

Sports, Media and Stereotypes Women and Men in Sports and Media

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INTRODUCTION

About the project

The media plays an influential role in creating images of both women and men. Sports coverage in the media is in many ways dominated by the coverage of men's rather than women's participation, which can be mirrored in the traditional public perception that men are active and athletic, and women, by exclusion, are not. To name just one example for the importance of this matter, studies have shown that girls frequently drop out of organized sports as teenagers and this has, at least to some extent, been explained by the absence of women as role models in the sports media. If this is the case the girls are missing out on a wide variety of positive benefits associated with sports participation, such as higher self esteem, more positive body image, higher grades and lower levels of anxiety and depression.

At the end of the year 2004 partners from five countries, Austria, Lithuania, Norway, Italy and Iceland, started a project which was given the title *Sports, media and stereotypes – women and men in sports and media* (SMS). The project was promoted and coordinated by the Centre for Gender Equality in Iceland, the national authority for gender equality issues in Iceland and received substantial financial support from the European Union. The purpose of this project was to contribute to the knowledge of representation of women and men in the sports media in Europe and to promote change in the stereotypes presented of both genders in this field and in general to increase gender awareness.

The first goal of contributing to the knowledge of representations of women and men in sports media was reached by performing a study aimed at exploring similarities and variations in representations of women and men in sports. This was done by analysing the images created through national media coverage of women's and men's sports activities in all the participating countries; and by collecting and analysing existing information on the participation of women and men in sports in each country. The purpose of this was to draw up a picture of the sports culture in each country, as it is necessary background information for the project and to compare the reality of the mediated world to the reality represented by statistical information. This summary report states the main findings of the study.

The second goal of promoting change in the stereotypes presented of both genders in this field was addressed by attempting to inform the most influential target groups in this

area about the impact of their representation of male and female athletes, particularly in the media, and how it creates and maintains traditional images of women and men. This was done in a threefold manner. Firstly by developing a multimedia material aimed to educate sport reporters as well as sports instructors and coaches on the representation of women and men in sports and thus to give them a practical tool to analyse their daily work. Secondly by establishing an expert advisory group on the issue which provided expert knowledge and assisted in developing the multimedia material. Thirdly by stimulating discussion on the subject on a European level by holding an international conference.

The project began officially on the 1st of November 2004 and finished at a final conference in Reykjavík, Iceland the 20th of January 2006. The first eight months focused on the research part of the project while the latter half focused on developing and producing the multimedia material aimed for sports writers, instructors and coaches. Five trans-national meetings were held during the project period, one in each country partaking in the project.

The total budget of the project was 326.000 Euro of which 80% funding came from the European Union (the Community Framework Strategy on Gender Equality (2001-2005)). The remaining 20% were funded by the project promoter the Centre for Gender Equality in Iceland and several other Icelandic sources.

The project promoter, the Centre for Gender Equality in Iceland joined up with both national and trans-national partners. These were:

- Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, Norway and the University of Telemark, Norway
- Center for Equality Advancement, Lithuania
- Austrian Federal Chancellery - Sports division and the Ludwig Boltzmann Research Foundation for Politics and Interpersonal Relations (LBRF), Austria
- University of Genoa, Italy.
- The University of Akureyri Research Institute, Iceland
- University of Akureyri Faculty of Social Sciences and Law (Media Studies Program), Iceland
- Centre for Women's and Gender Studies, University of Iceland, Iceland (Project evaluator).

The Centre for Gender Equality in Iceland was the project promoter. The Centre coordinated the project which involved managing and planning all major organisational matters and was therefore responsible for the overall organization and realization of the project. The trans-national partners were responsible for realisation of the project within their countries. This included conducting the research within their countries and finding and communicating with two national experts from their countries to take part in the Expert Advisory Group. Each partner also had to organise the trans-national meetings which took place in their respective countries. The University of Akureyri Research Institute was responsible for the coordination of the research work in the project and for collecting and analysing the research material for Iceland. The Institute was also

responsible for writing the final research report. The University of Akureyri Faculty of Social Sciences and Law (Media Studies Program) was responsible for developing the multimedia material. The Centre for Women's and Gender Studies responsibility was to evaluate the project and write an evaluation report at the end of the project period. The purpose of this summary report is to provide an overview of the main findings of the SMS project. It is based on the research report¹ (available at www.gender.is/sms) which in turn contains more thorough information on the research part of the project and its results.

Sports, media and gender

Biological differences characterise men and women when it comes to competitive sports; however, sports have generally been defined and developed according to masculine models. Gender stereotypes and socialisation tend to maintain the traditional gender roles of men and women, with the media playing an important part. Thus gender-related sports images have evolved, portraying women as fit only for certain sports but not others. In addition, media companies and editorial decision-makers tend to think of male sports as being commercially more viable than female sports, so that they publish no lack of sports role models for boys, while the opposite tends to be true for girls. While studies show that the news world is in general male-dominated the world of sports news proves to be even more starkly so.

The biological nature of the two sexes is very significant in considering their respective participation in sports. Dissimilarities in strength increase the likelihood of males dominating the field of sports. Also, most of the European sports were developed to suit the male body above all, and their standards have traditionally been set by men, even if many physical activities are just as well or even better suited for women than men. A case in point is gymnastics, where women are generally accepted as being more flexible and are typically smaller, which represents an advantage in gymnastics. Men respond to this by not competing in the areas of gymnastics where these features matter most, such as the balance beam. Instead, they emphasise the gymnastic events best suiting them, for example the rings. In this way men simply refrain from competing under conditions not suitable to them, whereas women frequently force themselves to fit into systems created by and for men.

