', *Media Report to Women*, no. 3, 2004, pp.14-21.

if/when the opportunity arises. Often those women who can meet, more easily, the expectation of ideal notions of femininity in their physical appearance see less contradiction in representing themselves ‘as they are’. Rarely, however, do they control the images, ideals and discourses produced by the mainstream and new media. In this regard, coverage of their lives outside of sport – as mothers, girlfriends, sisters or wives, for instance – can downgrade their sporting achievements and athleticism.⁴⁰²

At the turn of the century, Bernstein noted that ‘a certain ambivalence emerges every time a female athlete is framed as a sexual being or is in fact covered by the media not for her sport performance, but because she is attractive and conveys sex appeal’.⁴⁰³ Ambivalent representations of women in sport can therefore portray a positive discourse at first glance, but may also continue to hide and maintain the mechanisms of male dominance in sport through a subtle belittling of sportswomen. Ambivalence was identified as an important media-sport practice more than twenty years

402 Elizabeth Daniels, ‘Sex objects, athletes, and sexy athletes: How media representations of women athletes can impact adolescent girls and college women’, *Journal of Adolescent Research*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2009, pp.399-422.

403 Alina Bernstein, ‘Is it time for a victory lap? Changes in the media coverage of women in sport’, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 37, 2002, p.425.

ago,⁴⁰⁴ before the inception of new media, and it is one of the dominant framing techniques today. This includes coverage that celebrates women's prowess in sport but can also simultaneously trivialise them with references to aesthetic and sexual appeal, personal backgrounds and 'ordinary' lives.⁴⁰⁵ Intentional or otherwise, attempts by media professionals to manage these conflicting discourses can reinforce such ambivalence, especially in light of the limited availability of on-the-job training for young journalists and for those in the profession who wish to stay informed of social and research developments.

Consistently, research shows that female athletes receive far less coverage, quantitatively speaking, than their male peers in the written media, broadcast and new media.⁴⁰⁶ Though female athletes are now participating more, media

404 Margaret Carlisle Duncan and Cynthia Hasbrook, 'Denial of power in televised women's sports', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol. 5, 1998, pp.1-21.

405 Dunja Antunovic and Marie Hardin, 'Activism in women's sports blogs: Activism and feminist potential', *International Journal of Sport Communication*, vol. 5, 2015, pp.305-322.

406 Angela Lumpkin, 'Female representation in feature articles published by Sports Illustrated in the 1990s', *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, vol. 18, 2009, pp.38-51; Cheryl Cooky, Michael Messner and Robin Hextrum, 'Women play sport, but not on TV: A longitudinal study of televised news media', *Communication & Sport*, vol. 1, 2013, pp.1-28; Galen Clavio and Andrea Eagleman, 'Gender and sexually suggestive images in sports blogs', *Journal of Sport Management*, vol. 25, 2011, pp.295-304.

coverage and marketing internationally does not reflect this. In fact, longitudinal studies show that media coverage has declined, across a range of platforms, despite women's increased participation and sporting performances.⁴⁰⁷ It also seems that, of the available research on new online media forms, many reproduce the same gender imbalance in coverage. In general, then, this more limited coverage of women's sport has been clearly identified, leading to the conclusion that media sport 'reproduces, legitimates, and occasionally challenges ideologies of gender'.⁴⁰⁸ Some countries, such as Canada and the Nordic countries, have developed substantial experience in gender mainstreaming, which is also reflected in their policy work on gender inclusion in sport. The US, too, is often cited as a path maker for women in sport, through the introduction of Title IX legislation. Less the heralded success than most accounts might claim, Title IX has a number of crucial caveats. Not

407 Andrew Billings, *Olympic Media: Inside the Biggest Show on Television*. London, Routledge, 2008; Andrew Billings, James Angelini and Andrea Holt Duke, 'Gendered profiles of Olympic history: Sportcaster dialogue in the 2008 Beijing Olympics', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 54, 2010, pp.9-23; Cooky, Messner and Hextrum, 'Women play sport'; Mary Jo Kane, 'The better sportswomen get, the more the media ignore them', *Communication & Sport*, vol. 3, 2013, pp.231-236.

408 Bruce, 'Reflections on communication and sport', p.128.

only does its enforcement exempt contact sports from its scope, but also these sports are defined so broadly as to allow some organisations to resist the entry of females into culturally significant sports. Paradoxically speaking, then, Title IX is (in effect) toothless.⁴⁰⁹ Elsewhere, the International Working Group (IWG) on Women and Sport also showed that opportunities and access to sports and leisure retain a degree of symbolic closure to those women who are especially responsible for domestic work.⁴¹⁰ Put simply, women are becoming more visible and accepted as athletes in their own right, yet women's access to the corridors of sporting power and their public visibility remains comparatively restricted.

