

Women's (long) road to the Olympics

[Researchers](#) argue that from a gender perspective, sport is one of the most hegemonic social institutions in modern society. Indeed, traditionally sport has been dominated by men, both in terms of participation and governance. Women were excluded from the first modern Olympic Games, held in Athens in 1896. At the time, it was still [considered](#) that 'physical effort, like running, jumping and climbing, might damage [women's] reproductive organs and make them unattractive to men'. Pierre de Coubertin – the founder of the modern Olympic Movement – [argued](#) that women's participation would be 'impractical, uninteresting, anaesthetic, and incorrect'. He further claimed that the games were created for 'the solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism' with 'female applause as reward'.

Four years later, women were admitted in [Paris](#), but they numbered a mere 22 – out of a total of 997 athletes – competing in tennis, sailing, croquet, horse-riding and golf. Frustrated by the lack of opportunities for women in the Olympics, [Alice Milliat](#) founded the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale and in 1921 organised the first Women's Olympic Games in Monaco. The event was a clear sign of women's intentions to rival the Olympic Games; the International Olympic Committee (IOC) responded by requesting that the name be changed. The request was granted and the Women's World Games were thus born. The event took place every four years from 1922 to 1934, and the momentum it created helped the inclusion of a growing number of women's disciplines in the Olympic Games. In 1934, Milliat [offered](#) to give up the Women's World Games, provided women's athletics became fully integrated in the Olympic Games and women became represented on the IOC. Whilst Milliat did ultimately disband the Women's World Games when the first part of this request was met, it was not until 1981 that the first two women were appointed to the IOC.

From then on, the presence and involvement of women in the Olympic Movement have gradually evolved, reflecting the changes in attitudes and in society at large. The introduction of [Title IX of the US Education Act](#) in 1972 opened up opportunities for women athletes and the researchers who studied them, and had a global positive impact on girls in sport.

Since 1991, all new sports wishing to be included in the Olympic programme must also feature a women's event. The London [2012 Olympics](#) were the first in which women competed in every discipline. In 2016, some 4 700 women – 45 % of all athletes – represented their countries in 306 events in the Rio de Janeiro Olympics.

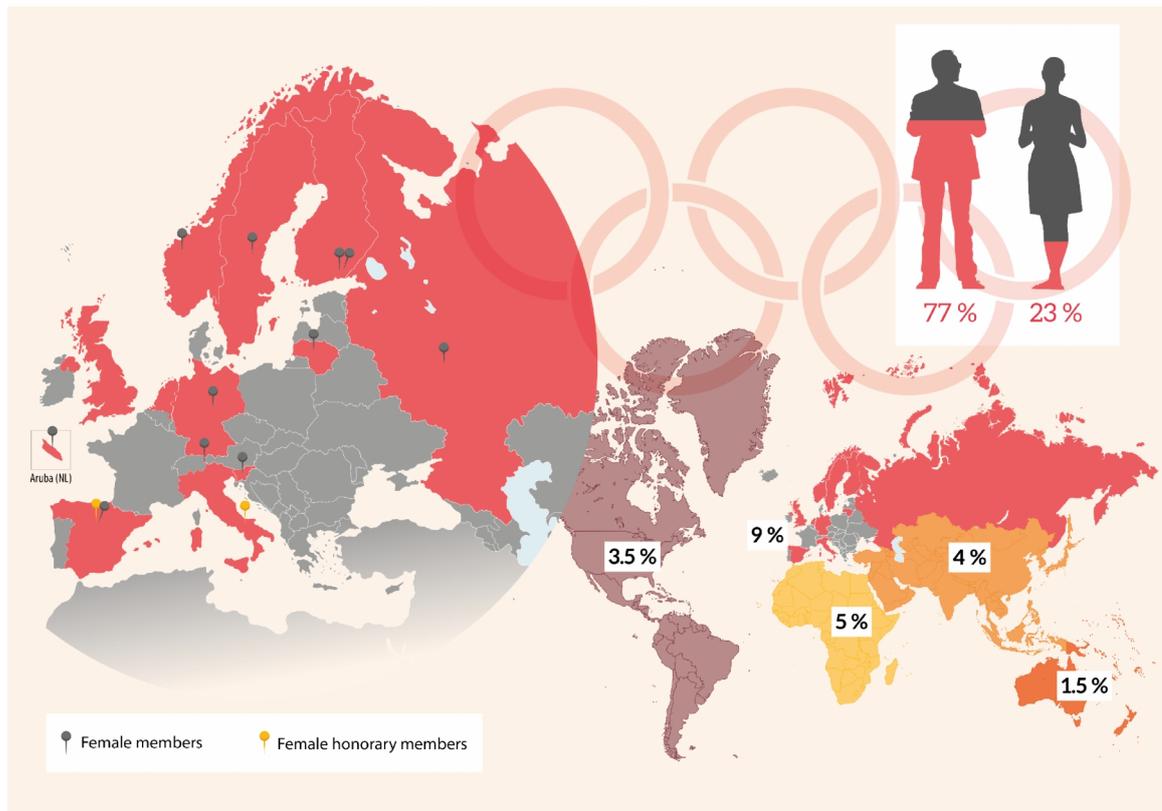
The increasing number of women in sport helps widen perspectives, bring in new ideas, and reach new audiences. However, girls and women across the world still get fewer opportunities and less investment, training and corporate attention when they play sport. Women who perform 'too well' are sometimes viewed with suspicion and submitted to [gender tests](#). Professional female athletes often face a glass ceiling and a substantial pay gap. Nevertheless, the IOC, which started out by excluding female athletes, now actively promotes women's achievements and supports the promotion of women in sport at all levels through its charter.