Two key words are common in the popular debate and ought to be distinguished at this point, i.e. sex and gender. Sex has come to refer to the biological differences of male and female, ordinarily established at the moment of conception. Gender, in contrast, has come to refer to the culturally determined understandings with which society constructs the sexual image -- namely cultural expectations regarding femininity and masculinity. Hence every society has certain concepts of what it means to be a man or woman, what

¹ See: Kjartan Ólafsson, editor (2006) *Sports, Media and Stereotypes - Women and Men in Sports and Media*. Akureyri, Centre for Gender Equality.

duties each entails and how the two are supposed to look and act. Gender, therefore, is a historically, socially and culturally constructed distinction between the sexes, with society at the same time moulding individuals in accordance with its expectations on gender. The bottom line is that whereas being male or female is an immediate biological fact, becoming a man or woman is a drawn-out cultural process. Indeed many modern scholars have suggested that rather than using the “sex-gender” terminology it would be more correct to speak of “doing gender”, since we indeed construct gender by our everyday actions and statements.

The cultural process transforming a male or female child into a man or woman is a quite complex process and generally called socialisation. Without a doubt, the media is one of the most important agents of socialisation in modern Europe, strongly influencing our beliefs, attitudes and values concerning ourselves, others, and the world around us. The impact of the media is especially powerful in that it does not merely reflect reality but even constructs it. One ramification of this is that when members of the media select what to broadcast or publish, they then portray to us a reality of their own choice. Thus media outlets not only offer us something to see, read or hear, but also shape our manner of sensing things and create our framework for comprehending society.

Because the media consistently seeks to present complicated issues in a clear, succinct manner to large-scale audiences, generalisations in the form of stereotypes become inherent in media presentations. This has at least three simple, yet very significant consequences:

1. Media outlets, run for the most part by commercial companies, need to conform with traditional beliefs and attitudes in order to maintain circulation or audience rates. This creates a tendency to build on prevailing stereotypes, be they negative or positive. Europe's traditional gender stereotypes are a pertinent example. As it is commonly acknowledged that men's sports sell better than women's sports, men's sports are what the media strives to deliver, while women's sports are given less attention.
2. The gender roles depicted by the sports media perpetuate customary distinctions between the sexes as to what is appropriate in sports. Researchers have even demonstrated that sports images often portray women as suitable for only certain fields, for instance for sports with an aesthetic element.
3. The media's portrayal of a male-dominated sports world hinders change, as girls in sports lack role models and encouragement to continue. On top of this, women's sports activities are often treated in the media as less important than those of men, which is one reason why it seems to be more difficult to motivate women to be physically active. This is especially evident among adolescent girls, who are prone to quit sports at the age of 15 or 16, while most boys continue into their twenties.

To be sure, the last few decades have seen dramatic changes in matters of gender equality in every sphere of European society; nonetheless, Europe itself is far from achieving a satisfactory status. Referring to the wider world, a study of seventy countries was carried out by Erin Research and the Global Media Monitoring Project in 2000, examining one day's worth of news – about 16,000 stories altogether. The study illuminated an indisputable male domination of the news, whose subjects in 78% of the instances were men. In sports news, moreover, 88% of the news subjects were men and only 12% women. In television newscasts, where sports constituted some 8% of all the news stories appearing worldwide, a mere 7% of these sports stories had women as their main focus. The situation in Europe does however differ somewhat from other regions of the world, in addition to considerable differences existing among individual countries in Europe. Now we will focus on the situation in Europe, based on the SMS study comparing Iceland, Lithuania, Austria, Italy, and Norway.

Data

The SMS comparative study used both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a description the sports news coverage in the five countries Austria, Italy, Lithuania, Norway and Iceland. In the quantitative part of the study more than 1.700 stories were analyzed and coded in a standardized way. Due to the different number of stories from each country the data has been weighted in order to level out the difference. Thus the data is analysed as if an equal number of stories would have come from the five countries. The data collection was concentrated on two periods. Firstly on specific days during the 2004 summer Olympics and secondly on several, rather randomly chosen “normal” days during the first half of 2005. Data was collected from both print- and electronic media, i.e. from daily newspapers and from television. It should be stressed that even though the quantitative data collection was fairly standardized it is by no way value-free as some of the information coded is based on the subjective evaluation of the individuals which examined the news stories.

Table 1: Overview of stories analysed in the quantitative part of the research project.

<u>Number of stories analyzed</u>	<u>Division between mediums</u>
Austria573	TV754
Lithuania134	Newspaper997
Norway199	Total 1.751
Italy577	
Iceland268	<u>Division between periods</u>
Total 1.751	Within Olympic period673
	Outside Olympic period 1.078
	Total 1.751

To complement the quantitative data and provide examples of how the gender stereotyping actually occurs in the daily news coverage of sports the research team in

each country also selected several examples for further analysis. To begin with the team in each country selected up to eight examples and aimed at providing stories from both newspapers and television, from both periods, on both men and women and showing both clear and not so clear examples of gender stereotyping. From these examples the Icelandic team choose two from each country which were analyzed in more detail. The results are discussed in the multi media material as well as in the research report and are also a part of the general findings of the research part of the project covered in this summary report. This short summary report does not however allow for a thorough discussion of these qualitative examples.

Additional data was also collected at a project meeting in Norway where members of the expert advisory group participated in a three hours long focus group discussion. These discussions were then transcribed and used as starting points for the analysis of the data. Thus the data was used to test some of the ideas that the members of the group had about sports media and stereotypes. This is discussed in more detail in the research report.

MAIN RESULTS

Men and women in sport

The most striking finding of the SMS comparative study is the obvious absence of women from European sports news. Out of every five reports, nearly four involve exclusively or almost exclusively men. As for the remaining part about, approximately one tenth involves men and women in fairly equal proportions, and a little more than in tenth is exclusively or close to exclusively on women.

