



Gender equality in media representation of sport in Ireland

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Table of Contents

Foreword	1
Introduction	2
Chapter 1: Literature Review	3
Under-representation	3
Misrepresentation	4
Women as a sports audience	5
Women in Media Production	6
Chapter 2: Methodology	8
Chapter 3: Findings	10
Finding 1: Why Gender Inequality is an Issue	10
Finding 2: Some improvements towards greater equality	12
Finding 3: Challenges to improving media coverage of Women’s Sport	15
3.1 Media production constraints	15
3.2 Structure of the workforce is a constraint	17
3.3 Audience as a challenge	20
3.4 Key Findings	24
Chapter 4: Conclusions: Guidance for better practice	25
National Governing Bodies have a role to play	25
Sponsors have a role to play	27
Male allies are needed	28
Role for quotas	28
A Role for all interested parties	29
Bibliography	30

Foreword

The Federation of Irish Sport are delighted to collaborate with Dr Anne O' Brien and Maynooth University on the research question **'why journalists and media producers create gendered sports content in the ways that they do'**.

The intersection of gender and sports has been a battleground for decades, not only in the arenas and fields where athletes compete but also in the media that shapes our understanding and perception of these sports. While the world of sports has long been dominated by male athletes, the portrayal of women in sports media has often been relegated to the margins, framed through stereotypes, and undersold in terms of talent and achievement.

This issue of gendered sports content in media is not just about numbers - despite recent improvements, the disparity in coverage, representation, and opportunities is stark - but it is also about the deeper, systemic patterns that influence how athletes of different genders are portrayed and valued. While male athletes are frequently celebrated as heroes and role models, female athletes are often depicted through narrow, outdated lenses that focus on their physical appearance, their roles as mothers or wives, or their emotional narratives rather than their prowess and dedication in their respective sports.

This disparity goes beyond the stories that are told—it shapes the very culture of sports, influencing who gets to be seen as a legitimate athlete, who gets sponsorships, and whose achievements are worth remembering. The absence of women's sports in mainstream media reinforces a broader cultural narrative about the value of women's contributions to society.

This work, which explores the complexities and challenges of gender content creation in sports media, is an important step in understanding the forces at play and envisioning a more inclusive and equitable future. It reminds us that the fight for gender equality in sports is not just about advocating for women to be seen and heard; the key discoveries of the research are about shifting the broader cultural framework and understanding that we all have our part to play if we are to tackle the challenges!

I would like to thank Dr O' Brien for her dedication and expertise in producing this report and also to thank all the journalists and editors who participated in interviews and provided information. This work could not have been undertaken without the support of Sport Ireland and the research grant scheme, our sincere thanks for their financial support.

Mary O' Connor

Chief Executive Officer

Introduction

Sport is a powerful tool for social inclusion and the creation of community, but research shows that women are systematically excluded from sports coverage in the media. While certain individual sportswomen or some teams are acknowledged for their achievements, as a cohort, women are still denied legitimacy in sports media. This occurs in three ways, through representation practices, through assumptions about women as an audience for sports content and through the fact that women constitute a minority of media workers within sports content production.

The way women appear, or disappear, in media matters because mediations are so ubiquitous in social life that there is no longer any world of sport separate to or beyond mediations of sport. The consequence of these patterns is that women's sporting lives and views and participation are relegated, presented as of lesser importance than men's involvement in sport. This representation of women's engagement in sport as marginal or lesser serves only to further exclude them from the arena and perpetuates a situation where the presumption is that sport is primarily a 'man's world'. This problem has obvious solutions, leading to calls for increases in the quantity of media content about sportswomen, for changes to the quality of representation, for the recognition of women as an audience for sports content and for 'the development of journalists' awareness of gender issues in reporting' (Liston and O' Connor in Free & O' Boyle, 2020: 153). It is to this latter solution that this study is addressed.



International research has shown that women in sport media are generally under-represented and frequently mis-represented, but there is a large gap in knowledge about why this is the situation.

This report outlines the findings from research with media workers on gender inequality in sports content in Ireland. International research has shown that women in sport media are generally under-represented and frequently mis-represented, but there is a large gap in knowledge about why this is the situation. This research project asked Irish journalists and media producers, reporters and presenters directly for their perspectives on why content about women and sport is produced as it is and the report offers an account of their lived experiences of producing women's sports for Irish media. The structure of the report is as follows, in Chapter 1 international research on this question is outlined in detail. The methodology underpinning the research is explained in Chapter 2. The key findings regarding challenges identified are discussed in Chapter 3 and suggestions for practices that might create more equal representation are outlined in Chapter 4. With a specific focus on how journalists and media producers see their experiences of creating sports content, this research unpacks in detail the logics and production process that construct women's sports in media. It offers an insightful understanding of the wider context and all of the factors that lead to the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women in sports media. It gathers expertise currently available within Irish sports media to offer solutions to improve the landscape for women in sport and women's sports coverage.

Chapter 1

Literature Review

Under-representation

UNESCO (2018) have established that while 40% of all sports participants internationally are women, their sports receive only 4% of all media coverage. The Global Media Monitoring Project (2020) notes that sport is among the top three topics in which women are least likely to appear. Women comprise only 14% of news subjects in sports-related topics worldwide, while men comprise 86% of subjects (GMMP, 2020). This underrepresentation is consistent across media platforms. In an analysis of television coverage of women's sport from 1999 to 2009 Messner & Cooky (2010) found that despite a decline in the use of sexist language, women were still significantly under-represented.

Similarly, in print media, Cooky et al note in a 25-year longitudinal study in the US that the lion's share of print coverage is still given to the 'big three' of men's pro and college football, basketball, and baseball while women's coverage remains 'dismally low' (2015: 261). As Lumby et al note this is the situation 'despite the ongoing successes and strong participation levels of women in sport' (2010: v). In terms of social media and its capacity to deviate from the norms of legacy media, Heinicken (2015) proposes that social media platforms are leading the way with changes in content production that enables female athletes and content creators to construct their identities in ways that challenge mainstream sports media discourses. However, other empirical studies show that the situation is not quite so positive. In Spain only 1.6% of sports news on Twitter (now X) concerns women and sport (Ada-Lamerias & Rodríguez-Castro, 2021). Sainz-de-Baranda et al confirm this finding in another study of Twitter use in Spain that shows coverage of women on social media 'depends on the sport they engage in and not their accomplishments in the sport' (2020: 5199). Similarly in the US, Romney and Johnson (2020) note that despite growth in female participation, Instagram coverage from the four

major US networks lags significantly behind men's athletics. Social media seems to reproduce the problem of underrepresentation evident in legacy media.

In addition to being underrepresented numerically and across various media platforms, the extent of women's exclusion from coverage also varies according to type of sport. A consistent pattern is the underrepresentation of team sports relative to individual sport. During the 2012 London Olympic Games the USA Women's soccer team won its fourth gold medal in five Olympics yet only received 1% of airtime during primetime (Coche & Tuggle, 2016). Similarly, the USA Women's basketball team won their fifth consecutive gold medal and received no airtime whatsoever (Coche & Tuggle, 2016). In comparison the USA men's basketball team received half an hour of coverage after winning (*only*) their second consecutive gold medal (Coche & Tuggle, 2016 cited in Villalon & Weiller-Abels, 2018 *emphasis added*). In individual sports, during the 2012 London Olympic Games it was shown that NBC for the first time devoted more airtime to women's sports than men's but 43% of coverage was where the athletes were featured in a swimsuit or bikini (Coche & Tuggle, 2016). In the

2018 Winter Olympics women's representation on NBC was at 52.2% of airtime, but in non-primetime programming the balance tipped back in favour of men (Arth et al, 2019).

In the Irish context specifically, there is almost a complete dearth of large-scale quantitative data on women's representation in sports media. As Liston & O' Connor note, 'Despite a recommendation from a 2004 Oireachtas joint-committee report on women in sport... there has been no action to instigate longitudinal research into the scope and nature of media reporting of women's sports' (in Free & O' Boyle, 2020: 138). Dunne in his examination of photographic coverage of sportswomen in a major Irish broadsheet print newspaper, *The Irish Times*, based upon a data set of over 1,600 images collected over a 4-month period, finds that less than 4% of photographs were of sportswomen (Dunne in Free & O' Boyle, 2020: 154). In short, the Irish situation with regard to under-representation of women in sport largely mirrors the international research, as also proves to be the case with patterns of misrepresentation described below.

Misrepresentation

A cluster of concepts, such as ambivalence, trivialisation, stereotyping, gender-marking, de-athleticisation and personalisation have emerged over decades of research to explain the practices of misrepresentation that pertain to women in sport media. Duncan and Hasbrook in 1988 introduced the concept of ambivalence to describe contradictory media messages about women and sport. Mary Jo Kane in 1989 first asserted that women are underrepresented and trivialised in the media by being presented in stereotypically feminine ways. Adams and Tuggle (2004) highlighted one such method of stereotyping whereby individual sporting events such as golf or tennis were deemed more socially acceptable for women and received more coverage than other sports that featured women in 'unfeminine' contact situations, as required of most team sports. Romeny and Johnson more recently note in the US females are more likely 'to appear alongside a male and are more likely be shown in culturally "appropriate" sports and in nonathletic roles' (2020:738). Dashper (2018) noted processes of 'gender-marking' where in-depth analysis creates buzz around male competition, but the same



...the use of descriptors 'girls' or 'young ladies' or 'ladies' in sports content and the use of female athletes' first names far more frequently than those of their male peers are also mechanisms that demean the athleticism of women

(Liston and O' Connor)

efforts are not applied to women's competitions, which are always more lacklustre and framed as 'women's sport' rather than simply as a competition.

Liston & O' Connor also note practices of gender-marking and de-athleticisation as key features of women's misrepresentation in sport (in Free & O' Boyle, 2020). Descriptors of femininity, sexuality, emotions and appearance are often used to describe female athletes, suggesting 'they have athletic abilities rather than athleticism' (Smith, 2016: 284). Kaskan & Ho (2016) note the use of sexist language to de-athleticise women during the 2012 London Olympics when two long jump winners were asked by a media commentator 'Where's that Olympic smile?'. The athletes were women first and their achievements were demeaned in ways that were highly gendered, an issue that also arose with a Eurosports commentator and camera operators in the most recent 2024 Paris Olympics (Le Monde, 2024). Villalon & Weiller-Abels (2018) similarly show that family status as wives, mothers, girlfriends, or any other aspects of personal lives are often emphasised over sporting ability. In a similar vein, the use of descriptors 'girls' or 'young ladies' or 'ladies' in sports content and the use of female athletes' first names far more frequently than those of their male peers are also mechanisms that demean the athleticism of women (Liston and O' Connor in Free & O' Boyle, 2020:150). As Liston & O' Connor note, '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 are positioned as less threatening and more appealing to dominant ideals' (in Free & O' Boyle, 2020:150).