Women in sports-related decision-making

Women in the International Olympic Committee

The under-representation of women in sports leadership positions is so common that it often goes unnoticed. When it is acknowledged, change is very slow in coming. There were no women members of the IOC from 1896 to 1981; the situation has only slightly improved in 2019, with 33 female [IOC members and honorary members](#) out of a total of 144. Moreover, fewer than 20 % of the members of the governing structures of affiliated bodies, such as the National Olympic Committees (NOCs) and the Association of National Olympic Committees, are women. Perhaps surprisingly, Europe has the lowest representation of women on the NOC general assembly, compared to the other continents represented: Asia, Africa, America and Oceania, (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Women in the International Olympic Committee, by continent, 2019



Source: [The International Olympic Committee](#), 2019, own calculation.

Numbers do matter. A 2008 [study](#) into women's participation on corporate boards confirmed that attaining a critical mass in a group yields more power and can tip the scales one way or the other, whereas 'token' presence can easily be marginalised. Being the only woman board member carries a real risk of tokenism, since a single woman is both highly visible and easily ignored.

[Research](#) (2012) also shows that when a minority group increases to a certain level or 'critical mass', its presence can alter the existing power relations. Scholars found that to successfully influence the culture of an organisation, a minimum of 30 % women's representation is required for a critical mass, including a minimum of three women on the board. Currently, four women sit on the [IOC executive board](#), representing 26.6 % of the board members.

Women in the International Olympic Committee: Milestones

In 1981, Flor Isava-Fonseca – a Venezuelan sportswoman and journalist – and Pirjo Haeggman – a Finnish sprinter – were the first women to join the IOC. Nine years later, Isava-Fonseca became the first woman to sit on the IOC executive board.

Gender issues started featuring more prominently on the IOC's agenda in the 1990s. In 1995, the IOC established a Women and Sport Working Group to advise the executive board on policies to be implemented in the field of gender equality.

The next year, the 1st IOC World Conference on Women and Sport took place in Lausanne, Switzerland. Several recommendations were made, including that the International Federations and the National Olympic Committees create special committees or working groups 'composed of at least 10 % women to design and implement a plan of action with a view to promoting women in sport'.

It was also in 1996 that the [Olympic Charter](#) was amended to include, for the first time in history, an explicit reference to the promotion of gender equality between men and women in the executive bodies of national and international sports organisations.

In 1997, Anita L. DeFrantz – a US Olympic rower – was elected IOC vice-president and became the first woman to occupy this position.

A few years later, in 2000, the 2nd IOC World Conference on Women in Sport adopted a resolution requiring to reserve at least 20 % of decision-making positions for women within the IOC's structures by the end of 2005. The same year, the [IOC Women and Sport Awards](#) were introduced to promote the advancement of women in sport.

In 2004, Gunilla Lindberg – a Swedish sports official – was elected IOC vice-president. The IOC Women and Sport Working Group became a fully-fledged commission.

More recently, in 2012, Nawal El Moutawakel – a Moroccan hurdler – was elected IOC vice-president.

Women represented 40 % of the participants in the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi (Russia). Female participation in the 2014 Youth Olympic Games in Nanjing (China) set a new record, constituting 49 % of the total.