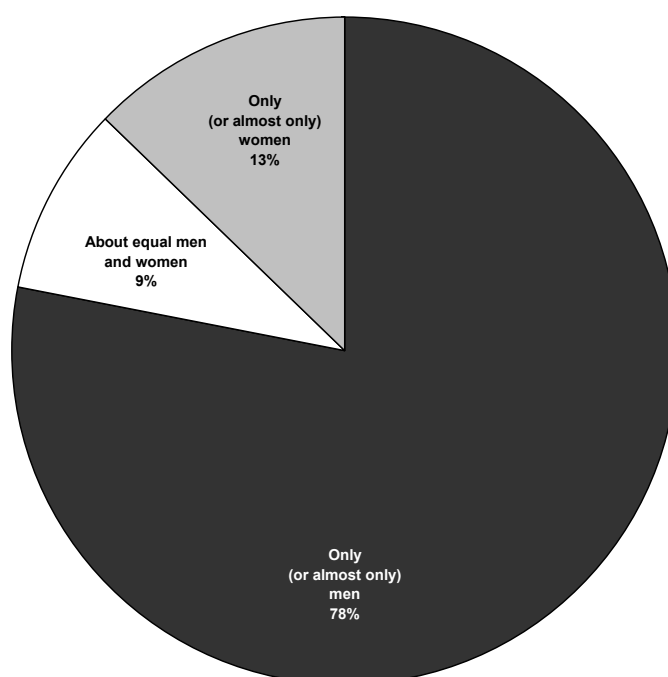


Figure 1. Proportion of stories by gender.

This absence of women is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it reveals that sports news definitely does not reflect the true proportions of sport practitioners by sex. Secondly, the male bias in sports news is likely to present young boys with a far greater number of role models than young girls are provided with. It is thus safe to say that European sports coverage centres on men, whether in terms of the amount of coverage or the number of reports. Every measurement, regardless of its approach, points in the same direction. For example, examining the sexual division of those quoted or consulted as sources for sports stories brings out the same pattern, with 65% of reports quoting or interviewing solely men.

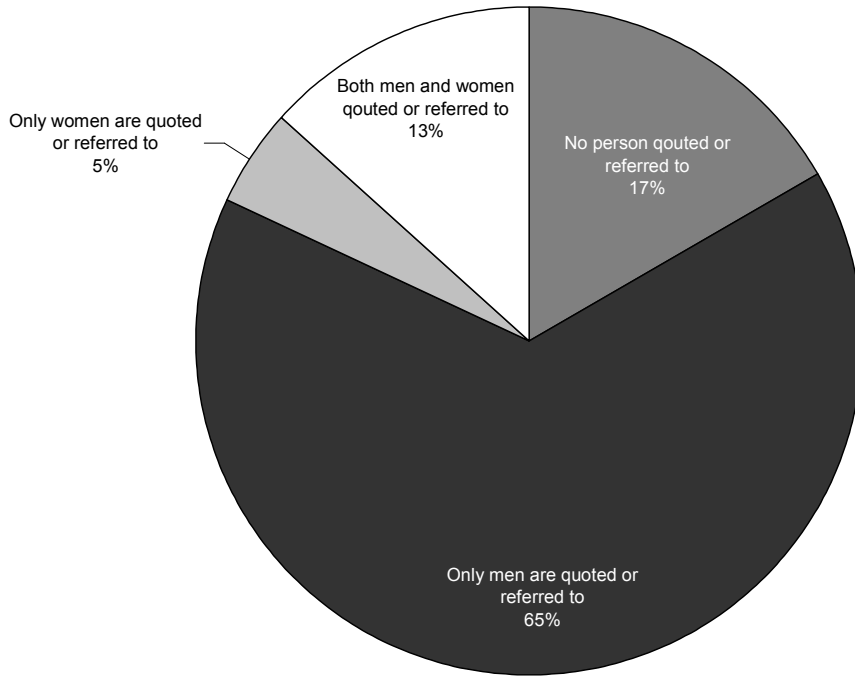


Figure 2. Persons quoted or referred to by gender.

In this respect it is striking to note that there are more reports simply telling about women than there are reports where women are allowed to express themselves in their own words. As we saw earlier, some 13% of the total news pieces were about women, but only in 5% of the pieces were women actually quoted. Moreover, men are frequently quoted on the performance and status of sportswomen, while it is substantially less likely for women to be quoted on the performance and status of sportsmen.