Cooky et al (2015) observe a welcome decline in the previous tendency to present women as sexualized objects of humour but note that this has been replaced by a tendency to present women athletes in their roles as mothers. Frequently, sportswomen's appearance is emphasised over their skill (Gurung & Chrouser, 2007). For instance, the first woman to win the Ballon D'Or, Ada Hegerberg, was asked to 'twerk' on stage when presented with her award (McKirdy, 2018). The emphasis on physical attractiveness erases athletic characteristics such as psychological determination and promotes objectification (Gurung & Chrouser, 2007). Female athletes have also faced direct criticism over their appearance. Olympians in 2012 were described by media commentators as 'too fat' further reinforcing the objectification of the athlete's physical appearance rather than acclaim for their athletic talents (Smith, 2016). Or in the most recent Olympics commentators still devalued athletes gold medal achievements by trivialising them for 'hanging around doing their makeup' (The Guardian, 2024). Women's sports are frequently only reported when women win (Cooky et al, 2015). Because of these misrepresentations audiences cannot endow the same respect to female sports as to male sports (Liang, 2011). Cooky et al's (2021) study of women's televised sport reveals little change in the quantitative apportionment of coverage of women's and men's sports over the past 30 years. These processes of marginalization, trivialization, ambivalence, stereotyping, gender-marking and sexualization of sports women (Bruce, 2016) still endure in various ways and have become embedded in the process of sports content production, which ultimately underserves women as a media audience.

Women as a sports audience

Women's sports spectatorship has been relatively ignored by researchers as well as media outlets for a long time (Schultz and Linden, 2014). Very little quantitative data exists on Irish audiences for women's sport. Nielsen research indicated that just 3% of print and 4% of online coverage went to women's sport and less than 20% of television coverage went to women or mixed-sex sports in Ireland (Liston & O' Connor, 2020). Internationally, while women have always been present in sport, their presence and legitimacy as sports fans 'continues to be questioned by many' (Toffoletti

and Mewett, 2012: xii). Amongst sports editors, women's sports have been treated as less valuable than men's. In justifying this inequality sports editors have argued that they merely reflect the truth around women's sports, that audiences are simply not interested (Laucella et al, 2017; Dashper, 2017). In reality, sports editors make selection decisions based on routines, institutional norms, organizational requirements, perceived reader interests, and personal attitudes about women's sports (Laucella et al, 2017: 774) all of which are heavily gendered (O' Brien, 2019). However, editors present these masculinist approaches as gender 'neutral' or simply normative. Sports journalists and editors constitute gatekeepers to content and while they view themselves as 'arbitrators of what readers want' (Hardin, 2005:65) reflecting objective reality, in actuality their approaches are rooted in patriarchal beliefs, values and norms. The idea that women are not interested in sports, or that women's sport is less valuable, or that it has no viable audience are all based more on 'myth than reality' (Hardin, 2005:72). As Schmit (2017:249) has documented,

In the United States, women account for 27% of regular readers of newspaper sports sections (Hardin, 2005)... 43% of the audience for the Federation Internationale de Football Association World Cup Final (Nielsen, 2010), and 45.9% of the audience for the Super Bowl (van Riper, 2011)... Women now make up the majority of viewers of the Olympics, and comprised 53.8% of the television audience for the 2012 Olympics (Consoli, 2012).

Similarly Liston, Hellstrand & O' Leary (2024) evidence record-breaking interest in the Irish soccer team's participation in the World Cup in 2023, where the women's opening match became the biggest live streamed event of the year for RTÉ while their second match was the most watched women's team event in history with an average of 551,000 viewers for the match or 68.9% of audience share, and 234,883 live streams on the online player. This data demonstrates that women constitute a substantial audience for sports media content, despite the fact that within that content there are still ongoing and significant issues with the quantity and quality of women's representation, challenges that arise from how content is produced and who is involved in its production.

Women in Media Production

Evidence shows that media outlets with female editors have more coverage of women's sports (Hardin, 2005). Moreover, these outlets engage in less stereotypical coverage (Kian & Hardin, 2009). Women reporters use more women as sources in their coverage (Hardin et al, 2007). However simply adding more women to the sports beat will not in itself overturn the masculinist hegemony that dominates sports media content. Women working in the sports media industry face significant obstacles to their equal participation and to their progress at work, which can ultimately serve to push women out of sports media work. Women are a minority of workers in sports production comprising only 10-12% of the US industry (Acosta & Carpenter, 2015) and under 10% across several European countries, where marginalization of female authorship has not seen any significant improvement from 2006 to 2020 (Boczek, Dogruel & Schallhorn, 2023). In Spain, few women can effectively access the labour field of sports journalism, and those who do find themselves in a space dominated by men (Faedo, Corrius & Ginesta, 2024:1211). Rather than progress, 'women are facing "pseudo-progress", a more appropriate term for the appearance of a change that is not actually occurring' (Faedo, Corrius & Ginesta, 2024:1211). Despite an increase in the number of women graduating from Media and Communications degrees, internationally the number of women sports journalists remains low (UNESCO, 2018). This may be due in part to, if not a hostile environment, then at least a male-dominated environment experienced by women working in this sector.

Sports journalism departments routinely promote and reinforce a bias in favour of men (Hardin & Shain, 2005; Organista & Mazur, 2020) and women experience a negative bias and discrimination within the structures and cultures of the media workplace (O' Brien, 2019). In terms of enduring structures in the media workplace the allocation of roles is heavily gendered, with men dominating in high status roles and women more prevalent in supportive or administrative roles. As Schoch noted 'An overwhelmingly greater number of male journalists cover the most prestigious subjects and produce greater numbers of technical match reports, taking on what are considered to be the "hardest" news stories. Women are restricted to

covering less prestigious sports, women's sports, and tend to be allocated "soft" stories to report' (2022:746). This allocation of roles in a gendered pattern subsequently dictates the speed, rate, and extent of career progression. Men were promoted on potential and faster over the course of their careers (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) which means they are more likely to achieve senior leadership roles, whereas right from the start women were promoted more slowly, and side-lined again at mid-career if they had children (O' Brien & Liddy, 2020), meaning they could rarely achieve senior roles. In Ireland only 12% of senior decision makers in media industries are women (O' Brien, 2017). Steiner describes the glass architecture that limits women's attempts to gain high status roles.

Glass doors leave women on the outside looking in... glass walls prevent women moving laterally out of jobs with no promotion prospects into ones with upward tracks... and glass cliffs are the impossible leadership roles women only get when nobody else will take them... and all the while men take the glass escalator of an assumed upward trajectory (Steiner, 2015).

Even when women achieve leadership roles it is more difficult for them to act outside of the norm, because they are frequently the only woman in the room and so more salient, any mistakes become the mistakes of their whole gender, rather than just one individual's mistake.

In addition to media industries being structured in ways that are gendered, so too the media work culture, its system of beliefs and values, also serves to invisibly privilege men. This is observable in a number of ways (O' Brien, 2019). Firstly, the perspective applied to content is normatively masculine, regardless of how many women are involved in decisions about content. In the sports media workplace, given the dominant association of sports with hegemonic masculinity, by seeking to enter that space women may be at a minimum routinely questioned or even understood as a threat to masculinity (Holland & Cortina, 2016). Secondly, women routinely get channelled into or out of the production of content based on presumptions about women's interests. It is generally presumed women can't produce men's content, so they are pigeonholed into female 'appropriate' content. As Hardin and Shain put it, coverage of high-profile men's sports continues to



Frequently because women experience such strong ‘push’ factors moving them out of the industry and simultaneous pull factors or expectations that they are responsible for most of the care work in the home, oftentimes women can be forced ultimately to leave their sports media careers [Hardin et al., 2008, O’ Brien, 2014, Harrison, 2018]

claim a more respectable status. Thus, if women want to advance in their careers, the ‘low-rung beat assignment’ of women’s sports is not desirable—although they are often placed there [Organista & Mazur, 2020]. Third, women’s physical appearance as well as their behaviours are routinely promoted or punished, depending on the extent to which they correlate with industry norms and expectations of acceptable femininity. Fourthly, women are expected to subscribe to a work culture that values traditionally masculine practices of long working hours, a rigid separation of career and life, and a lack of workplace flexibility [O’ Brien, 2019]. For many women, media work generally demands a level of availability that was often impossible for women to give because they were engaged in both career and care responsibilities, women in Ireland do 76% of all care-work [NWCI, 2009].

Women talked about other instances of how the work culture’s gender bias sometimes became outright discrimination against women [Harrison, 2018]. Women also report problems with sexual harassment [Whiteside and Hardin, 2012] which become increasingly problematic as they gain status [McLaughlin et al, 2012].

Female sports journalists are exposed to harassment both in social media and in their professional lives [Demir & Ayhan, 2022]. The most frequently received comments on Twitter by female sports journalists are derogatory and sarcastic, focusing on the physical appearance of women, including emotional harassment, physical threat, and profanity [Demir & Ayhan, 2022]. These experiences can cause women to frame

themselves as the problem [Miloch, 2005], leaves them to manage the additional emotional labour required to remain in the workplace [Harrison, 2018], or leads them to try to ‘prove’ their worth rather than to see themselves simply as workers with an equal right to participate in the cultural production of sport. Frequently because women experience such strong ‘push’ factors moving them out of the industry and simultaneous pull factors or expectations that they are responsible for most of the care work in the home, oftentimes women can be forced ultimately to leave their sports media careers [Hardin et al., 2008, O’ Brien, 2014, Harrison, 2018]. This ‘revolving door’ is reinforced through the notion that women are outsiders who must ‘fit’ in a naturally masculine and patriarchal arena [Hardin, Shain, & Shultz-Poniatowski, 2008: 68].

In attempting to address the core problems of an underserved female audience for sports, the misrepresentation of female athletes and the systemic exclusion of women from sports media production, female sports writers face ‘a double bind; women face many challenges that prevent their success as sports journalists; yet, the only way to end the prevalent culture that stifles progress is by succeeding and changing the culture’ [Schmidt, 2013: 251]. But women alone should not be held responsible for changing the gender inequalities in media and sports and so then the key question becomes how to collectively change the culture of media sports production to the benefit of all. Clearly, in terms of audience needs, representation and participation in production, women are marginalised in mainstream sports media, however currently we know relatively little about why that is the case. This generates the research question at the core of this study, which is why journalists and media producers create gendered sports content in the ways that they do?