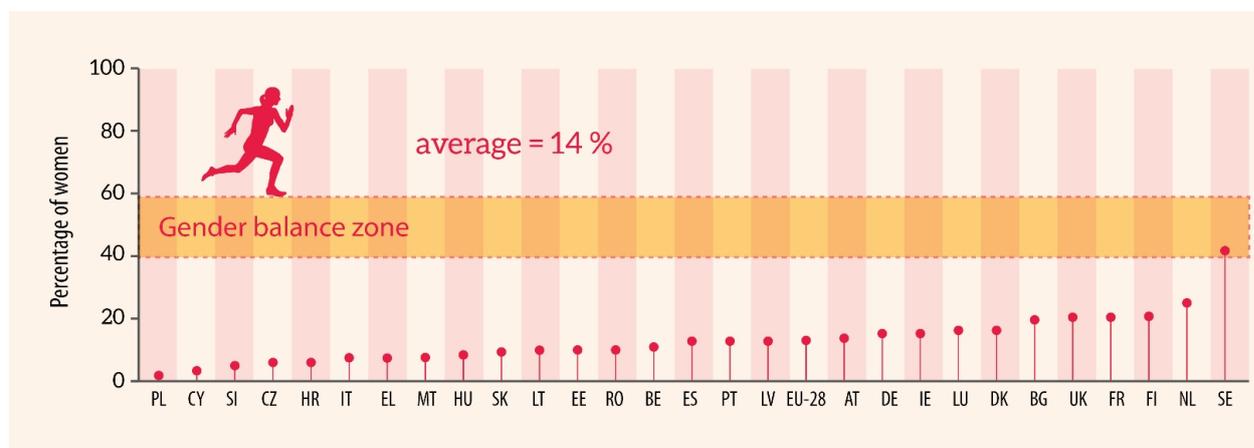
The [Olympic Agenda 2020](#) vows to achieve 50 % female participation in the Olympics by creating more participation opportunities, and to encourage the inclusion of mixed-gender team events, thus confirming the IOC's ongoing commitment to gender equality.

Source: [The International Olympic Committee](#), 2019.

Women in sports federations in the EU

Data released by the European Institute for Gender Equality show that on average in 2015, only 14 % of all top decision-making positions in EU Member States' sports federations were occupied by women, ranging from 3 % in Poland to 43 % in Sweden (see Figure 2). With the notable exception of Sweden, the majority of countries display a share of less than 20 %.

Figure 2 – Proportion of women among all decision making positions in national sport federations in the EU-28, 2015



Source: European Institute for Gender Equality, [Gender in sport](#), 2017.

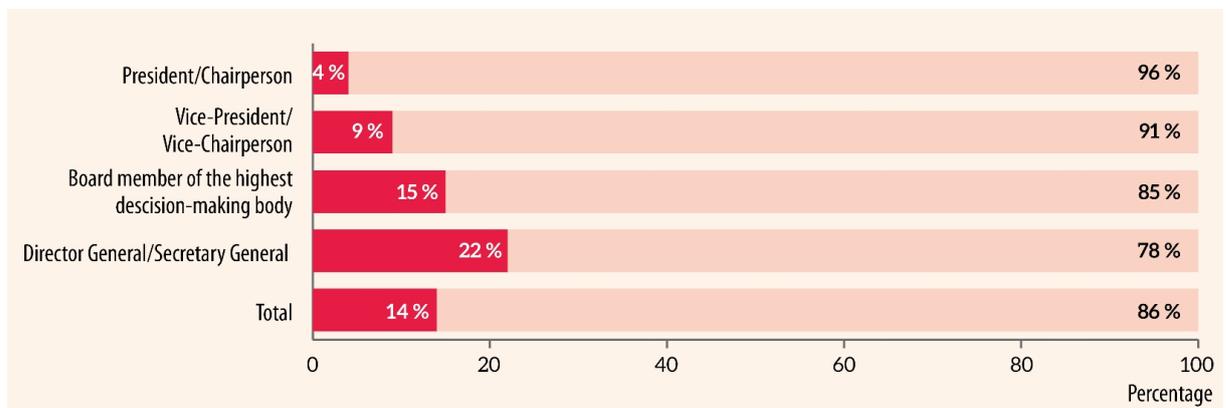
Note: The following positions are included: president/chairperson, vice-president/vice-chairperson, director-general/ secretary-general and other board members. To avoid double counting, each person is counted only once, even if they hold several positions.

Sport is seen as a voluntary activity, often a part of civil society, and is therefore left unregulated by the state. In other words, national governments are not inclined to penalise sports organisations for female under-representation in sports governance.

The hierarchical ranking of women in sports organisations tends to share similarities with other areas of decision-making where women [remain a minority](#). Indeed, vertical segregation accounts for the fact that the gender gap widens as the seniority of the position increases.

Indeed, while women held 14 % of decision-making positions in European Olympic sports confederations in 2015, they represented only 4 % (1 out of 28) of the total number of presidents or chairpersons and 9 % (8 out of 91) of vice-presidents. Women's share among board members was 15 % (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Proportion of women and men in decision making positions in European Olympic sports confederations, 2015



Source: European Institute for Gender Equality, [Gender in sport](#), 2017.

Note: To avoid double counting, each person is counted only once, even if they hold several positions.