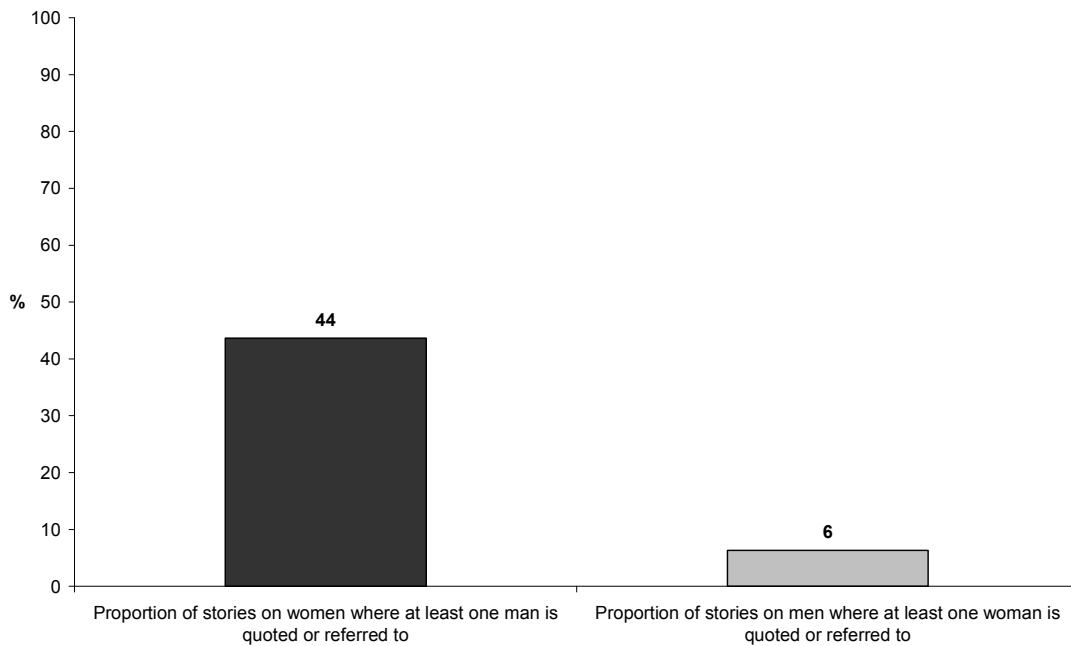


Figure 3. Persons of opposite gender quoted or referred to.

In keeping with this, nearly half (44%) of the total reports on women quote or refer to comments by men, whereas only about 6% of the total reports on men present quotes or references to comments by women. However, it is not only in the content of sports reporting that European women are short-changed; in addition, relatively few women are the authors of sports reports.

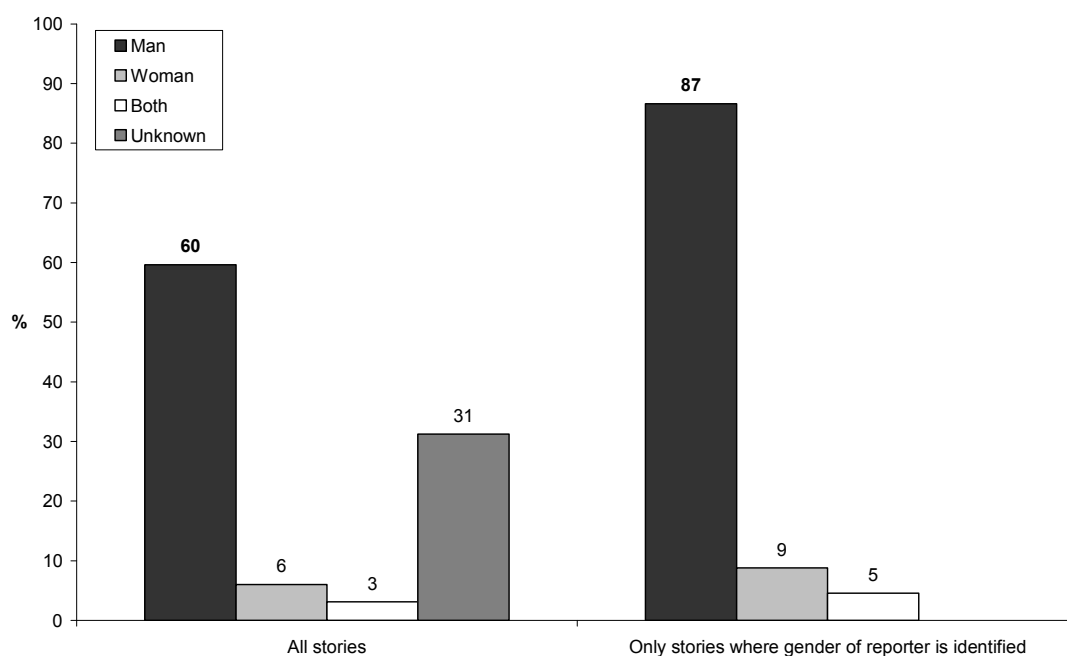


Figure 4. Gender of reporters.

It was not possible in all cases to determine the sex of the author of an article, but around two out of three stories examined in the SMS comparative study, or 60%, were clearly indicated as having been composed by men. Only very few such stories, or 6%, were clearly indicated as being composed by women. If only those news pieces where the sex of the reporter is known are counted, the numbers are even more lopsided in favour of men, who were listed as 87% of the reporters, while only about 9% of the pieces were clearly done by women and some 5% were composed by members of both sexes together. While these uneven ratios of male and female reporters are significant in themselves, they also offer a probable explanation for the generally male-dominated perspective in sports reporting and concomitantly at least a partial explanation for the comparative absence of women in sports reports. Furthermore, the fact that sports reporting is a man's world may be of consequence for how the reports are told and for media gate-keeping, determining which sports receive the most media attention.

Popularity of sports

Women are more visible in some sports, such as gymnastics, than in others. There are also sports, such as tennis, that have traditionally been practised with a degree of equality by both sexes. Finally, there are sports that are practised predominantly by men, or where tradition has at least focused attention on the male practitioners.

This table below indicates the popularity of sports according to the number of practitioners in the study countries. As we shall see, the attention of the media does not fully correspond with this table. The SMS comparative study made apparent that the majority of the stories examined involve sports where men have dominated. Media gatekeepers seem to have defined and established these sports as the most interesting and popular, perhaps reflecting norms in society at large. By reflecting such views, however, the media also reinforces them, including gender stereotypes with respect to sports participation. Football is the outstanding sport to consider, since it receives a unique amount of coverage.

Table 2: Five most popular sports² (est. number of practitioners) by countries

	Austria	Lithuania	Italy	Norway	Iceland
1st	Aerobic/fitness	Basketball	Football	Football	Football
2nd	Golf	Football	Volleyball	Skii	Golf
3rd	Tennis	Athletics	Basketball	Golf	Equestrian
4th	Netball	Aquatics	Wintersport	Handball	Handball
5th	Swimming	Handball	Judo	Gymnastics	Basketball

As the following graph shows by listing the ten most frequently reported sports, the number of football stories is more than double the number of stories about track and field, which ranks second. Team sports such as football, basketball and handball have however traditionally been dominated – at least in terms of media attention – by male practitioners, much more so than individual sports such as track and field, skiing or aquatics. This becomes clear when the story subjects are examined with respect to sex.