Chapter 2

Methodology

To address this question the research used a qualitative methodology and the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with a purposive snowball sample of 15 sports journalists and media professionals from radio, television, print and online outlets in Ireland. The snowball sampling of respondents began with contacts from the Federation of Irish Sport’s network of contacts amongst journalists and media producers.

A total of 37 potential respondents were invited to participate, and 18 did not respond to the request, 4 had initially agreed but either delegated the interview or were ultimately unavailable during the timeframe of the study. This means that the 15 people interviewed self-selected to participate, which flags their prior interest in the issue of gender equality. Their responses should be read in light of that interest. Conversely, this means that 18 potential respondents chose not to engage with the work, which might flag a disinterest or disengagement amongst a significant portion of media workers in the topic of gender equality in sports media.

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Questions addressed the specific constraints that shape how media producers approach the topic of women in sport.

Each interview was conducted during a single session, which lasted for an average duration of 1 hour and a maximum of 1.5 hours. Respondents were asked about the implicit ‘rules’ and explicit organisational frameworks that shape sports content creation and how women are framed within those rules and contexts. Questions addressed the specific constraints that shape how media producers approach the topic of women in sport, including how organisational contexts, genre values, established practices, work routines, unconscious bias, resource allocation, and imagined audiences all play a role in determining what is included or excluded and how women and sport are reported. Questions also explored the changes that journalists would like to see in future sports coverage. Specific approaches suggested by journalists to improve gender equality were sought and discussed as these are key to generating guidance for future sports reporting. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed on Teams and anonymised to ensure that no participant was identifiable from the detail contained in their answers. Original audio or video recordings were deleted and overwritten. Content analysis of the transcripts generated a number of key themes and subsequently findings, as well as suggested guidance, each of which are described in detail in the chapters below.



Chapter 3

Findings

The key findings of the research describe firstly, why respondents believe gender inequality exists in sports media, secondly, how some change was initiated in recent years and thirdly, what they see as the ongoing challenges to equality of representation for women in sports media. The findings are listed in the paragraph below and outlined in detail in each of the sections that follows.

In terms of why gender inequality exists in sports media, journalists saw this as a historical and legacy issue, tied up in things like women's lower participation rates in sport, and the lack of appetite in society generally to follow women's sports, which have endured until relatively recently. They are clear that there have been a number of changes in the last decade, which came about from societal pressure. This shift was underpinned by the success of women's teams and individual sportswomen over the last ten years. Respondents noted that better coverage of women's sports is possible because their stories are particularly rich, with better access often to sports personalities than in men's sports. They acknowledge the role of certain individuals, social media, organisations and the 20x20 project specifically in generating change, but also see that hard fought gains can be easily lost. Respondents saw the key challenges to more representation in terms of two main things (a) 'Production Constraints' such as space, resources, ongoing legacy practices, a knowledge deficit amongst journalists, depending on individuals to 'favour' women's sports rather than having systemic practices in place, and not enough women working in media and (b) the 'role of the audience' in influencing content creation. There was evidence of pervasive questions as to whether there was an audience for women's sport or not, whether media organisations should invest to create audiences or whether they could afford to do so. The idea of audience was heavily linked to event crowds and some respondents questioned whether

fans are really following women, while other respondents were clear that this issue should not prevent coverage. In terms of what respondents think needs to happen to improve coverage they adopted a 'macro' perspective. Rather than arguing for 'internal' media measures as such, instead they located the challenge as one that needs to be addressed by media, but in collaboration with NGBs and Sponsors, they saw a role for male allies in any change initiative and were clear that support for women's sport is something that needs to be embraced by Irish society broadly. Each of these four key findings are described in detail below.

Finding 1: Why Gender Inequality is an Issue

There was broad acceptance amongst respondents that gender inequality was a challenge for sports media. As they variously put it 'There's an absolute acceptance that it's an issue' [K], 'I'm 40 years a journalist... it's been omnipresent in my working life' [J], and 'In terms of both the quantity and the quality of coverage... I don't think we're at a stage where you could describe it as equality or anything of the sort' [E]. Respondents saw gender inequality as existing both across media platforms and across types of sport. They argued that inequality was created in part through unconscious bias but also through a protracted history of women's sport not being valued socially, whereby women's participation was both limited and marginalised. This history set in train patterns of inequality in

media representation that have created a deep-rooted legacy that impacts still today.

Many respondents understood that gender inequality was ‘a historic problem that goes back... that’s kind of as old as Ireland, or at least the last 50 or 60 years’ [B]. Part of that history was that fewer women played sport in the past. As one respondent explained ‘The thing that we always forget about women’s sport is that it’s so young compared to men’s sport. Like the first women’s Gaelic football finals were 1973 and the first women’s soccer international was 1973. So men’s sport here has a 70 year jump on women’s sport’ [H]. Respondents also noted a history of marginalisation of women in sport, ‘Women’s sports generally would have been underfunded, under-supported and... there really weren’t huge opportunities to play at an elite level’ [B]. This history of exclusion only began to change, and at that very slowly, in the last thirty years. As one respondent explained ‘You have a generation of girls now playing sport that just didn’t exist for their mothers and has existed only as recently as the mid 90s’ [H].

As well as sporting opportunities being less available, so too Irish society was less interested in women’s sport, a situation that also endured until relatively recently. As one respondent said, ‘There has to be an acceptance that there was a lack of interest in women’s sport in general in society’ [D] and ‘It would have been unthinkable 20 years ago to have an Irish women’s footballer as a household name’ [I]. Because of the dearth of women playing and the lack of public interest in women’s sport, women did not get the same sports facilities. The ‘Sporting infrastructure both globally and locally was designed by men for men to be enjoyed by men principally’ [L]. One respondent described what that meant for LGF players ‘They would have to come to the field, togged out because there were no facilities for changing and they left the game afterwards, unable to do what men do – have a shower’ [G]. This deficit in facilities also had a direct and negative impact on media coverage of women’s sport. ‘From a TV coverage point of view, it was just so difficult to make it visually interesting when you’re shooting a game and you’re looking at players of outstanding fitness and quality, and in the background there’s a few sheep in shot and not even a full stand’ [G].



Many respondents noted the willingness of workers within the sector to address inequality, ‘Once you’ve pointed it out, a lot of people are like, *“All right. OK, let’s try and do this” and they’re quite open to it’.*

For these historic reasons women’s sport received less media coverage. History favoured male sports and so the media audience for sport ‘is still skewed towards male because it always has been’ [L]. Respondents saw that the history of sport coverage had produced deep-seated practices, which generated an ongoing legacy of gender inequality for contemporary media. As respondents put it ‘It’s clear it’s a legacy issue and that’s what you’re dealing with, you’re going against what’s always been done... you always covered every match in the GAA championships. So editors assume you have to cover all those matches because that’s what people want to read about’ [A]. Another respondent agreed ‘legacy just continues to be followed because that’s the norm... we didn’t do it before so we’re not going to change now...’ [N].

Although respondents saw the roots of the problem in the past, they also understood it as being caused by bias. Respondents proposed that gender inequality was often un/consciously produced within the media sector. ‘I think the thing with bias – a lot of it is unconscious and that’s the problem. It’s not that people are outright saying “Sure, why would we cover the women?”. Nobody thinks like that... it’s actually more that it just goes completely unnoticed...’ [N]. Many respondents noted the willingness of workers within the sector to address inequality, ‘Once you’ve pointed it out, a lot of people are like, “All right. OK, let’s try and do this” and they’re quite open to it’ but that same respondent also observed that as an issue ‘it does still need a bit of prodding in a lot of ways’ [N]. Another respondent noted that coverage ‘still depends on whoever’s working that day and whether or not they have an appetite to cover women’s sports... it’s not systemic... there’s no policy or strategy around how these sports are covered’ [O]. Respondents’ articulations of where

gender inequality appeared in contemporary media were clear and nuanced. Inequality was seen as a challenge that varied across media platforms. As one respondent put it 'I think the challenges are very different in different places and therefore the answers are different... the anchor roles in sport... I think there's parity there... but on the written journalism side there is a huge issue... on radio there's an issue and in online' (F). Respondents also saw the problem of inequality in terms of variations in how different forms of women's sport were treated 'I think there is still an issue over the coverage of women's *team* sport...' (C). And similarly 'The ladies football and camogie All Ireland series runs alongside the men's. But it just does not get the same level of critique or media coverage' (O). Respondents were very clear that gender inequality is a significant, complex and ongoing problem for contemporary sports media.

Finding 2: Some improvements towards greater equality

Respondents were clear that changes had begun in recent years towards increased representation. This change was dated to within the last decade and was underpinned by women's success in both team and individual sports, this pattern had led in the direction of the mainstreaming of women's sport. While respondents were very clear that substantial and ongoing efforts were needed to maintain, improve and normalise coverage, they saw this as possible for a few reasons. They proposed that women's stories offer rich material for media, with better access to players than in male equivalent contexts, and with increasingly strong production values. The role of policy measures and explicit targeting of gender balance was to the forefront in respondents' accounts of how change had occurred in the last decade and was seen as crucial for future efforts towards change.

A change in direction

Many respondents acknowledged that there had been significant change in media coverage of women's sport. 'I would say things have changed for the better... with every passing 5 year block, you can definitely notice a big difference' (N) and 'It's getting so much better. On TV and radio now it's getting like you can see the differences there....' (A). They dated the beginnings of the

change to approximately six to ten years ago. As one respondent put it 'the needle started to shift a bit and there was more of a conversation around you know, the coverage of women's sports in Ireland and female sports people' (B). Another noted 'I think there was a mental block for the industry maybe a decade ago that I think has lifted...' (B). They were clear that the changes arose from efforts and overt strategy within media organisations to create change, in other words, it wasn't perceived as something that had happened 'organically'. As one respondent put it 'There's been a concerted push to address the problem from all sectors of media and to give women's sports more coverage' (B). Another concurred 'There's more of an effort being made, so for example panels that include women covering men's rugby matches or football matches or things like that, it's great. You can see so much more of that happening now' (A).

