

# Challenging gender inequalities or reinforcing old stereotypes? The coverage of sportswomen in the British, American and Spanish quality press during the London 2012 Olympics from the lens of journalism ethics

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## **Abstract**

According to their centrality as transmitters of information and values in democratic societies, the quality media should carry out a responsible treatment of all areas of the news arena, including sports. However, a major ethical drawback in the field of sports journalism has been the long-standing underrepresentation and biased portrayal of female athletes. This article has examined to what extent six prestigious newspapers (*The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sunday Telegraph*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *El País* and *La Vanguardia*) complied with the deontological principle of justice in their portrayal of sportswomen during the London 2012 Olympics. The content analysis of 4,507 pieces revealed that the newspapers sampled delivered the message of non-discrimination and considered sportswomen's triumphs as salient content. Despite this, certain forms of overt and covert stereotypes (sexism and mentions of physical attributes, emotionality, infantilizing and out-of-context reporting) permeated the coverage.

**Keywords:** Sports journalism, London 2012 Olympics, sportswomen, press, ethics

**Summary:** 1. Introduction. 2. Journalism ethics and the portrayal of sportswomen. 2.1. Quantitative nature of coverage. 2.2. Qualitative nature of coverage. 3. Methodology. 4. Results. 4.1. Quantitative results. 4.2. Qualitative results. 4.3. Raising awareness of the pending challenges to be faced on the way towards achieving equality. 4.4. The persistence of stereotypes. 5. Discussion and conclusions. Bibliographic references.

## *1. Introduction*

According to their normative public service role (Singer, 2013) and their centrality as configurators of the public agenda and transmitters of values in democratic societies, the quality media should carry out a responsible treatment of all areas of the news arena, including sports. Bearing in mind the increasing preoccupation among the citizenship with the moral ground of media professionals (Plaisance, 2009), and particularly, with how they treat especially sensitive issues such as gender equality (Súarez, 2013), sports journalists should also commit to the generation of high-quality content and the pursuit of excellence in their field. They need to do this more than ever in a changing landscape characterized by the 24/7 news cycle; the fierce competition and greater economic pressures (Plaisance et al., 2012); and the ethical concerns posed by new digital platforms, including: the tension between immediacy/accelerated production and quality, the verification and fact checking of content from online sites and social media, and the clash between real-interest stories and populist click-based ones (García-Avilés, 2014; Zion and Craig, 2015).

That being said, in the field of sports journalism, extensive literature has shed light on a series of problem areas that have systematically occurred here and that have challenged the normative standards of the profession. These widespread questionable practices include the pervasiveness of rumour, the «tyranny» of a narrow range of sports, the underrepresentation and biased portrayal of sportswomen, sensationalism, and the lack of variety of news sources employed (Horky and Stelzner, 2013; Rojas, 2011). All these ethical shortcomings have disparaged the respectability of the professionals working in the sports journalism field, an area still characterized by the long-held notions of it being a «toy department» (Rowe, 2007).

In the field of gender, the London 2012 Olympics represented a watershed moment for the inclusion of sportswomen. In Los Angeles 1984, fewer than a quarter of the athletes were female. In London 2012, 44.2% of the participants (4,676) were women (IOC, 2013), including athletes from Muslim countries that had never sent female competitors to the Games (Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Brunei). This unprecedented accomplishment opened new possibilities to evaluate the quantity and the quality of sportswomen's coverage, to observe if media sustained or contested the long-standing gender biases in sports journalism.

## *2. Journalism ethics and the portrayal of sportswomen*

Journalism ethics can be understood as «the moral principles, reflected in rules, written or unwritten, which prescribe how journalists should work to avoid harming or distressing others» (Franklin et al., 2005: 74). In order to pursue the excellence in the field, professionals should comply with the prescriptions established in the fundamental principles of journalism ethics: truth, justice, freedom and responsibility (Alsius, 2010). Placing the focus on the principle of justice, the major codes of ethics, promoted by UNESCO (Art. 9), the International Federa-

tion of Journalists (IFJ, Art. 7), the Council of Europe (Art. 33), the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ, Art. 1), the Independent Press Standards Organization (IPSO, Art. 12), the National Union of Journalists (NUJ, Art. 9), the Spanish Federation of Journalists Association (FAPE, Art. 7) and the Catalan Journalists College (CPC, Art. 12) are unequivocal about the avoidance of discrimination and stereotyping for reasons such as gender, race or disability.