² It should be noted that the figures behind this table are not easily comparable between countries as it is different what exactly is counted and which sports are included in the overall analysis.

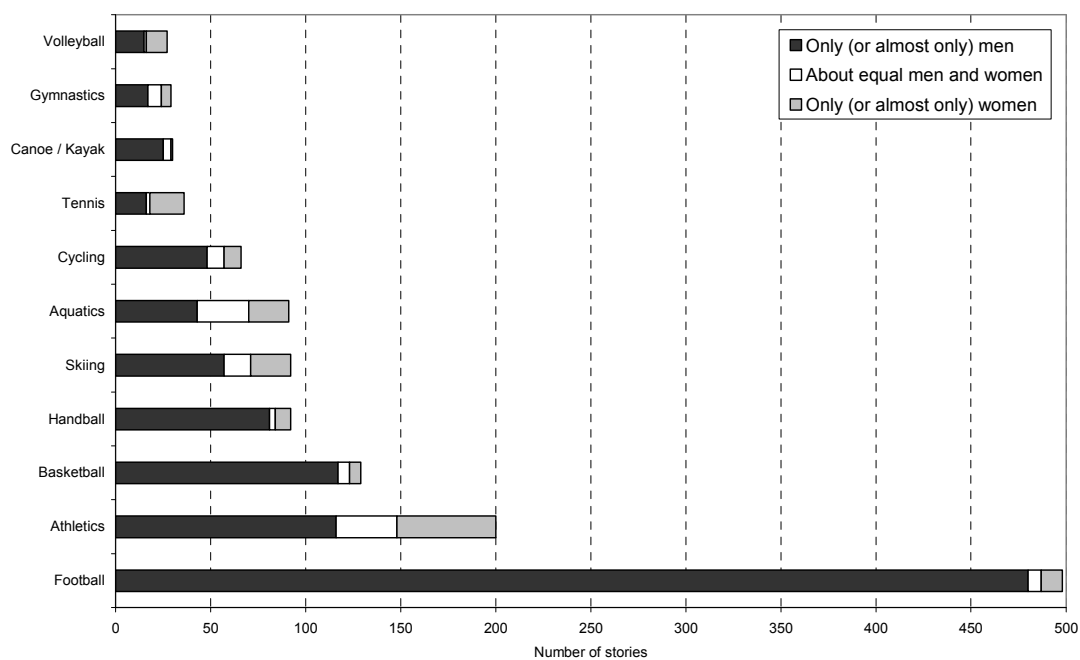


Figure 4. Number of stories by sports and gender.

The vast majority of football stories involve only men, with only a tiny fraction involving both men and women and an equally tiny fraction women only. Reports on basketball and handball are characterised by a similar tendency, whereas women are more visible in sports such as track and field, skiing, and aquatics, though still not as visible as men. Thus a basic tendency of European sports coverage is to focus mainly on sports traditionally dominated by men and indeed report mostly on the men in those sports. Football is particularly overbearing – that is to say, men’s football.

Although the main trend shows an indisputable male dominance in sports reports, the extent of this dominance fluctuates depending on the period. The SMS research suggests that general coverage is modified somewhat during periods of formal, structured international events such as the Olympic Games. The Olympic agenda consists of both men's and women's competitions, so that when the media spotlight is essentially on the games, reporting differs from “normal times”. Not only do the media report different sports, but it also reports more about women than at other times. This is made apparent by a comparison of sports reporting outside the Olympic period with that during the Olympic period.

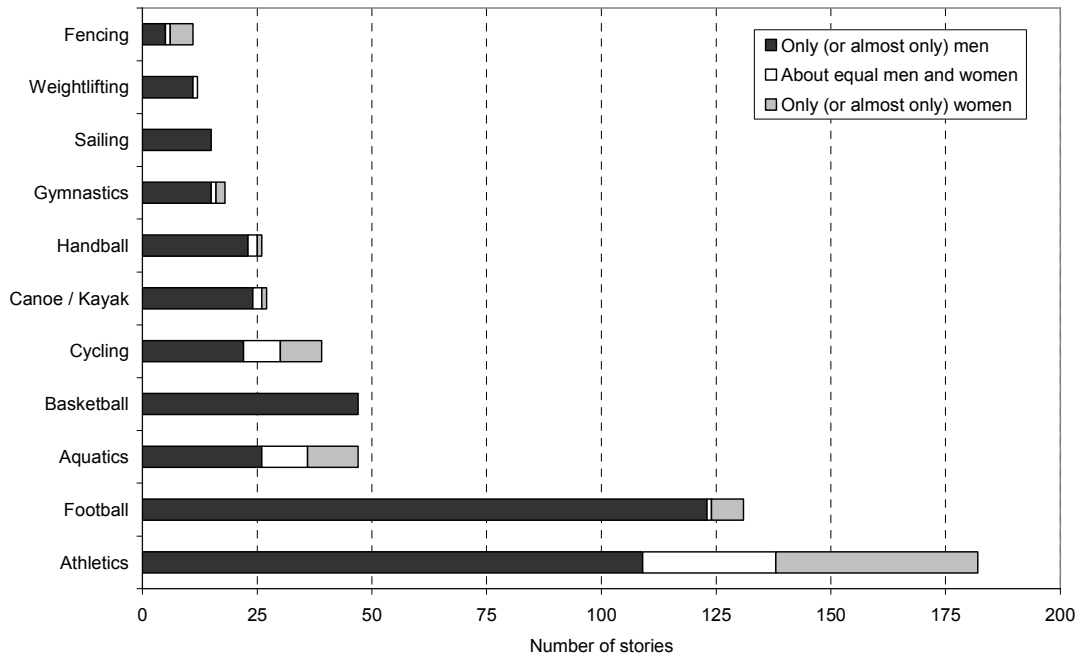


Figure 5: Number of stories within the Olympic period, by sports and gender.