Women in sports leadership worldwide

Female under-representation in sports organisations is not only a European concern but also a global one. A 2015 [study](#) looking into gender diversity on sports boards globally came to similar conclusions. The author analysed data from the Sydney Scoreboard (see text box) – a global index for women in sports leadership – reviewing sports organisations from 45 national sports federations (NSFs). The average result for women in sports leadership – 19.7 % – clearly indicates their under-representation. Only in four countries – the Cook Islands, Norway, Fiji, and Sweden – is women's representation above 30 %. The results reflecting the other two key indicators, women as board chairs (10.8 %) and as chief executives (16.3 %), show that it is even more challenging for women to obtain influential leadership positions. A comparison between continents shows that no region has achieved a critical mass of 30 % on any of the three indicators.

Based on the scoreboard, a 2018 [study](#) looking into 21 European NSF boards in 2013-2014 shows that women remain markedly underrepresented. The average result¹ – 18 % – highlights that 82 % of the members of European NSF boards are men, with only one country, Norway, achieving the necessary critical mass, in this case, 37 %. Chair positions for women on sports boards seem completely out of bound, as men hold 92 % of these positions. Finally, even though 21 % of chief executive positions are held by women, this only emphasises that the remaining 79 % are held by men. Europe does not seem to be leading the way in terms of gender diversity in sports leadership: the European average for all three indicators is either similar or slightly below the global average.

The Sydney Scoreboard

The [Sydney Scoreboard](#), an interactive online tool, monitors the gender composition of boards of national and international sports governing bodies. It originates from the 5th World Conference on Women and Sport held in Sydney in 2010 under the auspices of the International Working Group on Women and Sport, an independent global network of members of key government and non-government organisations. The scoreboard uses three key indicators for women in sports leadership: the number of women board members, the gender of the board chair and the gender of the chief executive. The latter two positions are widely acknowledged as the most powerful positions in an organisation.

The variations in women's participation in sports governance display a clear geographical divide. In terms of board members, the top 12 NSF boards – with Norway, Wales and Iceland leading the way – are all located in northern and western Europe, while the bottom nine – with the Czech Republic, Italy and Poland bringing up the rear – are predominately situated in southern and eastern Europe. Similar trends are also noticeable when analysing the other two indicators.

Importantly, whilst gender diversity on boards is an ethical issue in terms of adequate representation of society as a whole, it also has an impact on organisations' performance. Research data help build a clear business case in favour of gender diversity. For example, a [study](#) on women directors on corporate boards provides practical examples of how women's presence opens up new perspectives to debates and decision-making. Furthermore, it confirms that gender diversity on boards contributes to more effective corporate governance through individual interactions and a variety of board processes. Other publications point out that boards with three or more women are significantly more likely to have [conflict of interest guidelines](#) and to be active in promoting [non-financial performance measures](#) (such as innovation and social responsibility).

When [academics](#) specifically take risk and complexity into consideration, it becomes clear that women are often appointed to leadership positions under 'problematic organisational circumstances associated with greater risk of failure and criticism', a phenomenon called a 'glass cliff'. These results should be interpreted with caution, yet when this particular variable is factored into the calculation, the data show that female directors might actually be outperforming their male counterparts, since the positions women are given may be less promising to start with.

Women as coaches

In spite of the fact that the number of women actively involved in sport has increased dramatically over the past 50 years, across the globe female coaches are a statistical minority in nearly all sports and performance levels.

It has been estimated that only 20 % - 30 % of all sports coaches in Europe are women. Figures are even lower for qualified female coaches. Only in women-dominated sports, such as gymnastics, figure-skating and equestrian sports, do women outnumber men as coaches. That said, even in such sports, it is quite often men who coach women and girls. Conversely, very few women coach men, especially at the elite level. The number of women coaches in elite sports is very low and they typically hold assistant-coaching positions. Female coaches usually train adolescents or children who compete at the local and regional levels.

Studies confirm this and emphasise that besides often experiencing discrimination, female coaches tend to be assigned roles as caretakers and assistants to male coaches. In addition, female coaches are expected to cope with contradictory expectations, which confront them with an inextricable dilemma. On the one hand, an adaptation to masculine behaviour is seen as necessary to gain respect. On the other hand, this very type of behaviour is perceived as a defensive strategy. In other words, women coaches face a situation where they are expected to both affirm their gender and to keep it inconspicuous.

The importance of having strong female role models in sport, particularly in coaching, has been highlighted by various researchers, notably to inspire others to pursue and realise similar achievements or to provide insight and advice on how to navigate in a difficult environment. Indeed, practitioners argue that having a female coach has a positive impact on coaching intentions and can be related to the importance of having a female role model. The lack of such role models can lead to an inability to challenge or resist negative stereotypes regarding gender and leadership.

Women in sports sciences

The percentage and status of women in the sports scientific community mirror the situation of the female members of national and international decision-making bodies. Yet again, [research](#) confirms that women are a minority in the governing boards of scientific associations, and in particular, in the decision-making committees.