Some respondents were clear that while changes came as a response to people organising for change, not all parties were motivated by 'doing the right thing' as much as not wanting to be seen to do the wrong thing 'We have to force ourselves into this space because that bus is not reversing anymore. It's only going one direction....' (F). There was also a sense amongst respondents that while gender equality was improving in recent years, there was still a need for continued progress and so many respondents sounded the warning bells about the need for continued efforts towards more balance coverage. As one respondent put it 'There is no quick fix, but I think a lot of the solutions are in train...' (F) and 'It's still not perfect, but it's certainly come a long way.... So things have definitely changed... But there's still quite a long way to go' (B). One respondent noted that from the early 2000s to now the coverage of women's sport was 'unrecognisable in terms of the landscape and the way it's covered by the media. But that's not to say that there's not still issues there... it's still a long way off where it should be... it's going to take a lot of legwork and media organisations need a big shake up, they really do...' (N). One respondent observed that 'the biggest issue is you're still expecting the usual advocates to help you reach targets that you haven't even set properly... there's no strategy' (O).

Success as a force multiplier

While change arrived due to efforts from within media industries to improve the gender balance in sports coverage, improvements were further underpinned by the success of women's teams over the last decade 'because teams automatically grab people in a way that individuals kind of struggle to...' [H]. Successes were enormous for coverage of women's sport, or to put it another way, women had to achieve remarkable success in order to become impossible to ignore. Moreover, much of the success of women's team sport is still measured against a yardstick of male achievements. Women's teams 'have to reach that high level of success with Irish men, or they're less attractive to newspapers, to people who are in the business of selling sports reporting' [J]. Soccer was singled out for particular notice in that regard, as one respondent put it 'international women's soccer, in media terms, is a huge success story. Their matches are all televised. They have a commercial sponsor and their main players, the Katie McCabes of this world are probably as well recognised as anybody on the men's team.... international women's soccer in this country is the poster girl for equality' [K].

Team successes led to further practical changes in the levels of investment in women's sports and in access to facilities that were previously the domain only of men's teams. This in turn made quality media representation easier. As one respondent put it 'Success breeds success and investment in competitions, so that they are played in proper, decent, stadiums and look well and you've got big crowds, it becomes a kind of a virtuous circle then...' [K]. Another respondent noted the shift in television production values that had occurred over the last ten years. 'That is the biggest change, I think in terms of the viewer looking, now you have a decent venue and a decent crowd, but also you have a really professional TV set up - A crew of 25 people with five to seven cameras, including super slow-mos and virtual graphics... And it's not really that the person at home could point that out, they can't, but do they know there's a difference when they watch? They certainly do. And I think that has been instrumental in changing the way the women's game has been portrayed' [G].

As well as success for team sports, individual women also continued to achieve, in ways that were, as one respondent emphasised 'unprecedented' and that also grew the media

coverage for women, so that it began to become simply normal. As one respondent recounted 'Rachel Blackmore winning the Grand National and the Gold Cup... Ellen Keane Winning a gold at the Paralympics... that's what will organically grow women's sport' [H]. Women's success brought media interest, and their continued success ensured that coverage of women's sports becomes more normalised or mainstream. However, respondents also recognised that the normalisation of coverage was slow to become established. 'When it comes to building that product of consistency, where it becomes a regular part of your publication, every week over 52 weeks of the year, that's where the question becomes a little bit different and a little bit more complex'. Normalisation of women's representation is not a given, and should not only depend on their successes. While respondents flagged that the men's soccer team aren't 'attractive' currently, they still nonetheless get significant coverage, which raises questions about the women's fortunes should their successes abate.

Respondents also noted that women's sports stories were very engaging, which also encouraged media coverage. Numerous respondents noted that when women were given space to talk in media, they tended to give more than men in equivalent situations. As one respondent noted 'In the women's sport media, because a lot of them don't get the same exposure, they're more willing to say things that are really open... So there certainly isn't a fear that you're not going to get a story' [N]. Another respondent concurred 'There's good stories, take Katie Taylor, women's professional boxing essentially didn't exist when she started, the idea that an Irish woman could become a multimillionaire in professional boxing was beyond imagination' [H]. More recently women athletes were perceived to be much richer source of story than their male equivalents as one respondent put it 'The women in athletics... they have infectious personalities. Whereas you know some of the men's stuff can be a bit dull and dour, a bit sort of downbeat and a bit sullen' [I]. As another respondent explained 'a lot of the women's stories are not as well-known as they should be and a lot of the interesting people, they haven't done media 50 times a year for the last 10 years. And so when people hear from them, they often have something new and fresh and interesting to say. And that has proven to be an area where we have seen some

success in long form storytelling' [E]. The quality of stories was connected explicitly to a pattern of **more open access** to women sports stars. As various respondents put it 'The access with women's sports tends to be a little less restrictive than the men's. That's definitely something that makes it a bit easier to cover' [I] and 'The women's game isn't as precious about their players as the men's game is. You can't get an interview, good bad or indifferent with male players, but the LGFA they have been very good' [G].

A vital source of improvement towards gender balance in sports media was identified as lying with media industry thought-leaders, with social media conversations, as well as with the 20x20 movement. As one respondent explained 'there was quite a large push seven or eight years ago, mostly driven by some people in media, sort of people with large personalities or large followings on social media, trying to flag the problem that women's sport really wasn't getting anywhere near the prominence it deserved, so from that there was the start of a conversation' [B]. Numerous respondents referenced RTÉ's interventions and the work of the then Deputy Head of Sport Cliona O' Leary specifically. 'I think RTÉ definitely moved the dial, but with huge, huge effort, from Cliona O' Leary, a constant effort' [C]. Another respondent similarly observed 'I think a significant psychological shift was when RTÉ drove this thing about you don't say "Ireland are playing Portugal tonight" and then tomorrow you say "Ireland, women are playing Portugal". So the women was dropped. It's "Ireland play Portugal" and you read on to find out who's playing, that was a significant shift...' [G]. Another respondent explained that the equality effort was backed by sponsors and the involvement of corporates 'There was an organic kind of movement on social media and some brands got behind that' [D]. Those initiatives culminated in a broad campaign for change 'There was a campaign to really address this and try to drive change. AIG sponsored it and they were specifically focusing on trying to increase the number of females and the volume of coverage that women sports got' [B]. The impact of the campaign was described by one respondent in terms of the focus it brought. 'Certainly within our team it brought a really clear focus while it was running, like it was definitely something that was to the forefront of people's minds and... we were very proud of our commitment to meaningful and interesting



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and insightful coverage of women in sports' [E]. Sport governing bodies were also noted to have contributed here 'The drive towards equality in lots of sports bodies, whether it be the FAI or rugby has played a part in the drive to platform women's sports' [K].

While the impact of those endeavours was positive, respondents were clear that the hard-fought gains could easily be lost. As one respondent put it 'I think 20x20 was brilliant because it did make all those young girls say "No, we are as good and we do train as hard and we can do brilliant things, so you should be supporting us". I think it did have an effect there, but I don't think it had a lasting effect in media' [M]. Another respondent confirmed this sense of the precarity of the changes delivered. 'A year after 20x20. I was like, "Oh, why do we bother?" ...I just saw the women's team sport coverage shrinking back again... you turn on the radio and you just hear the lads again. I was kind of a bit depressed at the end of 20x20 because I saw everything dropping back down again. Soccer is the only thing that's gone the other way' [C]. That respondent concluded that the bid for gender equality in sports media coverage was 'a constant... battle' [C]. In order to better contribute to that 'battle' to achieve and secure change in the long term, respondents were asked what they thought were the ongoing obstacles to improving the quantity and quality of media coverage of women's sports. It is to an account of those challenges that the report now turns.

Finding 3: Challenges to improving media coverage of Women's Sport

Respondents proposed that the key challenges to more equal representation included production constraints, the gendered structure of the media workforce and ideas about the media audience that shaped gendered approaches.

3.1 Media production constraints

Key production constraints on covering women's sports were named as space, resources and a knowledge gap. Regarding the first of these, respondents argued that there was not enough space to cover everything and to add coverage of women meant going against what's always been done with male sports, which sometimes created a backlash. Some respondents argued that the dearth of space given to women came from bias while others argued it was due to a commercial impetus to capture attention within which women's sports 'just don't rate'. In a similar way, many respondents described how resources were more limited now than in the past. This meant they were allocated carefully and strategically connected firmly to the size of the audience. However, a number of respondents offered a seemingly opposing view, that more resources went to covering women's sport. The last production challenge mentioned was a knowledge gap amongst some media workers regarding women's sports but there was also a sense that journalists could get up to speed quickly when required.

Not enough space

A key constraint named by many respondents, particularly those working in print, was that there was not enough space to cover everything they wished to cover. 'By the time publications complete their absolutely essential obligations, covering the big stories, posting social media content, planning, having meetings, "unessential" content, which isn't expected to hit big numbers, is forgotten about' (M). Another respondent offered context as to why women's sport may get left out 'There is the fact that you're just going against what's always been done... I've limited space, so how do I throw out these men's matches that we've always covered in favour of the women's?' (A). If media organisations did not prioritise men's matches and what had

'always' been covered, they found that there was some backlash to that decision. As a respondent put it 'There would be a tradition and a culture of covering the underage GAA tournaments... Largely speaking, we've dropped them entirely... We get a lot of complaints about not covering these things anymore....' (K). In the battle for space it was somewhat unusual for women's sport to win out. One editor concurred 'I wish I could say it's no fault of my own, but I'm in charge of the section... you've got a collision of men's rugby, men's Gaelic football and the Premier League all at their zenith, they crowd everything else out' (D).

One journalist observed that the failure to give space to women's sport arose from bias. 'I look at women's football, they get very little, relative to how many people are involved with it ... they employ journalists to produce copy and it still gets squeezed... So I do think that there's a bias there amongst editors' (C). Another respondent explained the lack of space allocated in terms of a commercial impetus to capture attention. As one respondent explained 'It's so hard to cover everything, but the women are a bit of victim because, I suppose men's would still get priority... like Premier League kind of eats up nearly everything... you've got a lot of advertising, that would have to go around premier coverage' (I). Another respondent concurred, as he put it 'Editors will always gravitate towards what they think will get the most eyeballs the most interaction' (H). However this rationale was illogical as one respondent noted, women make most household consumption decisions 'Advertisers should invest in women and they'll make an absolute fortune' (O). But women's sport was not seen to garner large-scale attention, as the editor said 'In that scenario the preliminary rounds of the Women's Football or Camogie Championships, they just don't rate and it's as bald as that actually' (H). He argued women's sport didn't rate because of the absence of crowds at events, as he said 'The crowds would be small, so that's hard to justify as a national media outlet...' (H). And yet, interestingly the editor also noted a discrepancy between this commercial logic of large crowds 'owning' space for coverage and print outlets willingness to cover horseracing. As the editor observed 'Nobody goes to horse races and yet every newspaper carries 2 pages of race cards every day. We have no space for the stuff we want to write, but yet you put 2 pages of these ***** race cards' (H). He explained the

logic of this contradiction in terms of a 'total fear of alienating or losing readership' it seems there wasn't a corresponding fear of alienating a female audience through a failure to dedicate space. The report will return to the topic of the audience in further detail below.