That being said, groups such as sportswomen, non-white athletes and disabled participants still «experience more difficulty than others when accessing media» (Alsus, 2010: 113). Furthermore, the media have tended to generate and reproduce stereotypes that contribute to the social construction of differences. In particular, sports journalism has been constructed as a predominantly male territory, where gender differentiations have not only been legitimized but also accentuated. For reasons including the «token status» of women in sports departments (Hardin and Whiteside, 2009), the coverage of sport continues to be, in great part, characterized by the inequality between genders in quantitative and qualitative terms (O'Neill and Mulready, 2015).

### *2.1. Quantitative nature of coverage*

Various studies conducted during the 1980s and 1990s signalled a trend towards minimizing the coverage of women in sport (King, 2007). Since then, the space devoted to the coverage of men has indeed continued to be a lot more extensive than that of women in terms of the number of pieces awarded and their prominence (bigger space and an eye-catching position in the case of print media and being awarded a long time slot as far as television programmes and news bulletins are concerned). This situation has marginalized women, who have been underrepresented in comparison to men (Crolley and Teso, 2007).

Recent pieces of research have continued to highlight this on-going trend across all media platforms. To illustrate this, Godoy-Presland (2014: 595) underlined the fact that «sportswomen are still overwhelmingly under-represented in British print media» in her semi-longitudinal examination of British Sunday broadsheet and tabloid newspapers during 24 months (January 2008-December 2009). The author highlighted the fact that women received only 3.6% of the coverage during the period studied. In their 2009 analysis of six weeks of televised news coverage of women's sport on local affiliate channels in Los Angeles (KABC, KNBC and KCBS) and on the programme *SportsCenter* (ESPN), Cooky et al. (2013: 203) discovered that «women's sport is the lowest ever», with only 1.6% of the news devoted to sports.

Another piece of research worth highlighting is the examination of the front covers of *Sports Illustrated* over a period of 11 years (2000-2011) carried out by Weber and Carini (2013). The authors pointed out that the «percentage of covers [that featured women] did not change significantly over the time span and were comparable to levels reported for the 1980s by other researchers. Indeed, women were depicted on a higher percentage of covers from 1954-1965 [12.6%] than from 2000-2011 [4.9%]» (Weber and Carini, 2013: 196).

All these examples reveal the persistence of exclusionary practices that have contributed to generate the false impression that sportswomen do not exist or have little value. Although the figures vary depending on the social, economic, cultural, historical and sporting contexts of each country, women still receive less than 10% of the sporting coverage both in newspapers and television (Markula, 2009).

However, it is vital to acknowledge that these figures have increased in the last few years, especially in the case of sporting mega-events such as the Olympic Games. In contrast to the previous research on the NBC coverage of the Olympics, in their study of London 2012 prime time, Billings et al. (2014a: 48) highlighted the fact that «women athletes received the majority of the clock-time and on-air mentions».

## 2.2. *Qualitative nature of coverage*

As Billings et al. (2014b: 133) point out, «men and women athletes are described in a variety of media outlets in substantially different manners». As they add, «overt expressions of sexism are increasingly rare; however, many subtle iterations of sexism remain» (Billings et al., 2014b: 14). Media regularly employ certain covert strategies, such as the use of a series of adjectives, words and stereotyped constructions to establish the distinction between genders. According to Gallego (2007: 49), language «is not a neutral instrument that names the reality but maybe the more elaborated product of the human capacity to create it». Stereotypes, as cognitive instruments characterized by a simplified representation of the reality and the resistance to change (Berganza and Del Hoyo, 2006), pervade the discourse, legitimizing and perpetuating the hegemonic divisions of gender. There are several framing techniques worth highlighting.

### —*Sexualization and inclusion of references to sportswomen's physical attributes*

As Duncan (2006: 243) explains, «to focus on a female athlete's beauty is to introduce a *non sequitur*: it is a discursive strategy that trivializes a sportswoman's accomplishments because her appearance has nothing to do with her athletic performance». Media coverage of sportswomen has been traditionally characterized by the emphasis on the physical attributes of their femininity, such as their physical looks, attractiveness and attire. The overuse of references to these attributes has contributed decisively to turning sportswomen into sexual objects. To illustrate this, in her examination of the coverage of the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup by *Bild*, Pfister (2015) detected the publication of a great deal of text and images focused on eroticism. Nevertheless, there are some positive signs that may indicate the decline in this sexist type of coverage. In their analysis of the NBC beach volleyball coverage of Beijing 2008, Bissell and Smith (2013: 20) discovered that there were few sexualized camera angles and that the coverage «was not reflective of special attention to the players' bodies, their attire, or other appearance traits».