Practitioners argue that female coaches have little or no support for overcoming the various types of barriers – such as low confidence, lack of support, and deep-rooted sports stereotypes – they face, and strategies to change this state of affairs are very limited.

There being no legal requirement for including gender-specific topics in sports education and training programmes, these topics are often neglected, and gender-related issues are barely mainstreamed in the academic curriculum, including for the subject of coaching.

Some authors argue that women's progress through coaching is more comparable to a 'bottle neck' than a 'glass ceiling' analogy, since, as they advance, most women are excluded from pivotal positions through 'flawed pathways and few chances to coach'.

Facts and figures about women coaches across the EU

In 2009, 25 % of all coaches in [Finland](#) were women. Most of them worked in the federations and clubs of female-dominated sports, such as gymnastics and figure skating.

Data from 2008 show that in the [United Kingdom](#), there are more than 1 million coaches, of whom 31 % were women. Still, there were only nine women occupying a [head coaching position](#) within a senior national team, in comparison to 43 men.

In [Germany](#) some 10 % of the 500 national coaches are women. Slightly more – 13 % – can be found in elite sport, but with a few exceptions, they are all in charge of female athletes.

Gender pay inequalities

The gender pay gap is a global phenomenon reflecting wider gender inequality practices. [Research](#) shows that the pay gap is nowhere more apparent than in the world of sport. One direct consequence of this is that, as female athletes earn less and need a second job to make a living, they can devote less time to improving their skills; they therefore face a non-level playing field in terms of career chances.

A 2017 [study](#) reveals that even though the gender pay gap in sport has been narrowing, it still very much exists. A total of 83 % of sports now reward men and women equal prize money, but the disparities in some sports are substantial, with cricket, golf and football being among the most striking examples. In comparison, 70 % of sports offered equal prize money in 2014.

Football is among the sports displaying the greatest disparities. Indeed, a 2017 [global sports salaries survey](#) revealed that the combined salaries paid to women's leagues in seven top-division football competitions in France, Germany, England, the US, Sweden, Australia and Mexico, comprising 81 teams and 1 693 players, stood at £32.8 million a year, a little less than the £32.9 million earned by Brazilian forward Neymar for his playing contract for Paris Saint-Germain in 2017-2018. Similarly, while [prize money](#) for the men's Football World Cup in 2018 amounted to US\$400 million, women will get just US\$30 million in pay-outs in the 2019 Women's World Cup.

US basketball is the world's most lucrative sport for female athletes (see Table 1). The average pay for the 2017 season in the Women's National Basketball Association was US\$74 759, which is still 96 times less than what a male professional would earn for a season: US\$7 147 217.

Tennis was the first sport to pay equal prize money when the US Open started doing so in 1973, as a result of effective campaigning by former world number one professional tennis player, [Billie Jean King](#).² Wimbledon, the oldest tennis tournament in the sport's history, was the last Grand Slam event to follow suit in 2007, after persistent advocacy on the part of [Venus Williams](#). However, outside those major tournaments, the gender pay gap remains very wide at [large tennis events](#).

[Data](#) show that as at 2004, athletics, bowling, skating, marathon, shooting and volleyball all paid equal prize money. Since 2004, a further 12 sports adopted this practice, with squash, surfing³ and all World Championship cycling events achieving equality in the past five years.

Table 1 – Average annual salaries in the best-paid women's sports leagues in the world, 2017-2018

League	Country	Season	Sport	Teams	Players	€
WNBA	USA	2017	Basketball	12	144	64 388
Super Netball	Australia	2017	Netball	8	80	44 775
D1 Feminine	France	2017-2018	Football	12	273	42 188
Frauen-Bundesliga	Germany	2017-2018	Football	12	278	37 060
FAWSL	England	2017-2018	Football	10	157	29 962
Damehåndboldligaen	Denmark	2017-2018	Handball	12	198	29 543
NWSL	USA	2017	Football	10	199	23 301
Big Bash	Australia	2017-2018	Cricket	8	128	13 218
Damallsvenskan	Sweden	2017	Football	12	240	12 000
W-League	Australia	2017-2018	Football	9	162	9 154
AFL Women's	Australia	2018	Australian rules football	8	218	8 374
Liga MX Femenil	Mexico	2017-2018	Football	16	384	1 881

Source: SportingIntelligence, [Global sports salaries survey 2017](#).

In the past couple of years, women's football teams around the world have been standing up for parity with their male counterparts on the international stage.

A two-time European champion, [Norway's](#) women's football team has traditionally been one of the most successful teams in women's football, winning the World Cup in 1995. In 2017, the Norwegian Football Association announced that the amount of money paid to the women's team would almost double from 3.1 million to 6 million Norwegian kroner.

In April 2017, after being forced to change in public toilets and share tracksuits with youth-team squads, [Ireland's women's football team](#) threatened to go on strike for allegedly being treated like 'fifth-class citizens' by the Irish Football Association, before reaching an agreement.