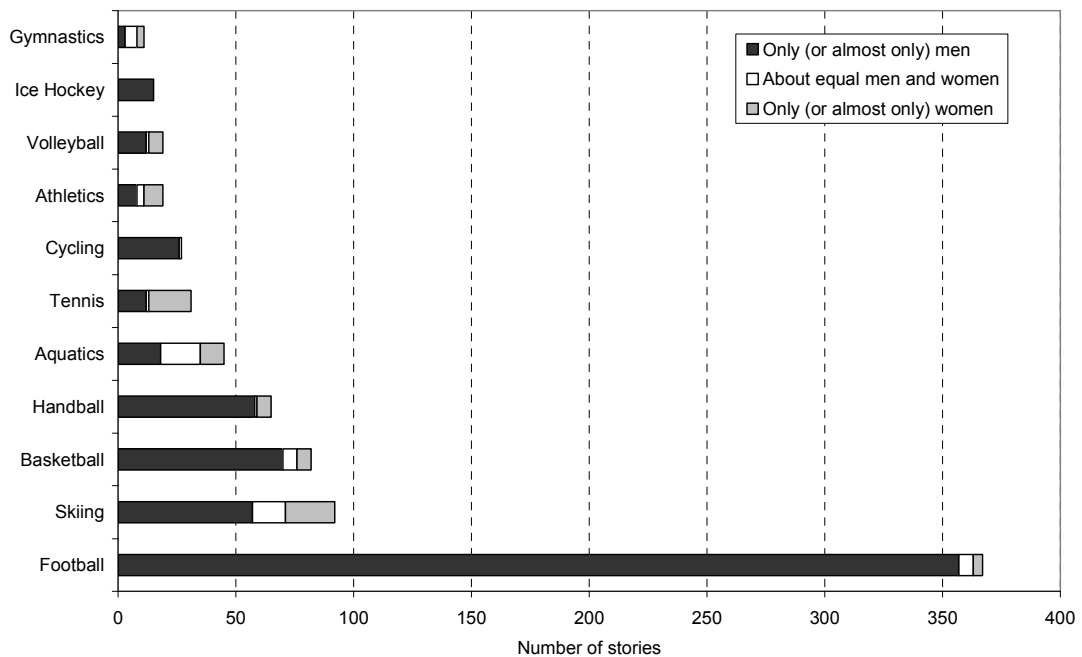


Figure 6: Number of stories outside the Olympic period, by sports and gender.

During the Olympic Games, the media directs its focus to a greater extent on track and field than on football, indeed producing a slightly diverging overall picture of sports than during the more “normal” periods. This has strong significance, because some of the sports that move to the forefront of the sport pages during the Olympics are not so male-dominated as the sports dealt with most outside of the Olympic season. For this reason, sportswomen have a much greater presence in the media during the Olympic

Games than otherwise. It is important to note in this regard that the Olympic Committee has established a gender equality policy which could be a major factor in this outcome.

Focus of the stories

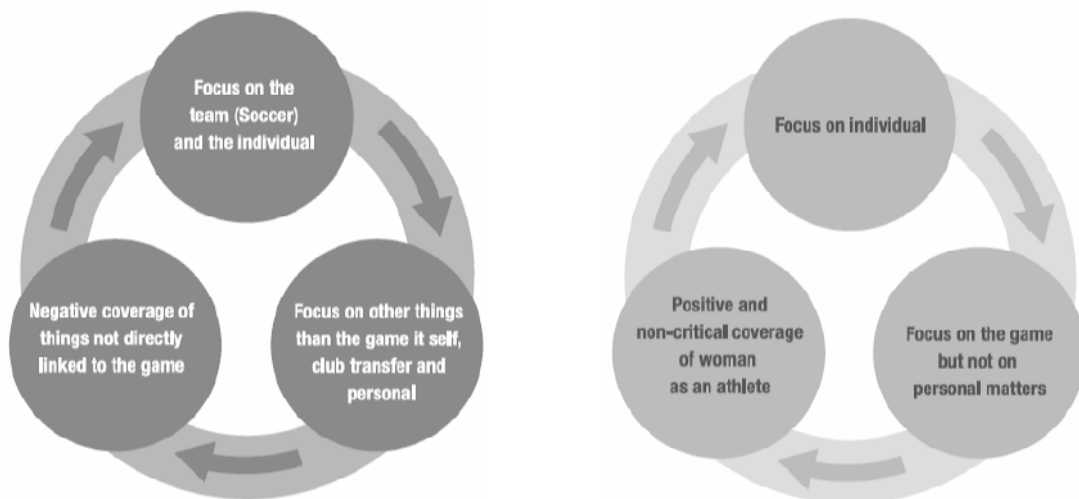
So far the subject matter of European sports reports has been analysed, with consideration for the types of sports and the sex of practitioners, and the outcome is clearly that men dominate. Furthermore, men also greatly outnumber women in regard to who does the reporting. In order to discover more about the characteristics of sports reporting, it is useful to investigate the focus of news pieces, which reveals a lot about how a report develops. The SMS comparative study examined the extent to which five issues characterised sports stories, all of which are of interest:

1. The focus of the story was on the game – the focus was not on the game.
2. The focus of the story was positive – the focus was negative.
3. The focus of the story was on the individual – the focus was on the team.
4. The focus of the story supported stereotypes – the focus combated stereotypes.
5. The focus of the story had sexual implications – the focus had no sexual implications.