Under-resourced

Many respondents described how resources were more limited now than in the past. 'Traditional media is shrinking... If we were living now with the media workforce of 15 years ago, I think women's sport would have a better chance of getting more coverage because there would have been more resources' [D]. This had very practical implications 'In the past, we might have had four people at the Olympics, now we have two' [D]. Much as was the case with the allocation of space, resources were allocated carefully and strategically. 'We have quite a small team in an independently run media company so we allocate resources strategically because it's impossible for us to cover every sporting event' [B]. Often media producers' strategy connected firmly to the size of the current audience. As one respondent explained 'because many are struggling financially and employ smaller teams than before, priorities are far more refined. More often than not, those priorities are getting as many views on videos as possible, to attract sponsors, or to get as many site clicks as possible' [M].

However, a number of respondents offered an apparently opposing view, that they were allocating a greater proportion of their resources to covering women's sport. As one respondent noted regarding soccer 'Ireland v England in the Aviva, we would have had two reporters there, we had a reporter in France... historically, we've never sent a reporter. We invest more now than we would have' [B]. And similarly 'We invest quite a lot... we would have had two journalists at the World Cup in Australia last summer' [E] and 'We had three people in Australia. We wouldn't send them for a Rugby World Cup, we really committed to it because it was worth it and because it was so novel, you know, because it was something that was unprecedented and needed to be covered as such' [H]. Another respondent concurred regarding women getting more resources for GAA coverage 'When the women's All Ireland finals came around, it was always junior reporters would go do it, but in the



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last 10 years they started sending their senior GAA correspondents to the Ladies All Ireland finals' [C]. In short, while the overall media resource package may have shrunken, respondents argued that women were getting a greater proportion of those resources, but this increase was from such a low base that the improvement seemed larger than they were in absolute terms.

A knowledge gap

A further challenge to the production of women's sports stories noted by respondents was that of a knowledge gap amongst some media workers regarding women's sports. As one respondent said 'They might be very across the men's hurling but they're not confident in their knowledge when it comes to camogie. They might feel bad they're saying "I'm really sorry but I haven't seen you play, I don't know anything about you" It's that knowledge gap which again comes from lack of coverage. But that's chicken and egg because if you don't send them to cover camogie matches, then they're never going to know who the players are' [A]. However, there was also a sense that journalists could get up to speed quickly when required. As one editor noted 'One of our journalists now does the women's soccer team. And you can see how much more into women's soccer he's got as a result. And so he's watching the WSL games in the States to try and get more involved and more of an in depth knowledge' [A]. Another journalist concurred 'I'm have been very impressed, most of the men who covered men's soccer for years, they've got versed in women's soccer very quickly' [C].

3.2 Structure of the workforce is a constraint

The under-representation of women in the sports media workforce was an issue that impacted on coverage in print, radio and online. Only television was seen to have greater gender balance in all roles except for technical ones. In addition, women were not proportionately represented in leadership positions and respondents noted the challenges of creating a pipeline for decision making roles when all other roles proved hard to fill. The position of women in punditry was a case in point where some respondents described the difficulties of finding women for those roles, while another respondent offered context and understanding as to why women might not enter those roles in great numbers. Similarly, respondents had a sense that the challenges women faced in undertaking media work included a disproportionate childcare burden, the fact that they were entering an already male-dominated sector and that there were gendered dynamics to the work at times. Nonetheless most respondents argued for the importance of including women in the production of sports media if the point of view or perspective applied to sport was to achieve better gender balance.

Women (not) working in sports media

The general context for work in sports media was that the 'staff levels in all of these organisations is dropping' [J]. Within that context it was clear that women were under-represented, 'this field attracts a lot of men' [B]. There was some variation across media platforms, with Television seen to be the best in terms of gender balance amongst workers across different types of roles. 'In terms of presenters, reporters, they're way more than half...' [K] and 'producer roles- researchers, assistant producers, trainee producers and actual producers'[G]. In terms of analysts and pundits Television workers had 'put a lot of work into breaking down prejudices... having female analysts and pundits on men's matches - now it's something commonplace, it's standard' [K]. However, television was seen as an outlier, 'I think broadcast is different because it's they're much more set hours' [C] and the balance in print journalism was not as good 'There's very few women going into sports writing' [c]. Similarly in radio, women were underrepresented 'if you listen to the radio from Monday to Friday, the amount

of women in sport that you'll hear is fairly limited, and there are very few decision makers there' [N]. Again online outlets had an over-representation of male staff. 'Our online desk.... there are no women, none on that desk. When we were recruiting I would say it was 50 to one in terms of male to female applicants...' [K]. In general for new entrant roles there was an over-representation of men, as one respondent put it 'When you go to market, they don't seem to be coming out of college looking to get into sport' [D].

In terms of leadership roles, women tended to be under-represented, 'they're definitely underrepresented in the very senior decision making roles... I'm struggling outside of two or three to think of any more that were ultimately the bosses in their organisations...' [F]. However there was evidence that some organisations were proactive about addressing that challenge. 'I actively went after making sure that senior management had a strong female presence' [F]. But the pipeline to leadership was not adequate, as one respondent explained 'We need to have strong female representation in management teams. That's easy to say and really hard to do. You can't just parachute people into these positions and that's the generational piece again, they've got to grow up through it and understand it, but it's hard even getting people in on the lower levels' [F].

There was a similar challenge getting women into punditry roles. Listing the difficulties one respondent noted 'Thousands and thousands of men have played at a high level. So if you've got 100 men you might find 3 people who have the credibility... The starting pool for women is way, way smaller...' [K]. Another respondent shed more light on the challenges women faced if they put themselves forward, 'We made a decision that on every senior Inter County men's game, we'd have at least one female analyst. They were reluctant, so we tried to organise a workshop for women commentators. We got 5 applicants at the start, by midweek before the workshop it had reduced to three, by the Friday we were down to one, and then the one person said she wasn't doing it on her own. And when we went back afterwards and interrogated why - They said they just didn't feel the confidence to do it. And though nobody said it, we see this a lot. We see a lot of disrespect towards women who put their heads above the parapet to be analysts or commentators on the game. That I

think is the next barrier' [G]. He continued to point to the misogyny and sexism still faced by women in media 'We're working with X at the moment on a programme. And she gets terrible abuse, which is unfounded, unwarranted and has no basis whatsoever - it's all about the tone of her voice! Could you see a male analyst or commentator being castigated? I can name loads of them with poor broadcast voices, people will pick on women - "What does she know about sport anyway, she can't even talk... her terrible accent". That is definitely an impediment. You'd have to ask about how we breakthrough that, you know?' [G]. Despite the challenges, respondents in recruitment roles claimed they were generally positive about female applicants. As they variously noted 'I'm actively encouraging people if I'm getting expressions of interest from women, I'm doing everything I can to keep them involved but I have to be quite proactive as an editor' [B] and 'Every editor is looking for women, for lots of reasons, to balance gender gaps and to get more women's sports coverage... I would say there's more kind of opportunities than hindrances...' [B] and 'I would say they look for them. They just struggle to get them' [C].

Many of the respondents understood at least some of the factors that challenged women working in sports media. They recognised women were still underrepresented in the workforce 'I would have been the only woman in a press conference and I found that hugely intimidating... that has changed in the last 20 years' [O]. They understood the challenges of media work and the disproportionate care burden that women carried in addition to their formal jobs. Respondents were sensitive to the nuance needed to acknowledge the care burden women carried, without at the same time implying that they were not adequate to the task of their jobs, nor that they should only be concerned with care work, that was not their point. As the respondent said regarding television production work 'I'm choosing my words carefully now. It's tough on women that life. Especially women who start a family... one producer we had, she was terrific, she started a family and she left. You just could not head off on Friday evening to cover a game and be gone for the best part of three days with small children at home... and that is a huge challenge' [G]. The respondent could see the need to adapt work to life-stage demands, such as



childcare, as he put it 'If that were to happen now the scope of productions we do is much broader and we'd be better equipped to find a way of keeping her on board with a different job spec...' [G]. Another commentator noted that despite the challenges, some women did manage to juggle work with care work, despite the lack of supports. 'I can't say that I know anybody who's given it up for that reason... The broadcasters all managed to do it with kids. I don't know how they do it, but they do' [C]. Another respondent flagged the difficulty that lay behind trying to maintain work and caring responsibilities 'You're working weekends and evenings so it's not very family friendly... you come back from maternity leave and you're kind of starting over again... you're missing out on opportunities because you're making decisions based on family... I have found it very, very hard' [O].

Other respondents accounted for the absence of women in sports media by pointing to the precarious nature of work in the sector 'The freelance world can be really difficult to navigate and I think a lot of people want to feel like they have a steady enough job by the time they're 30. Men seem to be more OK with dabbling around' [N]. Some understood that part of the challenge was that women workers were having to break into an already male-dominated sector and face the already gendered dynamics of a male-dominated workforce. As one respondent described 'I know the struggles one woman had for years to be taken seriously, and it's wrong because her writing was always very, very good. But, you hear people going 'Who's your one? What's her story?' in a way that the rest of us [men] never get interrogated' [H]. Another respondent concurred 'There's still these people that would have an old fashioned [sexist] way of thinking. Not too many I would have thought at this stage... I know it still does exist. There's no doubt about that even maybe, subconsciously, you might not get people saying it, but they might be thinking it...' [I]. Other respondents understood that male-dominance in the sector was changing 'I think it's a better environment for women to come into now... that old male idea of what would a woman know about sports. I think that's going... RTÉ have done a good job with normalising this and Cliona O' Leary was very, very strong on that...' [D].

But some respondents were ambivalent about the gender dynamics of the workforce. One female journalist noted that the male dominance did not

pose her any problem 'I don't think it's a hostile environment. Not anymore. I mean I've heard one or two people saying oh, when I went into it, I was really intimidated and I didn't identify with that at all' [C]. Others saw the workplace as respectful, while also acknowledging that there could be cases of disrespect. 'It doesn't matter whether you're a man or a woman if you know your stuff and people can see that you'll, you'll get respect, there's going to be examples of where it doesn't happen obviously' [M]. And others saw the gendered workplace as a phenomenon only relevant to older workers 'I think most [women] were welcomed by their peers, not necessarily by the guys that were in their 60s, 70s' they noted that they 'never had to deal with anybody feeling that they were being badly treated by a male colleague' but did acknowledge the possibility that 'that may be because the girls kept it to themselves' [F]. But some respondents were blind to the gender dynamics of the workforce, their logic was that media work was gender neutral that if nobody stopped women applying then that should mean there was an 'equal' opportunity in play. 'I never encountered an occasion where somebody was being hired and there was a preference for a male or a female reporter' [L]. Much as was the case with the film industry a decade ago the 'explanation' for the lack of women in the sector, was not to be found in the gendered dynamics of that workplace but rather the idea that 'Women are too smart to work in newspapers' [X].