The [Scottish female football team](#) also managed to come to an agreement with the Scottish Football Association after implementing a media blackout and raising questions about finances, support and respect.

In September 2017, [Denmark](#) cancelled a women's Home friendly against the Netherlands, because of a financial dispute with the Danish Football Association. The men's team [offered](#) the women's side US\$80 000 a year to help cover their costs, but the association rejected the offer. It has been reported that female players receive about 14 000 Danish kroner (€1 880) on average per month. The wages of their male counterparts have not been disclosed.

[Nigerian female football players](#) 'the Falcons' held a sit-in protest in 2016 over unpaid allowances and bonuses for winning the Women's Africa Cup of Nations – their ninth African title. They have also been selected for every Women's World Cup since the FIFA competition began in 1991. News reports claim that the Falcons were handed 10 000 naira each (US\$50) after successfully qualifying for the 2016 Africa Women's Cup of Nations. In comparison, the men's team, which failed to qualify on two consecutive occasions for the respective men's event, are paid US\$4 000 each for a draw and US\$5 000 for a win. The women are also reportedly still owed their bonuses for qualifying for the 2015 World Cup. Back in 2010, journalists revealed that the women received US\$500 for every win at the World Cup, while the men received US\$30 000. Furthermore, while the male team was lodged in five-star hotels, the women's team was kept in sub-standard accommodation.

The [US women's national football team](#) recently won much improved pay and terms, a long-term fight that came to prominence when five of the country's top players filed a wage discrimination suit with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

The women footballers [used to earn 60 % less](#) than their male counterparts. That was despite the fact that the women ranked higher than the men in their respective FIFA world rankings (1st versus 30th), played more games and generated US\$20 million more in revenue than the men in 2015, when they filed the complaint.

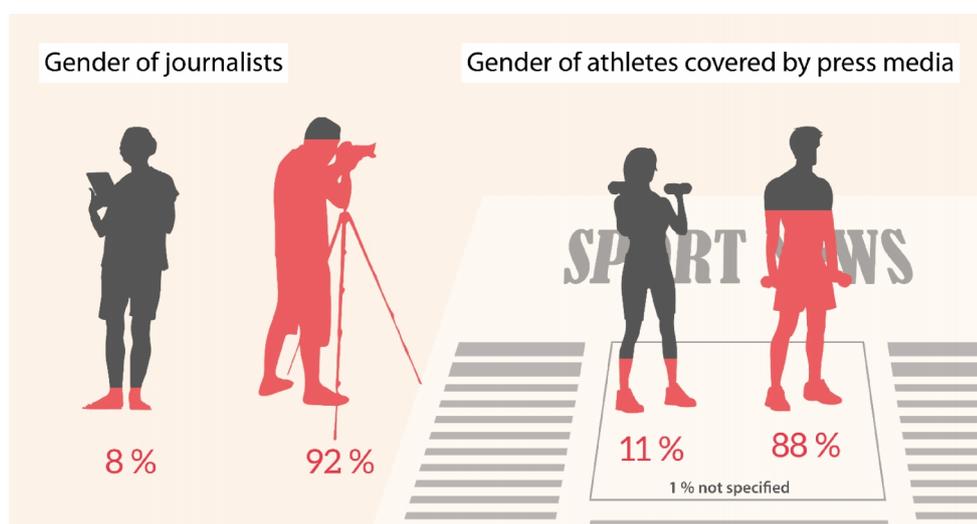
Gender-related stereotypes in media representation

Despite the considerable increase in girls' and women's participation in sport and a growing audience interested in women's elite sport, there are still [significant differences in the media coverage](#) of women's and men's sports, with the latter receiving far more media coverage. Some researchers argue that the media tend to depict women athletes in a [hypersexualised way](#), showing them as women first and athletes second, thus contributing to the construction of harmful gender stereotypes. Comforting traditional expectations, the media also seem to be perpetuating a gendered perspective of sports as masculine (e.g. football and ice hockey) and feminine (e.g. gymnastics and figure-skating). Indeed, female athletes quite often receive coverage in the media only if they are participating in [traditionally feminine sports](#). This only makes it more difficult to break traditional gender barriers and allow women to participate in 'masculine' sports and men to participate in 'feminine' sports.

Media coverage of women's sports

The results of an extensive [study](#) carried out in 22 countries around the world show that sports journalism in the print media is often a 'man's world', with over 90 % of the articles being written by male journalists (see Figure 4). Moreover, men traditionally cover the most popular sports such as football, rugby, cricket, and ice hockey, while women are in charge of 'second-rate' disciplines generally mentioned in the 'other sports' section. The study also reveals that over 85 % of the print media coverage is dedicated to male athletes.