Women remain underrepresented in formal leadership roles in sport: female representation on the board of international sports federations, national Olympic committees, and sports-governing bodies remains low

409 Sarah Fields, 'A Toothless Tiger? Sports, Title IX, and Gendered Bodies', in Joseph Maguire, Mark Falcous and Katie Liston (eds), *The Business and Culture of Sports*. Vol. 3. (USA: Macmillan, 2019), pp.19-33.

410 Kari Fasting, Trond Svela Sand, Elizabeth Pike and Jordan Matthews, (eds) *From Brighton to Helsinki: Women and Sport Progress Report 1994-2014* (Helsinki: Finnish Sports Confederation). Available at http://d3mcbia3evjswv.cloudfront.net/files/IWG%20Final%20Report.pdf?mRdkO5N0_atTOUY7MwR.XrK07t3Ar78d.

(eighteen, seventeen and below thirty per cent respectively in 2016).⁴¹¹ Around the world, drop-off and drop-out rates for young females continue to exceed those of young males, and sporting youths today are still far more likely to be coached by men. Nationally, Sport Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland, too, recognise gender imbalances in the ratios of males to females: as coaches, officials, adult participants (though ratios of males to females are decreasing), as CEOs, chairs of national governing bodies (NGBs), board members of NGBs, and in media coverage.⁴¹² In the all-Ireland context, the international successes of women's teams (in sports such as rugby union and hockey) contributed to a widening of the scope of available content within the media-sport landscape. Key decision-makers in state-funded media sport (for example, Ryle Nugent, sports editor at RTÉ) were empowered by these successes to continue to push a 'gender agenda' that had already taken root in the early 2000s. Reflective of

411 Women on Boards, *Gender Balance in Global Sports*.

412 Sport Ireland, *Policy on Women in Sport* (2019). Available at https://www.sportireland.ie/Media/Latest_News/Sport%20Ireland%20Women%20in%20Sport%20Policy.pdf; Sport Northern Ireland, *Public Authority Statutory Equality and Good Relations Duties Annual Progress Report 2016-17*. Available at http://www.sportni.net/sportni/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Sport-NI_S75-Annual-Progress-Report-2016-2017-Final-Draft-Approved-22-02-2018.pdf.

this twenty-first-century agenda, a bimonthly publication, *Fairplay*, was launched to promote women in sport. Other NGB-sponsored publications have also expanded, such as the LGFA's *Peil*, while more recent online platforms have also grown exponentially – for example, Sportswomen.ie (which was live for three years), and Off the Bench and Fair Game podcasts, the latter having won best webcast series in the 2016 Realex Web Awards. Women's involvement in sport on the island is now a more animated debate topic on traditional and new-media platforms, manifest in television series such as *Jump Girls* (RTÉ) and *Mná Spóirt: Croí is Anam* (TG4 and BBC). It was into this social milieu that, recently, a campaign was launched on the island of Ireland to create a measurable cultural shift in the presentation and perception of women's sport by 2020, one of three core objectives being a twenty-per-cent increase in media coverage. The strapline for this campaign highlighted the importance of women's visibility – as sporting role models – but also the need for cultural exposure to sport in order to normalise women's sense of place and belonging in sport.

20x20: 'If You Can't See It, You Can't Be It'

The 20x20 campaign was launched in October 2018, and

championed by the Federation of Irish Sport (FIS), the representative organisation for over a hundred NGBs and local sports partnerships on the island of Ireland. The idea originated with creative marketing agency Along Came A Spider (ACAS) and its female founders, Sarah Colgan and Heather Thornton, who approached the FIS chairperson, Mary O'Connor (second author here). Collectively, they shared a motivation to challenge the cultural barriers that they had faced and/or observed, notably the accepted undervaluing of women in sport. Colgan, for instance, highlighted that her own increasing awareness of her unconscious biases as a parent had motivated her: 'my own auto-pilot reaction with my daughter of basically being much more determined that my son would play sport'.⁴¹³ As an inter-county player, O'Connor had direct experience of low media coverage and paltry attendances at games. She was motivated by a cocktail of past frustrations, but also by the strategic opportunity generated by her role to bring about positive change for future generations. Having observed the ways in which previous efforts around the gender agenda had fluctuated, mainly because they were spearheaded by

413 'Women's sport hasn't been visible enough to occupy that same spot in our hearts. It should, it can and it will'. Available at <https://www.the42.ie/20x20-sarah-colgan-sit-down-feature-4405601-Dec2018/>.

individual organisations and/or did not have mainstream or widespread support, the campaign organisers focused on securing the commitment of NGBs and Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs) over a two-year period. These groups, including the Female Sports Forum in Northern Ireland, were identified as critical to the potential success of the campaign. Lacking a weighty financial incentive that could be offered to secure buy-in from these groups – by way of comparison, phase one of This Girl Can had a fund of £10 million from Sport England – a powerful social and moral message was instead required to garner their commitment and future support. This was identified as the potential societal value that could be generated from the promotion of women in sport and, in particular, the ways in which NGBs and LSPs could become cultural architects of this, staking out their contribution to transformational change.