Other respondents understood that balance in the workforce was connected to getting a more balanced point of view on women's sport. As they noted 'A lot of it is very dependent on how many women are in the room... because if you're in a scenario where there are a lot more female journalists working you're more likely to get somebody saying, "Hey, what about that?"' [N]. One woman described how women co-workers had come up with a 'rule' about representation that treated women's sport according to 'what we do for the boys?' [N]. As she explained 'So if Rory McIlroy was leading a major going into the weekend... Would that be the lead story? And if the answer to that is yes, then if Leona McGuire is leading one, we should be leading with her' [N]. In effect they made any unconscious bias explicit by asking the simple question - what do we do for the boys? As she elaborated 'It does make you think, if the All-Ireland camogie final is on this weekend - What do we do

for the boys? Do we do build-up in one county on Wednesday, one county on Thursday, a live on the Friday, the match on the Saturday? Then we should replicate it with the women... I think people just haven't given it enough thought' (N). As another concluded 'Having women in there is so valuable because you automatically have a different point of view, you'll see things differently or it'll just be an automatic thing' (A).

3.3 Audience as a challenge

The question of an audience for women's sport was replete with apparent contradictions. Some respondents argued that there was an audience for women's sports, some argued there wasn't, and some were ambivalent. Some respondents argued that the dearth of an audience made covering women's sport commercially unviable, while other respondents argued that it was up to media outlets to create an audience for women's sport. Others argued that media can't 'afford' to cover women's sport before there is an audience, while some respondents proposed that media can't afford not to cover women's sport. Interestingly, the media audience was equated with crowds at team games and within that understanding respondents argued that women's sport did not attract crowds adequate to coverage, but other respondents pointed out how some minority sports were still covered extensively regardless of the fact that they did not attract any crowds. Many respondents articulated the ways in which the audience for sports is imagined in ways that are gendered. Moreover, gender bias is also in play amongst fans who judged women's sports against male metrics rather than on their own merits. Each of these findings is discussed in turn below.

Many respondents were clear that there was an audience for women's sport. There was a sense, in particular from online outlets that men were engaging more with women's sports, as one respondent explained 'we would find some really encouraging signs of an audience that are interested ...they like the women's game in nearly the same level of detail as they would the men's game.... there's quite a receptive cohort there among the male audience' (E). Other respondents believed that the growth was coming also from women's engagement with sports media 'We always kind of say when a story goes well. There must be women reading it too, because you get

that little spike' (I). Moreover they noted that the audience was expanding rapidly. As one respondent noted 'All the research tells us it's the fastest growing market in the world'. Other evidence of a growing interest in women's sport was an inaugural bidding war for television rights 'Even for us to get these [matches] it was bidding war with several other media organisations, which hadn't happened before' (X). The fact that more girls and young women were playing sport boded well for many respondents, as one put it 'Surely you would imagine that future generations are more and more interested in sport than the previous ones were... there's going to be a market out there' (H). For some respondents a female audience for sports media was a logical next step and one that would be backed by commercial impetus 'There's also this realisation that keeping 50% of the population on the outside looking in is not really a great idea. And if you're looking to grow either your audience or your footprint as a brand, shunning women and women's sport is a counterintuitive strategy. I think marketing companies and brands realise this as well' (B).

However, a number of respondents were clear that there was not an audience for women's sports. As one put it 'If there is an insufficiency in the coverage it's because there's an insufficiency in the level of interest that's there' (J) and similarly 'We're a commercial enterprise, if nobody's reading it, then we're not necessarily going to cover it' (I). Another respondent was more data-led in their conclusion, observing that 'One of the great things about technology now is that we've got more data... The audience for women's sports is not so big... you put up something about Katie Taylor and promote it on Facebook or whatever, the article will get loads of likes. But the number of click-throughs versus the number of likes will be quite different' (D). Another respondent saw that there was a clear inequality in interest in women's sport and concluded that it could not 'be the job of any media organisation to say this is equal and you will consume it equally.... when by any yardstick or any metric the interest is not equal, it just isn't... it gets live coverage on television and radio, gets promoted and still the audience doesn't come. We cannot make people watch them...' (K). Moreover, there was a further challenge that if media outlets invested in an audience for women's sport the feedback was sometimes negative. As a respondent observed 'There's definitely an education piece to

do with our audience... we get very regular feedback and it can be quite pointed sometimes... a little bit of reluctance around reading about women's sport, for a lot of readers there just wasn't that much interest in it... we had to sort of like be almost selective in what news that we shared and how we shared it' (B).

Other respondents were ultimately ambivalent about whether there was or there wasn't an audience for women's sport. As one respondent noted 'We're still trying to figure out the audience... we didn't get the impression from the very broad feedback loop of subscription appeal or even views, it doesn't seem to be the product that's right for our audience' (E). However, another respondent reflected on the predominance of men's sport 'This is your classic chicken and egg because people will 'want' to read about it because that's all that you give them' (L). Another made a similar argument 'Why would women have been interested in men's sport when that was all that was given to them? If they had the option to watch women's sport from the same sort of early age that men had the option, maybe they'd be more interested. So again, it's that chicken and egg thing of women aren't interested, because they were never given women's sport to be interested in' (A).

For many the decision to cover women's sports was primarily a commercial consideration. 'Media is heavily driven by what's most profitable, which is the most clicks. That is ultimately what stands in the way of using media platforms as channels for driving positive change, like increasing coverage of women's sport'. That respondent was clear that there was not yet adequate motivation to invest fully in women's sport 'Companies I have worked for have only shown interest in producing women's sport content when it is likely to convert into lots of engagements. Examples would be a Katie Taylor fight or the Ireland Women's World Cup campaign' (M). Some other respondents could not yet see how investments in women's sport were converting into increased revenue, but they were nonetheless optimistic that they would get there 'I don't think I have quite seen a huge amount of evidence yet of an audience that is willing to sign up because women's sport is their driving interest... you're kind of treading that balancing act between the visibility of the stuff versus protecting the core business... I would be super optimistic that we will get there' (E). Print outlets in particular saw women's sport



Another key theme in respondents' understanding of the audience or potential audience for women's sport was the need for media outlets to create an audience. As one respondent put it ***'The more and the better you cover something, the more readers you're going to get'*** (I).

as a way of diversifying their audience and their offering. 'We're selling less newspapers now than we were last year, and next year we'll be selling less newspapers again. So our future is our website and our app and our online content and how good it is. And the more areas we can find to encourage people to come to our website or to our app for our content, the better. Women's sport is a much higher priority for us now than it used to be. I'm not sure how big a part it can play at the moment in terms of bringing new people to us or more people to us.... the increases are slow' (D).

Another key theme in respondents' understanding of the audience or potential audience for women's sport was the need for media outlets to create an audience. As one respondent put it 'The more and the better you cover something, the more readers you're going to get' (I). Another agreed 'When I say I want to cover something, people will say, well, there's not really an interest. To me it's the opposite argument, in that there won't be an interest until you cover it' (A), and 'There's a chicken and egg part of that one, unless you get that coverage, you're not going to generate some interest' (J). Some respondents offered evidence of how television had already contributed to the growth in audience. As one described 'In 2001 we started covering LGFA games... Back in those days, you'd be lucky to have 300 people at a match. I'm really proud to say that in the last five years we've broken records for European women's sporting events in Croke Park.... I think the TV coverage has been key and very, very instrumental' (G). Another described a similar process of growth in relation to the Irish soccer team. 'It was very much a building process. Everybody grew with this team to the point

that they're now filling out the Aviva Stadium... when they walked out the door for the England game and it was full, the players faces were in shock because they didn't realise that it had built so much' [N]. A number of respondents saw the current moment as an opportunity to get in at the start of a period of growth in women's sport and its coverage in media. As they said 'I do believe in creating something and I think there's a magic in being there from the start...' [N]. Another concurred 'My argument is this is your chance to get in at the start of something and get subscriptions or get readers or listeners off the back of women's sport' [C].

While a number of respondents were encouraging of media organisations covering women's sport, others were equally clear that media can't 'afford' to cover women's sport before there is an audience. As one noted 'I think sometimes the commercial impediment unfortunately means that you kind of need to have a bit more of a robust business case before you can invest at that level' [E]. Some were wary of alienating current audiences by reducing coverage of men's sport in order to make space and resources available to cover women's sport. As they put it 'There's a commercial aspect to it too, in that I'm expected to try and keep the readers that we have, I've already reduced the GAA coverage quite a bit and I do get letters about it, and if you

keep doing it, are you alienating the readers that you do have? ...With newspapers you feel like you're constantly trying to keep the readers that you have' [A]. A respondent in broadcasting commented 'Like if [Broadcaster x] has the opportunity to show 2 soap operas, one of which is really popular and the other isn't, it doesn't make any sense to argue that they show the unpopular one' [X].

This view contrasted with other public sector journalists who argued that media can't afford not to cover women's sport, even before there is a large audience for it. As one said 'I really think that there's an onus on us to show it because it's the right thing to show, not because we think it's going to get massive audience figures... I think we should be covering national moments, whether one person watches it or one whether 1,000,000 people watches it and it's up to people to decide whether they want to be on the journey' [N]. Another respondent, working in a commercial outlet agreed and saw coverage of women's sport as important in its own right and not just for commercial gain 'We'd be tracking our audience quite closely and so we knew, that there wasn't a huge audience at the time but we felt like it was important to cover women's sports. I wouldn't say we did anything extraordinary in the space, it was assigning our writers to cover games... it was a slow build up' [B].