Figure 4 – Proportion of sports journalists by gender and athletes covered in articles, worldwide, 2011



Source: T. Horky and J.-U. Nieland, [International Sports Press Survey 2011: Results and Outlook](#), Play the Game, Aarhus, 2013.

Quite strikingly, a 2009 [survey](#) carried out by the British Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation found that for every newspaper article featuring a sportswoman, there were 53 focusing on men. Likewise, New Zealand [research](#) suggests that male gold medallists receive more than double the additional coverage of their female counterparts. The same is true for TV coverage. While the [US women's basketball team](#), which won its fifth consecutive gold medal in 2012, received less than half a minute of prime-time coverage, the men's team, which won its second consecutive gold medal, received approximately half an hour of prime-time coverage.

Similarly, [UNESCO](#) data indicate that only 4 % of sports media content is dedicated to women's sport. Of that 4 % coverage, reporting often refers to women's physical appearance, age and personal lives, rather than their athletic abilities. Likewise, just 12 % of sports news is presented by women.

[Researchers](#) argue that the misrepresentation of women's sports accounts for the lack of interest among sports fans and reinforces the public's generally negative attitudes towards women in sport. Moreover, the lack of coverage of women's sports may be holding sports fans back from developing an interest in women's sports and becoming fans of specific women's sports teams and athletes.

Viewing habits

A 2018 UK [survey](#) focusing on attitudes towards women in sport, revealed that, in terms of viewing preferences, there is a strong bias towards male sports. Unsurprisingly, tennis, swimming and athletics came top of the most watched women's sports. Unlike football or rugby, these sports are more widely perceived as having a unisex character.

Interestingly, the poll showed that the main reason why people do not watch women's sports is not a matter of personal choice, but is rather due to a lack of TV coverage. The second-most popular reason given by participants is that they prefer watching men. This preference seems to be shared by both genders: 18 % of women and 20 % of men gave this as the reason why they do not watch women's sports. The third most popular explanation given by male respondents is that women are inferior at sport, both in terms of skill and strength.

In the past, top male players including [Novak Djokovic](#) and [Rafael Nadal](#) have claimed that men should earn more as they attract larger audiences. However, defeating objective perceptions, official viewing figures [show](#) that fans' interest is not based on gender but is rather determined by individual performance and personality. For example, from 2010 to 2014, the US Open women's final drew a larger audience in the US than the men's final. This was arguably due to Serena Williams appearing in four of those finals. Similarly, more people watched Kim Clijsters' final in 2010 than Nadal's victory the same year, and more than 1.5 million more people watched Samantha Stosur's final than Djokovic's final in 2011.

Greater coverage of female participation, combined with more national [awareness-raising campaigns](#), could nevertheless help change attitudes towards women in sport and encourage fans of both sexes to watch women's sport at an elite level.

Popularity and coverage of women's sports events in the EU

Media attention is important for players and clubs because it attracts investment, enhances the status of athletes and clubs, and opens up new prospects for development. It might therefore be tempting to seek to tackle the lack of TV coverage for women's sports by introducing mandatory quotas for broadcasters in the EU. This could, however, prove unworkable and counter-productive. For sports events to be successful, they need to generate excitement. Every EU country has at least a couple of household names of female athletes capable of galvanising large audiences. Yet, if the respective sports organisations do not design a sustainable long-term strategy for their women's events, the public's interest may not last long.

One way of setting up such a strategy is through forging partnerships with broadcasters and the wider media to generate excitement and gain momentum around women's sports events. Experts [argue](#) that this could be achieved by amending the [Audiovisual Media Services Directive](#)⁴ in order to promote a broader coverage of sports events, both in terms of content and gender, including not only live coverage but also deferred coverage, general news programmes, and reporting of sports events (e.g. by employing more female sports commentators). It is further suggested that the new rules could be modelled in line with existing articles aimed at the promotion of European films, such as using new media for greater exposure of women's sports events, or encouraging broadcasters to develop strategies for the promotion of women's sports. Finally, the EU could set up targets and report on progress.

Highlighting that 'equality means visibility', the UK Sports Minister, [Mims Davies](#), recently called on major broadcasters to increase their coverage of women's sports events and ensure that they are no longer treated like a 'novelty'. Similar reactions have been voiced in [France](#) and [Spain](#), to name but a few.

Women's football: Growing more popular every day

Quite counterintuitively, [football](#) is the most popular sport among girls and women. Around the world, over [30 million](#) girls and women play football. The [US, Germany, Canada and Sweden](#) have the largest populations of registered female footballers. Women's football is well developed in [Europe](#): 52 football associations have a senior women's national team and 51 countries maintain a domestic women's league in the framework of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA).

