The complex relationship between media representation & empowerment: Possibilities and challenges

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Outline

Current situation
3 disempowering effects of limited visibility
The visibility $\leftrightarrow$ empowerment relationship
4 suggestions for building visibility
4 suggestions for activating media role models

*Sustainable Development Goal 5*
Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

“We recognize ... the contributions [sport] makes to the empowerment of women and of young people, individuals and communities, as well as to health, education and social inclusion objectives.” (UN Sustainable Development Goals)
“Symbolic annihilation” in sports media
By men, for men, about men

- Global 2011: 14 days, 18,000 articles, 81 papers
- New Zealand 2008: 1 year, 8000 articles, 1 paper
- Europe, USA, UK, Australia 2005: 14 days, 10,000 articles, 37 papers
- Denmark, Norway, Sweden 2002: 25 days, 3,000 articles, 9 papers
Sportswomen face “symbolic annihilation” in New Zealand sports media

Fig. 1: 30 years of research on print media coverage in New Zealand

Fig. 2: A full year of 2008 media coverage in one New Zealand newspaper
“We are teaching girls to be happy about watching boys... [and] boys that they don’t have to watch stories about girls”

(Geena Davis, in Ryan, 2010)

Sports media create a story that what sportswomen do is not culturally important.

“Go ahead and play, but don’t expect us to pay attention”
Females write more stories about women

Stories about sportswomen written by male and female sports journalists
Media visibility & empowerment

• Widespread belief a connection exists
• *Theoretical* support
• *Anecdotal* support (stories of individuals)
• *Empirical* research – ‘role models’

✗ is negative and supported by research

? reflects primarily anecdotal, not much evidence to support

✔ is positive and supported by research
3 disempowering effects of (in)visibility

✗ Females (and males) learn that women’s sport doesn’t matter

✗ Fewer role models to identify with
  - Girls much more likely than boys to select opposite sex sporting role models

✗ Fewer chances to see people ‘like me’
  - Narrow range of abilities, races/ethnicities, gender identities, ages, body types, sports
Beliefs / Anecdotal

Assumes more media coverage means women’s sport will be seen as culturally important

Assumes visibility will affect behaviour

- Role models open up possibilities
  “I do hope we can...maintain ...some of the tremendous media momentum...so that young girls across the country can continue to see, and aspire to be, women of real achievement” (girls’ school headmistress, in Dunn, 2015, p. 1)

- Increased elite and grassroots participation with additional benefits to self-esteem, etc.

Elite footballers felt “in a position of power that can encourage young people to participate in sport...to enjoy physical activity and promote good health” (Dunn, 2015, p. 4)
Theory and Research

Media is a major resource for youth identities

Girls looking for same-sex role models
  - “Females are more like us” (Adriaanse & Crosswhite, 2008, p. 388)
  - But girls *and* elite sportswomen much more likely to have male role models

Females more likely to view events with sportswomen
  - and female audience higher for these events
  - general sports coverage (TV, newspaper) attracts men

Female fans frustrated at poor coverage

Females often prefer performance-based images

Can serve as coaching tool
  - “Elite women handballers provided models for technical and tactical practice, as well as interactional cues and clues” (Broch, 2015, p. 167).
Ways to build higher visibility

Seek relationships with local/national media
- Talk to journalists in person
- Find out and deliver what they want/need
- Congratulate on good coverage
- Implement best women’s sport story awards

Influence government to pressure publicly owned media

Create online/virtual networks of women’s sports
- Use Internet/social media to promote, share the load
- News media follow social media

Use researchers
- Produce hard ‘data’ to challenge governments, sports organisations, media
Activating role models for change

Face to face as well as high-profile

- “authenticity, direct expression, personal contact, and involvement” (Brace-Govan, 2013, p. 121)

Similarity

- gender, sport, race/ethnicity, dis/ability, age, body type

Reflect qualities associated with femininity and masculinity

- “She is stong, powerful and never say die” (Adriaanse & Crosswhite, 2008, p. 387)
- “She is nice, pretty, fast and a good sports woman” (p. 386)

Encourage coaches to use media role models
References