### —*Emphasis on the psychology and emotionality of sportswomen.*

Sports media have persistently used certain types of expressions (for example, athletes who «cry or show her tears» or who are «sweet», «weak», «delicate», «sub-

jugated», «fragile», «passive», or «nervous»), which are indicative of a gender-biased portrayal that contributes to characterize women only as emotional, weak and dependent beings, who also fall in sporting competitions due to «stress, nerves, or anxiety» (Daddario and Wigley, 2007: 44). These descriptors are clearly opposite to some of the characteristics traditionally attributed to male athletes, who «are depicted as succeeding because they do not let emotions override their athletic desires» (Billings *et al.*, 2014b: 133).

—*Out-of-context reporting of sportswomen.*

Commonly, sports media have focused their attention on non-sport-related or peripheral aspects with regard to women. For instance, there have been frequent references to elements such as the personal circumstances of sportswomen (family life, habits, relationships, leisure activities, marital status, motherhood, husband's occupation, diet, sexual orientation, among other non-athletic themes) rather than information about their athletic skills, career path, commitment and intelligence.

—*Infantilizing.*

The infantilizing of sportswomen is depicted in the mass media by the use of certain diminutives, expressions and words that evoke a childish conception of female athletes, for example «girls», «brides», «young ladies», «golden girls», «youngsters» and «sweethearts».

### *3. Methodology*

Taking the aforementioned framework into account, the objective of this article has been to answer the following research question: To what extent did the British, American and Spanish quality press comply with the deontological principle of justice in their portrayal of sportswomen during the London 2012 Olympics?

The study has made use of the qualitative content analysis technique (Altheide, 1996). The sample was chosen in a non-probabilistic way by the researcher, who purposively selected the media considering strategic criteria such as their quality, relevance with regard to their communicative systems, circulation and their capacity to carry out «systematic, insightful and rigorous sports journalism» (Boyle, 2006: 10). More precisely, the research has examined six top-tier newspapers of general information: *The Guardian*/*The Observer* and *The Daily Telegraph*/*The Sunday Telegraph* (United Kingdom); *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* (United States); and *El País* and *La Vanguardia* (Spain).

It is true that range of platforms via which sports products are consumed are now multiple, including social media (Fernández Peña *et al.*, 2014). However, print media not only «have traditionally been considered the primary sites for citizens to discuss matters of common concern» (Wahl-Jorgensen and Galperin, 2000: 20) but they are also «still important vehicles for news gathering and for producing and disseminating information to a broad public» (Darnell and Sparks, 2005: 360).

*The Guardian*/*The Observer* and *The Daily Telegraph*/*The Sunday Telegraph* are two of the most influential newspapers in the UK and abroad in terms of their

quality and trustworthiness. *The New York Times* is definitely one of the high-status news outlets that set the public and media agendas worldwide. *The Washington Post* is also considered to be one of the most prestigious US newspapers. As regards to the Spanish press, *El País* has been consolidated as the leading quality newspaper in Spain since the democratic transition. The Barcelona-based *La Vanguardia* is one of the oldest newspapers still being published in the country, being a benchmark for Spanish and Catalan journalism.

In all these newspapers, the object of study has been the pieces that referred to the London Olympics. The timeframe of the observation is 33 days (18 July-19 August 2012), including the 19 days of London 2012 plus one week before and after. During this period, the 198 issues that form the corpus of analysis, whether as hard copies or exact PDF replicas of the print versions, were rigorously collected. A total of 4,507 pieces have been codified. The origin of the pieces was as follows: *The Guardian/The Observer* ( $n = 1,023$ ); *The Daily Telegraph/The Sunday Telegraph* ( $n = 1,540$ ); *The New York Times* ( $n = 519$ ); *The Washington Post* ( $n = 524$ ); *El País* ( $n = 404$ ); and *La Vanguardia* ( $n = 497$ ). The articles that exclusively referred to the larger framework or contextual aspects of London 2012 (culture, legacy, economics, legacy, transport, environment, etc.) were excluded from the sample.

A database that was created with specialized software, FileMaker Pro 12, allowed the researcher to register and manage the content of each unit of analysis. The data provided by the content analysis has been correlated with the major codes of journalism ethics—direct sources of substantive deontology (Casasús, 2011) and essential documents within the Media Accountability Systems (Bertrand, 2001)—as well as information obtained from seven semi-structured interviews with top scholars in the field of sport media and journalism ethics. The following table presents alphabetically the list of the interviewees as well as the contextual data pertaining to the conversations.