In 2010, the European football governing body launched its [women's football development programme](#) and funded an extensive series of projects across Europe to drive growth and sustainability in the women's game. In addition to funding projects, the programme is now offering UEFA member associations a series of 'free kicks' – knowledge-sharing schemes, practical courses and advisory programmes – in six key areas, among which on- and off-field development, coaching and refereeing.

Career paths of female football players: The Swedish experience

[Research](#) carried out by sport scientists shows that Sweden has managed to create an environment that appeals to girls and produces more [professional female football](#) players than in most other EU countries.

The 'sport schools' specialising in football are the centrepiece of this system. Spread throughout the country, they offer four academic levels: elementary (age 10-12), secondary (age 13-15), high school (age 16-18) and university (age 18+). The Swedish sport system reflects the EU guidelines on [dual careers](#), which aim for athletes to combine education and sport training. In 2016, there were 98 sport secondary schools and 68 sport high schools in Sweden, where girls constituted respectively 14 % and 29 % of the students.

Girls who continue to play when at high school, embrace a career in football. However, the high level of dropouts prevents the majority of girls from reaching the next level and become professional football players. Similarly, the authors argue that the Swedish system is centred on selecting players rather than developing them. Also, the extra burden that dual careers impose on private/family life, more often than not discourages female players from continuing to the tertiary level.

Last but not least, financial prospects for women players are not as attractive as those for men (i.e. the average salary of a professional female football player in Sweden is slightly over €1 000 per month).

On a global level, the [FIFA world ranking for women](#) is topped by the US, followed by Germany, France and England. Since 1991, the [FIFA Women's World Cup](#) has been played every four years, and has gained substantially in popularity and media attention over the past few decades. The 2015 FIFA edition in Canada drew unprecedented interest, with more than 750 million fans following the matches on TV and 1.35 million spectators watching their favourite teams in the stadia.

In 2018, for the first time ever, FIFA announced the launch of its [women's football strategy](#), in which the top football authority vowed to take concrete steps 'to empower girls and women, make football a sport for all and advocate against gender discrimination'. The strategy centres upon three key objectives: increasing participation, enhancing commercial value, and building stronger foundations. Indeed, the FIFA Women's World Cup plays a key strategic role as part of its efforts to double the number of female players to 60 million by 2026. In addition, shaping new revenue streams and optimising existing ones – more specifically through enhancing ties with existing commercial partners, developing a strategy to sell broadcasting, digital and media rights, and establishing a women's ambassadorial programme to generate additional exposure for legendary female footballers – will make it possible to expand the development efforts. Last but not least, creating a more sophisticated women's football ecosystem and encouraging leadership roles for women is expected to modernise the management of the game.

European Parliament views on gender equality in sport

Parliament has consistently advocated for gender equality in sport. Already in [2003](#), it called for an end to the distinction between male and female disciplines in top-level sport; action for improving women's participation in technical roles and in decision-making; protection of the health of women athletes; and the adoption of measures for the prevention of [gender-based violence](#). In a [resolution](#) of 2007, Parliament focused on gender issues in sport in relation to education. The resolution recognised the importance of the full participation of girls and women in sporting activities at all levels, and considered gender equality and non-discrimination to be objectives that form an integral part of sport's educational and social functions. It further stressed the need to ensure equal access and participation for women and men, boys and girls at all levels and in all functions and areas of sport, irrespective of their social background. A later [resolution](#) of 2012, urged sports organisations to further encourage women's participation in sport and in sports organisations' governance bodies by guaranteeing equal access to sporting activities, in particular for girls and women from disadvantaged backgrounds, by promoting female participation in sport and giving women's and men's sports and results equal prominence and visibility. The resolution also encouraged EU countries to develop measures enabling female athletes to reconcile their family and professional sports lives and to promote gender equality in government policies on sport.

In February 2019, the Parliament and the International Federation of Professional Footballers signed an [agreement](#) to mobilise voters ahead of the 2019 European elections. As part of the campaign, high profile players, such as [Nilla Fischer](#), will be encouraging women to vote on issues that matter to them.

MAIN REFERENCES

European Institute for Gender Equality, [Gender in sport](#), 2017.

A. Elling, J. Hovden, A. Knoppers, [Gender Diversity in European Sport Governance](#), 2018.

ENDNOTES

¹ The calculation is based on data from 21 European countries, including Iceland and Norway. Results for the United Kingdom appear separately for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

² Billie Jean King is also famous for her '[battle of the sexes](#)' match opposite former Wimbledon champion Bobby Riggs. Incidentally, this was one of the most-watched televised sports events in US history, which arguably [had a strong impact](#) on a whole generation of young men.

³ Surfing pays out the same overall prize money at world championships. However, prize money for individual events in the league is based on the number of competitors involved, resulting in men's events handing out more awards.

⁴ The [directive](#) has recently been revised and approved after a lengthy period of discussions. It seems therefore unlikely that the process will be reopened in the near future.

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