The campaign is organised around five phases/chapters, the first aimed at raising awareness of the subliminal bias held towards women in sport. Sixty-five NGBs and LSPs signed the 20x20 charter at its launch on 15 October 2018, committing themselves to a twenty-per-cent targeted increase in one or more of the three action areas – media coverage of women’s sport, participation levels, and live

attendance figures – each organisation having autonomy in terms of the area(s) most appropriate to their programmes of work. Each NGB/LSP was also given access to campaign assets and content, as well as time to create an action plan under the respective pillar commitment (media coverage, participation, attendance). Phase two of the campaign was launched on International Women’s Day 2019. It called on NGBs, LSPs, clubs and individuals to publicly announce their pledge as part of the campaign #Showyourstripes, and an invitation was extended to all schools (primary and post-primary) to engage in physical activity at twenty minutes prior to, or after, the hour on that day. Phase three was launched at the time of writing, and focused on the importance of role models.

Despite the absence of a formal budget, the launch of 20x20 was heralded a success. The females who spearheaded the campaign maximised their soft-power opportunities for influence, and drew on their positions of status in sport, PR and media. They designed and communicated a clear set of authentic goals that was successful in attracting endorsement and sponsorship. Media partners were secured, in RTÉ Sport, TG4, *Off the Ball* (Newstalk), SportsJOE and Her.ie, each of which has also committed to increasing

its coverage of women in sport by twenty per cent over the course of the two-year campaign. The involvement of five sponsors – Lidl, AIG, Three, Investec and KPMG, supported to a lesser degree by Healthy Ireland – has been central to the successful launch of the campaign, each of the five sharing associated costs equally. Three of these were already committed to supporting women in sport through their sponsorships of Dublin GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association), women's professional golf, the LGFA, the National Football League and the national senior women's soccer team. Five ambassadors were also identified, each associated with the five sponsors: Louise Quinn (soccer), Sarah Rowe (Gaelic football), Laura Twomey (camogie), Leona Maguire and Stephanie Meadow (golf).

The absence of a designated campaign fund has, by necessity, shaped and constrained the focus: raising public consciousness and agreeing a set of attainable and measurable targets in the three action areas. Outcomes for 20x20 will be evaluated against the benchmark figures generated by Nielsen Research (during the monitoring period 8 August–7 September 2018) and by the NGBs and LSPs; the former carried out an audit of Irish media before the campaign launch, while each sports organisation

also provided prior benchmarking data on participation and attendance. Nielsen's pre-campaign audit included broadcast-television listings across thirteen channels in Ireland, twenty sports-media websites and up to seven print-media publications (including the Sunday newspapers). Analysis indicated that three per cent of print coverage of sport and four per cent of online coverage was dedicated to women's sports, while less than twenty per cent of all televised sports features related to either women only or to mixed-sex sports. Nielsen's benchmarking data also highlighted the decreasing participation gap between the sexes in sport and the need for more female role models.

Acknowledging that, at the time of writing, 20x20 has been running for approximately seven months, prominent campaigners have been surprised, thus far, by its positive reception. More scepticism and cynicism were anticipated than has been shown to date, publicly at least. There have been some (anecdotal) accounts of negative responses: from those who were obviously threatened by change involving either the (further) opening up of sport to women and/or the associated challenge to preconceived ideals around femininity. Since the launch of 20x20, Sport Ireland, too, has formalised its 'Women in Sport' policy (on International

Women's Day 2019), and confirmed Lynne Cantwell and Nora Stapleton (former Irish international rugby players) as chair of the new committee and Women in Sport lead respectively. This initiative built on an extensive review carried out in 2018, and has established four key target areas (supported by the relaunch of an annual fund of €2 million): coaching and officiating, active participation, leadership/governance and visibility. Given the overlap between the deliveries of these two major initiatives by Sport Ireland and the FIS, there may be some challenges in measuring outcomes for both separately; after all, correlation is not causation, and multiple variables are at play in a complex policy field like sport.

