

## **Changing the channel:** the reasons behind the lack of media coverage for women's sport

**By Charlotte Keuris**

Society has mostly embraced equality in the work place, but sport journalism still belongs to a boys club.

While the coverage of women's sport across the world is already unequal to that of males, often the publicity focusses on everything else but their sporting abilities.

The Gender and Media Progress Study 2010 conducted by Gender Links found that sport is the most covered topic in South African media with over a quarter of all coverage. Yet only 10% of this coverage is of women sport or women athletes.

Even when women sport events are reported on they are often broadcast during odd hours, treated as less credible events or portrayed as a novelty instead of a serious sport event showcasing talented sports women. "Online commentary points to girls and women as dominating social media during the [Olympic] games. Yet in both social and mainstream media, this attention shows that female athletes often found their looks, style of dress and physical appearance to be cause for comment" writes Kopano Sibeko in a recent article for Gender Links. "Women have made consistent contributions to South African sports at all levels, yet their achievements receive limited coverage by the mass media" adds Sibeko. Traditionally sport has been a male dominated field and sport women still struggle to get the same sponsorships or opportunities.

"It's a tough task being a South African sportswoman as the vast majority of women's sport is largely amateur and plays second fiddle to their male counterparts" writes Nickolaus Bauer in the Mail & Guardian. Women's sport in South Africa does not receive the same amount of media coverage as traditional male sports like rugby, soccer and cricket and because of this women sports struggle to attract sponsors. Executive Producer and Head of Sport at eNCA, Guy Hawthorne believes "the bottom line is the level of interest in female sports events, which lags way behind that of the men. Tradition plays a role here. Football

was traditionally a male game (as was cricket) and it is only in the recent past that women have started playing it at international level.”

Therefore the level of coverage of women’s sport is simply a reflection of the level of interest viewers have in the sport. While this might be the case, if viewers are not exposed to more women’s sport their interest will not grow. More importantly this lack of coverage has negative effects on the women sports themselves.

“Due to a lack of funding and media coverage, women teams face a bleak future as the country’s best talent is lost when players turn their back on the game” adds Bauer. Because women sport is not very lucrative many women can’t pursue a career in sport. This stops our women sport teams from reaching their full potential and further discourages sponsors from investing in a team, fuelling the cycle of inequality. Technical director of women soccer at SAFA, Fran Hilton-Smith, agrees that women sport needs to be invested in if it is going to reach the same level as male sport. “If you have no product, you don’t have sponsors or coverage, but if you don’t have sponsors or coverage you’ll never have a product”.

There is a misconception that viewers don’t want to watch women sport and that women sport is not as entertaining as male sport. These misconceptions are not being challenged and will continue to be believed until media coverage is increased and viewers are exposed to women sport on a regular basis. The argument that broadcasters are simply reacting to the wants of the viewer and the over abundance of male sport events is supported by media institutions and prominent sponsors. “SuperSport doesn’t specifically cater for ‘men’s’ or ‘women’s’ sport. All rights are considered on an even basis, taking into account price, popularity and status of the event. That said there is an unintentional skew towards traditional men’s sport simply because these are more on offer to broadcasters” said SuperSport communications manager Clinton van den Berg in the Mail & Guardian article. “Obviously sports with the biggest audience offer us the best prospects of a commercial return” adds Enzo Scarcella, head of Vodacom Marketing. “The level of coverage enjoyed by a team, male or female, is largely related to their success rate. Our women’s netball team, for example, struggle to hold their own on the international stage and this is reflected in the coverage they get” explains Hawthorne. The lack of sponsorship and the lack of media

coverage of women sport prevent these sports from reaching the same level as male sports, yet sponsors expect women sports to reach this level before investing in them.

This unequal coverage of women sports is not limited to South Africa and has also been noticed in first world countries such as Britain and America. In Britain, the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation (WSFF) found that coverage of women's sport makes up only 5% of media coverage. The WSFF describes this as 'shocking' and urged government to do more to promote women's sport in the country. Furthermore, research done by the WSFF found that women's sport only receives 0.5% of all commercial sponsorships. This is the same problem we're facing in South Africa where lack of sponsorships leads to lack of media coverage and vice versa.

When women athletes receive media coverage it is not focussed on their athletic ability or achievements. A perfect example of this is the type of media coverage some women athletes received during the London Olympics this year. Some Olympic viewers took to twitter to mock the hair of Gabby Douglas, a British gymnast who made history by being the first black woman to win individual Olympic gold in gymnastics. Instead of focusing on this athlete's incredible achievement at age 16, social media commented on her appearance in an unflattering way. Another example of such coverage was when London mayor, Boris Johnson, wrote that the popularity of women's beach volleyball at the Olympics was because of the 'semi-naked women' who were 'glistening like wet otters'. Such comments, especially by an authority figure like the mayor, exemplify crass sexism and reduces beach volley ball to a novelty rather than a respected sport. This lack of respect for women athletes and their sports is at the root of the problem of unequal coverage. Viewers will only change their opinions if media starts covering women sports at the same level that traditional male sports receive media coverage.

"All this unbalanced coverage reinforces the stereotypes that sport is for men" writes Sibeko. If media coverage continues to favour traditional male sports viewers will not be exposed to women sports and women sports across the world will continue to struggle. "If the media focuses more on women athletes and the various roles that women play in the sports industry, it will help eradicate stereotypes" believes Sibeko. Small changes can make a big difference and if publications and broadcasters make a commitment to showcase one

women sport in their coverage daily this will start the process towards equal coverage and opportunities.

It is up to the media to start changing the perception of women sports as less important and less interesting than traditional male sports. The media need to change their attitude towards covering women sport in order for viewers to change their perceptions of women sports. If there is any hope of women sport reaching the same levels as male sports then media institutions and sponsors need to start investing in them.