There were various ideas about the sports media audience in evidence in how respondents addressed questions about the audience. For many respondents the media audience was equated with crowds at team games. As one respondent explained 'Big crowds equal people who are interested in reading things, which means that when we send somebody... there's going to be a significant amount of people there to read it - that's kind of what it boils down to...' [E]. Another respondent concurred 'Massive numbers at the games persuades the media that is worth covering... In soccer they attracted big numbers... 22 or 23 thousand to the women's international game. Like that's a sea change, I never thought I'd see that in my in my lifetime...' [C]. This equation of crowds with audience created frustration for some respondents who saw women's attendance at matches as inadequate 'Why will 10,000 women go to the Ulster men's football final and maybe 1000 go to the women's final? It's not just a question for the media, it's a question for all society and it's a question for women as well' [K]. However other respondents were willing to question the equation of crowds with audience 'Particularly when it comes to a public service broadcaster I do not subscribe to the idea that it has to have 500,000 people watching it or it doesn't mean anything to anybody' [O]. Another journalist was willing to point to the double standard that was at play in the application of crowds as audience to some sports but not others. As they said 'There is absolutely an element of we could write about a women's football match, but the crowds would have been small at it, there definitely wouldn't be 1000 people at these games, so that's hard to justify as a national media outlet... but amateur boxing doesn't get any crowds, and we cover it because that's going to be our biggest Olympic medal team... No crowds go to the rowing, but we'll cover that as well, because we know that when Paris comes around, we're going to be writing about people who come from minority sports' [H].

Perhaps some of this is explicable in terms of how the audience for sports is imagined in ways that are gendered. As one respondent commented 'The perceived readership for a newspaper is older men, especially for the sports section... There is a big female audience for the paper but the thinking is that... they don't read the sports section' [A]. When asked if he wrote for an male audience one respondent was taken aback and replied in the affirmative 'Yes.....but also I'm thinking about that

for the first time, which is probably not good.... I think you probably hit on something there. I think a lot of the time I am probably writing for a sceptical male' [H]. The response of the sports audience to women's sport is therefore mostly the response of a male audience, and as one respondent noted those reactions were quite polarised. 'The male audience either really embrace it and are really vocally supportive and really try to amplify and share and generate positive discussion, or else they will go so far in the other direction that it doesn't even bear really weighing up in terms of their dismissiveness or how they will try to maybe undermine or belittle' [E].

In the same way that the audience was understood to be male by many respondents, so too they were clear that there were gender biases in play amongst fans. One respondent highlighted how supposed fans of sports were often only fans of male sports 'I'm a sports journalist, and my friends that are into sports, five years ago, none of them would have been able to pick Katie McCabe out of a lineup, she wouldn't really have crossed their paths at all...' [H]. Similarly another journalist concurred 'That's the problem with Team Sport.... if you ask GAA people, are they a male follower or a Dublin follower, they'll say they are a Dublin follower, but they don't go to the women's games. If they went to the women's games there would be the volume going to those games. That would create pressure on media to say give it equal coverage, we know that that doesn't happen. So like, fans are at fault as well...' [C]. Another agreed 'A sports fan should be a fan of both your teams. There should be no reason why you don't support the women with as much energy and gusto as you do the men's' [L]. Many respondents were adamant about the need for fans to attend women's games. As one respondent observed 'If you are into sport at all, and you're just airily dismissing women's sport, then you're denying yourself, like, an avenue of enjoyment.... if they go, "I'd watch the men do it, but I wouldn't watch the women" I'd be going "Well, then you just don't have enough context"... because if you know the context behind two teams and the storylines that are involved it's as exciting as anything' [H].

In particular, respondents wanted women to attend women's sports events. As they said 'You need to get women to pay to go to sports events. You need women to support women's sport. And we



Another key theme in respondents' understanding of the audience or potential audience for women's sport was the need for media outlets to create an audience. As one respondent put it *'The more and the better you cover something, the more readers you're going to get'* [I].

in the media need women to buy our newspapers' [H]. Another respondent agreed, noting gender equality in sports media was part of a broader 'whole of society issue. I think that media has got a leading part to play in that and to be fair they are trying. RTÉ cover all of the women's rugby, all of the Women's football internationals in the same way as they do the men's. They get an audience for it. It might not be as big as possible yet but we can't blame the media for that. That's on the general public that we need to come to it' [L]. The attendance of women and fans more broadly was again connected to pressure on media to cover women's sport 'If the general public aren't turning up, then maybe the media don't feel the same obligation to cover it to the same extent and that slows the progress because if you give people a reason not to change, then chances are that they probably won't' [L].

A key element in understanding audiences' lack of appreciation for women's sports was that they were mostly judged by male standards, rather than taken on their own merits. As respondents explained 'There is, of course, a sort of inherent bias. Women aren't as good at sport as men they don't have the physical makeup you know, all of that and there would be of course that kind of, "I like to watch the highest level of sports, so why would I be watching the women play football?"' [H]. Another concurred 'A lot of people tend to view women's sport through the prism of men's sport, so they look at it and go "Well, the women's rugby team is just not as good as the men's rugby team" or "I don't like the way they play rugby because you know, it's just not as good. They're not as skilful" this sort of thing. Instead of taking it as its own thing,

that would have its own audience' [A]. Another respondent spoke to the need to move past this comparison 'The interesting thing about female sports - Who are the majority watching female sports? Men, and not for any other reason and they just enjoy watching sports and therefore they've gone "actually this is better than I thought it was going to be".... If you're going to go and watch a women's football match or a women's rugby match and you're expecting the same as the men you're going to be disappointed. If you go and recognise that there is a different skill set and it's done in a different way, then actually, you might appreciate it and be actually entertained. The comparisons need to stop and that is an education piece and that takes time... we are not going to click our fingers and fix it overnight. This is a process and it is arguably a generational process' [F].

Another respondent agreed that there was still a bias and perception that women's sport was of an inferior quality to the men's but she explained how that could sometimes be countered. 'I give the example of the Irish women's hockey team, they got to the World Cup final in 2018. Total freak. Nobody expected it. But everyone was hopping on board, saying how brilliant it was, including social media, which is really interesting. I felt it showed that bias because most people knew nothing about hockey. So they weren't judging it through a male prism.... they weren't saying, "Oh, but they're not as fast or as skilful as the men..."'. They were just saying, "Oh, my God, look at these women. They're great, and they got to the World Cup final." And I think that's that was very indicative to me of how there is a bias amongst the public and amongst the media that we value things starting with the male game.... But in hockey they didn't do that. Nobody did that. Everyone went "Oh my God. These women are brilliant"' [C].

3.4 Key Findings

The key findings described above have outlined why respondents believe gender inequality exists in sports media, and the nature of some improvements in recent years. The findings also outline the ongoing challenges to equality of representation and participation for women in sports media. In the following section the report describes what needs to change to ensure fairer representation.

Chapter 4

Conclusions: Guidance for better practice

When asked what they saw as useful in progressing the agenda of gender equality in sports media, several respondents proposed that improvements could be made through increased interaction with NGBs and by better aligning sponsors with the agenda of equality in media content. Many respondents saw male allies in media industries as crucial to the efforts to achieve gender balance.

National Governing Bodies have a role to play

Respondents were clear that some sports organisations have made very positive contributions to how women's sport is covered in media. The relationships between media & National Governing Bodies (NGBs) were viewed as positive. As one respondent put it 'The people within the communications departments, they're very proactive and I have never found them to be anything but super-responsive and helpful... they are really already doing great work in that sphere' [E]. Moreover journalists understood that NGBs have been very focused on gender balance in their approaches to media. They saw evidence of this in the NGBs webpages 'Some organisations have given their women the same sort of amplification and exposure as they give their male teams... when you go into the FAI websites... on the landing page - men and women come up exactly the same, whereas you used to have to search for the women's stuff before' [C]. NGBs for smaller sports were positively regarded 'A lot of those smaller NGBs are more balanced as well, it's just an accepted thing that women get the same coverage as men...' [A]. Strong relationships and open communications between NGBs and media producers were seen as key to improving gender equality in coverage 'We can all be on the same team here... But it does take a bit of collaboration, and that isn't always easy with the sporting bodies because they think you're looking for something

all the time. And actually you're really trying to help them sometimes' [N]. An editor concurred 'The number one thing they [NGBs] can do, is get a person in place whose responsibility it is to communicate what they are doing to the media...' [D].

Many respondents spoke of the benefit to them of NGBs supplying content. As one journalist described 'The Ladies football and camogie associations, both do brilliantly. One of the best things they do is they pay freelance journalists to write content for them...they send us a content advisory so we know what's coming... we know what fixtures we're going to have match reports from... I'll have pictures as well, that's guaranteed... They send in a feature for newspaper only, it's embargoed. You'll get it on Friday, for publication Saturday. It is honestly the best thing they do, all my resources are so tight, budgets, time, space, but if you know it's coming and you can plan in advance, then it's much easier to incorporate it into your coverage.... because it's good quality and it's freely available, it's huge and it's something that the smaller sports could definitely learn from to try and boost their coverage... and I know that puts a cost on them, but it's worth it in terms of the overall benefit... That would be my biggest recommendation...' [A]. A number of respondents flagged this initiative as really useful to them, particularly in light of the resource constraints on print outlets in particular 'It's definitely been something on an ongoing week to week basis that

we have found very useful in making sure that we can cover events that we might not necessarily have had the capacity to staff' [E]. For a number of respondents increasing the profile of women's sports was tied to NGBs taking ownership of the process of co-creating content with media producers. As one respondent put it 'The biggest opportunity is to stop waiting for somebody to do something for you because it won't happen... You must take charge of it yourself and promote your own sport and engage media' [D].

However, respondents did also propose that some organisations needed to innovate regarding their engagements with media. These recommendations varied from small scale initiatives, such as supplying basic information, to a shift in attitudes towards media, to a broader recommendation to take ownership of their own content creation. In terms of the need to supply information to ensure coverage, one respondent noted some organisations 'are not able to send out where their matches are on, what time they're on, who the referee is, who is playing and match previews. The information is so poor... And that can be problematic' [N]. The respondent acknowledged that for women's sport there was 'a bit of a vacuum there where it's hard to get information... a lot of that information is just available about the men because all it takes is a quick Google search...' [N]. The respondent recommended that NGBs

think about creating access to that information 'Create a database that allows you to go to the calendar.... I want to promote them, but trying to chase information about when matches are on and whatever is deeply frustrating' [N]. The cost of not making information easily accessible was a disincentive for journalists to cover it 'For journalists, if you don't make it easy for them, they won't bother.... most journalists, are overworked because they're doing too much other stuff' [N].

Respondents also recommended a change in approach to media more broadly, arguing that NGBs needed to be more open to media. The onus was on NGBs to not duplicate some of the challenges that media producers faced when engaging with men's sports. As one respondent put it 'If you want to expand the coverage and interest in women's sport... You don't treat it the same as the men's. You don't have this paranoia and this protectionism. You actually break some of that model and you're more expansive and you're more open and you create more opportunities for your athletes to be interviewed' [C]. Another respondent agreed 'Sports journalism has become very, very difficult in men's sports, controlled access, excessive media training... at the press conferences, I think if I guessed what they were going to say and wrote it down, I would probably be about 80% right...' [D]. The approach of team managers to media access was a particular focus.