A certain pattern emerges when the first three issues are examined with regard to the sexes. In stories about women, the focus tends to be on the game or that particular sport, not on various other things related to the sportswoman, such as a potential transfer between teams or her private life. Furthermore, the focus of stories about women tends to be rather positive and in many cases far from as critical as in stories about men. Finally, the focus of stories about women tends to be on the individual rather than the group. This is not surprising in light of what was said earlier about female sports, since reports about women are mostly on sports for individuals, such as aquatics and track and field, rather than on team sports such as football, basketball or handball.

A somewhat opposite picture emerges concerning reports about men, stories about whom are less likely to focus on the game itself and more likely to focus on such external matters as the players' private lives, club transfers, or further aspects considered intriguing by the media. Not surprisingly, sportsmen enjoy a less positive tone than sportswomen, because coverage not concentrated on the game is much more negative than that aimed directly at the game. Another implication is that men are more likely to become celebrities than women, seen as newsworthy in their private lives off the field as well as while performing as sports heroes on the field. The price of this fame is nevertheless that a considerable proportion of the treatment may be deemed negative.

The following explanations might make the situation clearer: In the case of males in sports, the focus is on both the team and the individual, even though team sports such as football, basketball and handball are frequently discussed. Males are more likely to become celebrities, and media interest is directed not only at what such celebrities do on the field, but also in their daily lives. The themes regarded as newsworthy in the personal lives of celebrities are more often negative themes rather than positive ones; therefore, the negative treatment of male athletes is considerable. The other possible explanation for why sportsmen receive more negative or critical discussion than sportswomen is that men's sports are often considered to be a more serious business than women's sports. While women's sports are dealt with in a relatively nonchalant manner, men's sports are in some cases almost a matter of life and death. Not achieving a goal in a man's event would therefore occasion critique, while this would not be so in a woman's sport, which is evaluated as less momentous. The upshot is that the male athlete becomes even more newsworthy, gathering fame both individually and as a part of a team; this then generates further coverage focused on the individual and the team and has a multiplying effect on coverage as a whole.



In the case of females in sports, on the other hand, the focus is directed first and foremost at the individual, largely because the sports that women participate in and receive coverage for are often individual sports instead of team sports. This contrasts starkly with the coverage of men's sports, as does the focus involved in the next issue. When women's sports are reported, the focus tends to centre on the game, not on something extraneous to it. This implies that women do not become celebrities as readily as men, and the media expresses less interest in what they do off the field. Thus it follows that the discussion of women tends to be more positive and less critical in nature than the discussion of men. However, the other side of the coin from what was just said about men applies here; i.e., that women's sports are considered less important than men's sports and for that reason do not excite as much heated criticism and negative treatment.

These findings indicate that the media has a tendency on the whole to portray sportswomen differently from sportsmen. Men tend to become celebrities more frequently, with all the critical, negative discussion involved, not least because they are perceived as doing something of real importance.

Women, in contrast, are described positively, with a focus on the sport itself. However, the underlying notion is that women's sports matter less than men's. All of this exercises an impact, by supporting the existing gender stereotypes that society nurtures. In the analysis of the stories the coders were asked to evaluate to what extent the stories could be said to either enhance or work against stereotypes. This is of course a crude measurement but it is interesting to note that the coders are more likely to say that stories on women rather than men are in some ways enhancing stereotypes; this even though many stories are simply a statement of facts, e.g. on results from matches.

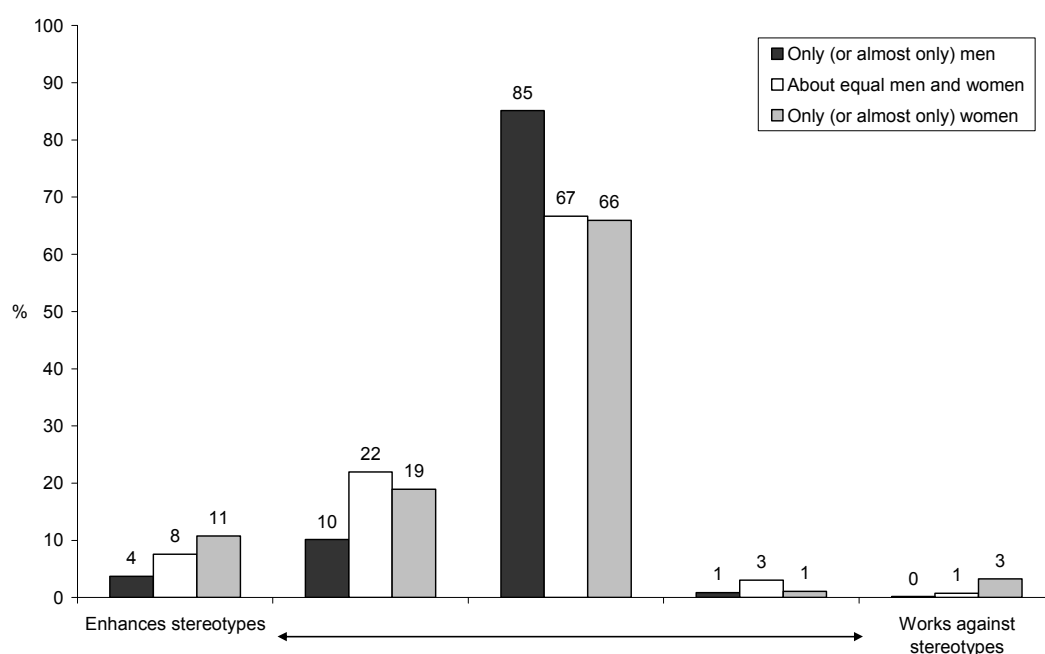


Figure 6: Estimation of to what extent the stories are enhancing or working against stereotypes.