It also remains to be seen whether the positive energy that has been harnessed by the 20x20 campaign can overcome any politics or power struggles associated with ownership of the gender agenda in sport, not least the organisational and political capital to be gained from being the real or perceived leader for women in sport. As one of the 20x20 campaign organisers made clear to the first author, 'women in sport belongs to no one individual or organisation'. More broadly, further work will be required to understand the success factors that bring some women,

but not all, to respond positively to such campaigns. Indeed, as Sport England noted of This Girl Can, despite inspiring almost three million women to take up physical activity since its 2015 launch, it did not reach some women to the same level – for example, those women who bore the greatest responsibility for lower-paid, routine work, and those who fulfil the bulk of domestic duties. Some ethnic groups in England were also identified as being ‘harder to reach’. The new strapline for This Girl Can, ‘Fit Got Real’, seeks to become more diverse by greater encouragement of women of varying ages, ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds with regard to exercise in their daily lives. It also remains to be seen whether campaigns such as 20x20 can create the cultural space needed for a more cohesive and concerted challenge to male-dominated organisational cultures. The chapter concludes by reflecting on these and future challenges associated with such cultural change.

Alternative futures and future challenges

On the island of Ireland (as elsewhere), the marginalisation of women in sport has partly contributed to the absence of critically informed debates about the various initiatives, planned or underway, to address underrepresentation. The

relative exclusion of sport from wider feminist initiatives is also a contributory factor in this. There is often a fear of potential negative repercussions when speaking out about women in sport, of being perceived as ‘yet another complainer’ voicing anger and disillusionment, especially in the burgeoning media-sport opportunities for female contributors. This has led to a situation overall in which conformism and containment have largely prevailed in relation to the gender agenda in sport. Absent, then, are more radical voices concerning the pace, volume and impact of such change in the context of gender equality in sport. Lacking this diversity, the potential danger is that the better sportswomen get, the more they might be restricted, symbolically, if the organisational cultures that provide the basis of gender inequity remain unproblematised. Why, for instance, has the question of gender quotas in sport been sidelined since it was raised by the then minister of state for sport, Patrick O’Donovan, a number of years ago?⁴¹⁴ What were the sportive diplomatic channels that were

414 ‘There needs to be a change in mindset in how we view the role of women in sport’. Available at <https://www.the42.ie/patrick-odonovan-irish-womens-football-team-3325612-Apr2017/>.

clearly activated and which led to the relative silencing of a minister who sought to apply a ‘kick under the table’ to NGBs regarding quotas? Furthermore, in light of international developments around gender mainstreaming, why has neither government in Belfast or Dublin, nor the two state-funded sports bodies (Sport Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland), formalised a policy position regarding gender equality or equity? And what of the composition and views of the growing fan-and-spectator base for women in sport? These may be consumers of sports media more generally, they may comprise both sexes, and it will be important to assess whether sport remains sexist for fans – for example, through the ways that female athletes might be portrayed, ongoing sexism in the media, or any heteronormative assumptions that female or male fans watch sports solely to gaze at males or females respectively. If ‘sex sells’, this has important implications for journalistic practice in media-sport coverage.

While current approaches aim to open up the cultural space into which women might reach the *same* level as their male counterparts, in doing so there are wider structural challenges to overcome that might allow women to *start* at the same level as men. In this regard, networking between

women and the development of leadership and media competencies will be critical to their embodying the media-sport landscape and the sporting corridors of power. Much of the existing research, too, on media sport, has focused on gender differences. More sensitivity to gender similarities is required going forward, including the ways in which media sport might also constrict the frame of reference for masculinities. Wider changes to the composition of the population on the island of Ireland will also require greater research attention in media-sport work: to intersectionality and to identities – ethno-religious and national – given the naturalisation of many migrants and refugees (including female sports stars Sanita Purspure, Gina Akpe-Moses and Patience Jumbo-Gula).

As an important cultural artefact and agent, media sport reflects and reinforces deeply embedded norms about gender. There is the potential, too, for the inclusion of media-sport content that might challenge the ways in which people think about women in sport. As the early reception of the 20x20 campaign has highlighted, there is an appetite among the general public, who do take an interest in women in sport. Of course, there are dangers in making generalised statements about any social grouping. This is especially

relevant given the contentious debates around women (for example, #MeToo) and currently in athletics – for instance, where women are a ‘protected category’ for the purposes of single-sex competition. It is hoped, then, that the spirit of this chapter is taken as observations on tendencies, where individual exceptions to any widespread pattern will exist. For, one day, a boy might grow to manhood in the belief that, by the mere fact of acknowledging and celebrating his sister’s involvement in sports, through the vehicle of media sport she is by right his sporting equal, if not, in some cases, his superior.