One respondent identified it as a barrier to greater access to sportswomen and in turn to a broader public interest in women's sport. As they observed 'I don't understand a lot of managers' attitudes to the media. It's nonsensical. It's very unprofessional. They think, "Oh, we'll keep them away from the media because, you know, it might distract our players..." But women need more promotion, not less. We need to get them out there. We need people to identify with them and young people to get to know their personalities and all the rest." [C]. While the respondent could understand the reticence to some extent 'there's a proliferation of media, it's harder for managers to control the media' nonetheless they were clear that if managers were 'working in a women's sport, it's part of your job to manage this as well... how are we ever going to get to know and identify and create interest in female players if we don't hear or see them' [C]. The respondent was realistic that NGBs would not necessarily be able to intervene very directly in this dynamic 'They can't control managers' and so beyond recommending managers give more access to women players, the organisation themselves were trying to compensate for a lack of access 'and that's the kind of situation you're in at the moment' [C]. The situation with managers and access is clearly an area for further improvement. In a similar vein, respondents urged NGBs to create or maintain better access to players 'Trust us to do a one to do a one-to-one without thinking we're going to hang the subject, because I think that's the big fear, so they're managed to within an inch of their lives... there's a fear that if the journalist is let loose then they're going to paint them in the wrong way... You can see it with the women's soccer, the women's rugby, it's choreographed, you know, it's stock answers, it's becoming a bit dull, it's just typical press conference stuff like we're all used to... let the shackles off' [I].

Sponsors have a role to play

As well as NGBs having a key role to play in ensuring clear communication and access for journalists to cover women's sport, so too respondents believed that increasingly gender equality in sport matters to sponsors, and there was scope for NGBs to engage here too. As they put it 'That philanthropic element to big business, they have to appeal to their female audience... and sport is an area they can use' [C]. However sponsors are sometimes slow to see the opportunity offered by women's sports to

engage publics. As one respondent noted 'I find it very depressing, but also very notable that around the Women's World Cup last year corporate Ireland really didn't seem to jump on the bandwagon in the way that they did with the men's Rugby World Cup... there was no sense of "This is the women's Italia 90." There was no "must have" merch for the Women's World Cup... they've obviously made the determination somewhere that the money wasn't there, that there wasn't a profit in it' [H]. Many respondents argued that women's sport should be particularly attractive to sponsors because of the relatively lower cost of entry for sponsors. As one respondent commented 'You can't get cheaper... it was very easy to get into women's sponsorship... and you can grow it. So I think that's one of the areas that again needs to be pushed by NGBs and I think some NGBs are good at this' [C].

Many respondents saw that sponsors could have a role intervening to improve the coverage of women's sport. As one observed 'Sponsors like Lidl with Ladies Gaelic football have transformed that sport through their marketing smarts because a lot of Irish sport is still amateur run... if you bring the marketing power of a Lidl or an Aldi or a Dunnes Stores or a Vodafone to the table, then you're really putting this sport brand onto a different platform as regards the general public's accessibility' [C]. Sponsors were understood to have brought changes to public perceptions of women's sport that were consequently seen as sponsorable. 'The business side of it has been a catalyst for change in terms of how it is seen. So you know when Guinness sponsored the Six Nations, they didn't necessarily choose to add on the women's Six Nations. Now they do and it's difficult to conceive that they would choose not to do the women's side of it because of the questions that will be asked of them publicly. The women's product is viable and valuable enough so that it will be able to stand alone' [L]. Moreover the campaigns promoted by sponsors were understood to have changed public attitudes to women's sport. 'They've totally changed how they promote their product to women. It's not about how you look anymore, it's what your body can do and how powerful and how strong and how fit you are and how healthy you are and how you pass it on to your kids. And we've seen that in multiple ads where, even before the World Cup, girls were featuring in soccer ads, you know, not little boys, they changed it. So that is an area I think that's still to be harnessed' [C].

Respondents proposed that there could be an expanded role for sponsors in directly improving media content about women's sport. As one respondent explained 'What happens, a lot of the time is I'll get an e-mail in from PR companies saying X are having an event to push their sponsorship of the GAA and they've got a player from each of the four codes up for interview. Great. The players are getting their appearance fee. The PR company are being paid to promote the event. And X get their coverage in the paper because they have the four players there wearing their branded gear, blah blah blah, that's all fine. The newspapers are looking at it asking "What are we getting out of this? We don't get advertising. We're putting your branding out there. We're sending a reporter to cover it in a time of limited budgets. Where's the value for me?" Like you don't get to speak to a GAA player unless they are pushing a branding event and now it's something that I do less and less because I'd much rather try and do a unique piece... it's going to be of much more benefit for the readers and for engagement than going along to a gig where you have [a player] turning up to promote [a brand] and he's going to say absolutely nothing of any interest and it's instantly forgotten the next day' [A]. Another respondent concurred 'Short-term PR attempts to enhance company reputations fall well short of assuring committed, detailed and genuine coverage - the kind able to dissolve cultural biases towards women's sport' [M]. The model of the LGFA providing content was seen as a more impactful initiative that sponsors could take on. 'Pay freelancers to cover the games.... So if you want to get branding out there, this is how you go about it. You pay Sportsfile every weekend to cover one of their matches and send a weekend wrap... better again do an interview ahead of the round of action so that you have a piece that could stand with it and previews and I guarantee it'll be used... just carry a line at the end saying X are sponsors of and supporters of women's sport in Ireland... that could be built into the sponsorship model in some way' [C]. While NGBs and sponsors were seen as key to improving coverage, so too there was a central role for male allies in the initiative of improving gender equality in sports coverage.

Male allies are needed

Respondents were very clear that the initiative of getting gender balance in media coverage of women's sports was not one that should be left to women only. As one respondent put it 'The only way the women get there is by men giving them a hand up, I only got to where I am because I had some really good men as bosses and during my career, who... started giving me shifts, gave me a job and opportunity. So there's a lot of onus on men to step up... there's only so much women can do' [A]. Some respondents explained male allyship as influenced by their personal relationships 'They may have daughters and suddenly they've got more into it that way' [I] or 'I was involved in my personal life in women's sport, So I've been doing more than would normally be done' [D] and 'On the 20 by 20 campaign, there were there were seven men on the steering group... all of them were fathers of daughters and from a just a purely human level that's probably going to be the beachhead of where this comes from' [L]. Arguable however the allyship needs to expand beyond men's relationship to specific women to a broader buy-in as simply a cause of equality, fairness and the promotion of sport for all people. Many male respondents also identified as allies to gender equality 'I mean, look, it's really important to me' [F] and 'It's very close to my heart' [L]. Some were allies in ways that were very practical as one respondent described 'last week... the two Ireland teams were playing... and we had somebody at both. Now, look, I won't lie to you, I suppose a lot of that is due to the fact that one of our soccer writers is really into the women's soccer, so he was looking to go to that. That helps too, if the reporter or correspondent has a genuine interest in or a genuine passion for it, but... out of the team of 20 people there might be four or five who are particularly interested in the women's side of things and they're pushing it to get it onto the pages or the site, you know that's going to help ... They just want to be fair, they're forward thinking' [I].

Role for quotas

There was some ambivalence about the role of quotas in improving coverage of women's sport. Some respondents saw it as a necessary next step for media outlets. 'Swedish national television, they decided 5-6 years ago that they were going to go 50:50. So whenever they had a male sports story

they were going to find a women's sports story. And funnily enough, they were able to find them. They might have had to look a little bit harder. They might have had to look in different places. But if you value equality, then that's what you have to do' (L). Others took a position of seeing quotas as a necessary evil, but this interpretation of quota was entangled in the common confusion that quotas mean taking people unqualified for roles rather than the actual function of quotas to fill roles with qualified people who happen to represent minoritised communities before filling roles with well represented groups. As the respondent said 'I am the most anti-quota person possible because I just don't like it as an idea. But I now know it has its place and I understand why it has its place. I think it's just, it's almost like the nuclear option, we have now tried everything we have now done everything, we are going to hit that button and I really don't like this because I think it undermines everybody... the potential males that are trying to implement something that should be changed. And I think it undermines the people that are coming into the roles because there's always that asterisk beside their name, which should not be' (F). This mis-interpretation of quotas is common, but nonetheless respondents were still open to quotas as a way of ensuring change, that was otherwise glacial in its speed. As well as seeing roles for NGBs, sponsors, male allies, and quotas in addressing inequality, a number of respondents also saw it as an issue that needed to be tackled by parties beyond the spheres of media and sport.

A Role for all interested parties

Some respondents were clear that the responsibility for promoting gender equality in sport should not sit with the media or sports bodies alone. They saw a greater role for government and society more broadly. One respondent felt media were disproportionately responsabilized for the problem 'You do have concrete examples of significant progress in the media over an extended period of time and it's not solving the problem as it's perceived in terms of equality. All the things that are being asked of the media are being done in terms of getting live coverage on television and radio, promotion and still the audience doesn't come. Well, then the questions clearly are wider than just the media... We sort of feel we do a lot and yet it's like if the media did more then, there wouldn't be a problem' (K). That respondent also



Respondents were very clear that the initiative of getting gender balance in media coverage of women's sports was not one that should be left to women only.

proposed that gender equality in media was a challenge for multiple social parties to address. As they said 'The idea that media exist in a virtuous vacuum outside of society, reflects a totally unreal version of society where everybody wants to see things equally, they just don't. They don't. Like it's a long, complicated process in which the media plays a role, but a far smaller role than the organisations themselves, and the government- in terms of funding, general society and their level of interest, all of those things impact on each other' (K). With regard to the role of government, respondents were supportive of initiatives that had been introduced, such as increasing the proportion of women on boards of sporting organisations. 'Their insistence on making the boards of the sports organisations 50:50... it's small thing, it won't necessarily change everything, but over time, when you have more women making decisions, just better decisions will be made in regards to women's sport' (H). Withholding funding for lack of compliance was seen as key to implementing the policy 'Where they threatened to withhold funding if there wasn't 40% gender equity on leadership groups... when you threaten to withhold money, it does tend to sharpen the senses' (L).

Despite the myriad of challenges identified by journalists and producers with regard to tackling gender inequality in sports reporting, it was heartening that there was also a strong range of proposals for measures to tackle the challenge and a very strong sense of willingness on the part of media practitioners to engage with sports organisations, sponsors and society more generally to bring about change. 'I think it'd be no harm as a basis going forward if Sport Ireland and the media organisations came together and [discussed] how we all work together....' (N).

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