The most immediate message here is that the vast majority of sports reports do not build on classical stereotypes of the genders. Clearly, sports reporters are not preoccupied with the social roles of the sexes. In spite of this, a considerable portion of the reports can be said to affect stereotypes, with some combating existing gender stereotypes but many more actually reinforcing traditional images. Furthermore, the reports tend to buttress female stereotypes to a greater extent than male stereotypes. Nearly one out of three sports stories does, to some extent, support traditional female stereotypes.

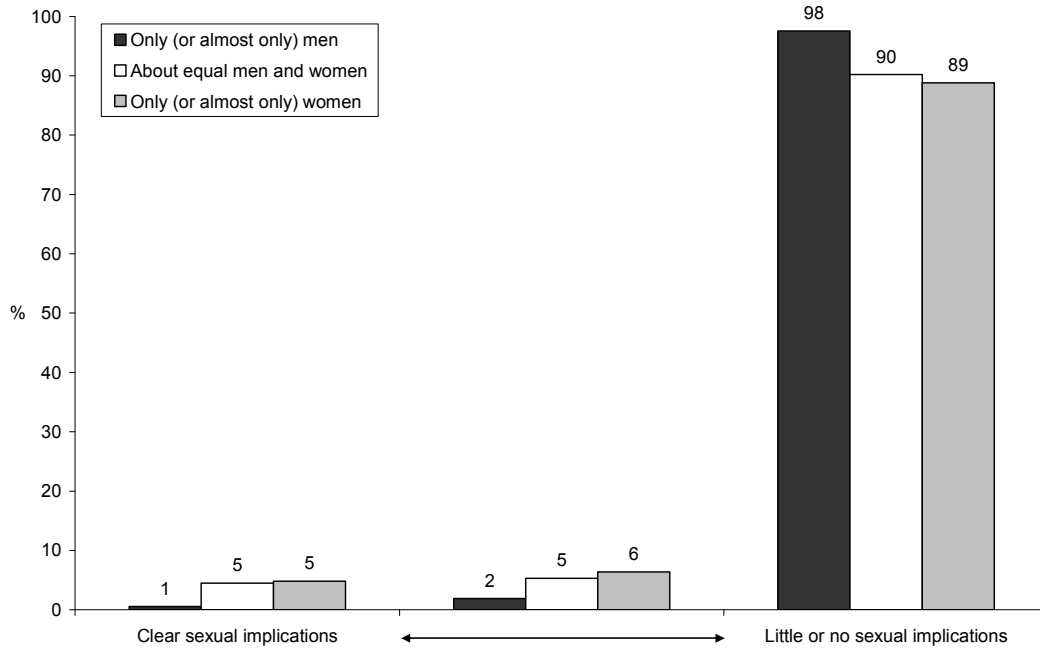


Figure 7: Estimation of sexual implications by gender.

This tendency can be observed to take a step farther, if by shifting the focus to stereotyping and sexual undertones. Although relatively few reports have obvious sexual connotations, such can be found and, as might be expected, are more common when the material deals with women than men. Up to 10% of the reports on women have hints of sexuality and around half of them, or 5% of the total, communicate sexuality clearly. The ways in which this is done vary widely, but in the most extreme cases women are displayed in a vulgar manner, as sex objects.

CONCLUSIONS

The SMS comparative study shows clear distinctions in how men and women in sports are portrayed by the media.

Firstly, there are far fewer stories about women than men. Also, a large proportion of the reports deal with team sports, where men tend to be highly visible. Women receive what little visibility they have primarily in news about individual rather than team sports.

Secondly, there is a strong tendency to idolise the leading men in sports, focusing on them as social celebrities as well as sportsmen. Thus the sports media not only covers men more extensively in general, but also often discusses aspects about them that are unrelated to the sport itself. Women, on the other hand, neither find their way into the media as readily nor, when they do, does the focus diverge much from their role as sportswomen. As a result, men must pay the price of fame, with many of their stories having a negative undertone, while women enjoy a relatively positive tone. An evident reason for the more critical treatment and the idolisation of men in sports as opposed to women is that women's sports are not considered as important as men's sports, whether by the media or the public. European sports coverage thereby reflects and interacts with public opinion and in fact reinforces traditional gender stereotyping.

Thirdly, on the whole, sports news neither reinforces nor combats stereotypes. However, in a number of stories there is a tendency – especially regarding the presentation of sportswomen – to support traditional stereotypes. Indeed, SMS researchers found that almost one in every three stories about women corroborated stereotypes to some extent, though it is particularly important to note that the stereotype connotations of a particular story or photo are not always obvious and are rarely the result of a conscious decision by the reporter or photographer. What lends this significance to the material in question is its context – the context of a world of sports reporting that is dominated by men.

Fourthly, there are relatively very few female sports reporters, so that media gate-keeping is loaded with male norms and values. The disproportionate sex ratio of sports reporters in itself creates a tendency to reiterate traditional stereotypes.

All of these problems have to be given special attention. Special caution should however be exercised in how the media, sports authorities and athletes themselves go about raising sportswomen to the media status they deserve. Their under-representation should not be rectified by “selling” female athletes as sex objects or by subjecting them to the roles laid down by traditional gender stereotypes.

Although the media coverage of women seriously needs to be magnified and multiplied, it is of vital importance to do this by multiplying the exemplary reporting already being done, not by magnifying the content of stereotypes and sexism.

Sports, media and stereotypes are complex phenomena, with no single authority empowered to rectify these issues once and for all. Still, the authorities can contribute policy landmarks, and strategic groups such as sports trainers and sports reporters have a vital role. In the final analysis, however, these matters concern everyone and are a question of mending norms and values that are deeply encroached in our culture and therefore can only be altered by creating a collective awareness in society about their meaning.