Table 1. List of interviews conducted for the study.

ID	Interviewee	Affiliation	Date	Place
1	Andrew C. Billings	University of Alabama (US)	09/07/2014	Tuscaloosa, AL
2	Kim Bissell	University of Alabama (US)	10/07/2014	Tuscaloosa, AL
3	Pam Creedon	University of Iowa (US)	28/06/2013	Dublin
4	Clifford Christians	University of Illinois (US)	03/04/2013	Seville
5	Kari Fasting	Norwegian School of Sport and Physical Education (Norway)	09/05/2013	Cordoba
6	Linda K. Fuller	Worcester State College (US)	28/06/2013	Dublin
7	Richard Haynes	University of Stirling (UK)	30/10/2013	Stirling

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1. Quantitative results

The six newspapers devoted considerable space to female athletes on their front pages and in their sports sections and supplements. As can be seen from Table 2, *The New York Times* dedicated the same number of pieces to male and female athletes ( $n = 204$ ; 39.31% to each gender). The remaining 21.39% refers to the pieces in which both men and women were protagonists. It is also significant to note that in *The Washington Post* the gap remained in single figures (4.01%) and that in *The Guardian/The Observer*, the gap was close to 10% (42.82% for men v 32.16% for women).

Table 2. Number and percentage of articles by gender.

Newspaper	Male		Female		Mixed		Total	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
The Guardian/ The Observer	438	42.82	329	32.16	256	25.02	1,023	100.00
The Telegraph	717	46.56	485	31.49	338	21.95	1,540	100.00
New York Times	204	39.31	204	39.31	111	21.39	519	100.00
Washington Post	199	37.98	178	33.97	147	28.05	524	100.00
El País	219	54.21	103	25.50	82	20.30	404	100.00
La Vanguardia	245	49.30	135	27.16	117	23.54	497	100.00

Source: Own elaboration.

Nevertheless, in *The Daily Telegraph/The Sunday Telegraph* (15%), and especially in *El País* (28.71%) and *La Vanguardia* (22.14%) the imbalance was greater. At this primary level of observation, therefore, it can be seen that the American newspapers were the closest to parity and that the Spanish publications were the least egalitarian in that sense.

Beyond this primary evidence, a closer look should be taken at the extent of the pieces, in order to determine how many of the most frequently published large pieces (more than ½ page and one page) were devoted to women. The data reveals a positive fact: *The Guardian/ The Observer* devoted a similar amount of «more than ½ page» pieces (M: 49; W: 50) and «one page» pieces (M: 19; W: 19) to men and women alike.

However, by and large, it can be seen that in the other newspapers the differences became more accentuated. To begin with, in *The Daily Telegraph/The Sunday Telegraph*, the pieces with a length of «more than ½ page» were more frequently devoted to men ( $n = 78$ ) than to women ( $n = 47$ ). This trend was repeated in the case of «one page» pieces (M: 25; W: 15) and also in articles of «between one and two pages» (M: 71; W: 45).

Table 3. Distribution by gender and length of the pieces published in *The Guardian/The Observer*.

Extent	Male		Female		Mixed	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Brief piece	202	46.12	150	45.59	78	30.47
Less than a ¼ page	62	14.16	35	10.64	26	10.16
From ¼ to ½ page	77	17.58	56	17.02	64	25.00
More than ½ page	49	11.19	50	15.20	24	9.38
One page	19	4.34	19	5.78	37	14.45
Between one and two pages	26	5.94	18	5.47	26	10.16
More than two pages	3	0.68	1	0.30	1	0.39
Total	438	100.00	329	100.00	256	100.00

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 4. Distribution by gender and length of the pieces published in *The Daily Telegraph/The Sunday Telegraph*.

Extent	Male		Female		Mixed	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Brief piece	239	33.33	166	34.23	82	24.26
Less than a ¼ page	171	23.85	111	22.89	68	20.19
From ¼ to ½ page	131	18.27	99	20.41	58	17.16
More than ½ page	78	10.88	47	9.69	29	8.58
One page	25	3.49	15	3.09	34	10.06
Between one and two pages	71	9.90	45	9.28	63	18.64
More than two pages	3	0.42	2	0.41	4	1.18
Total	717	100.00	485	100.00	338	100.00

Source: Own elaboration.

It can be seen that *The New York Times* devoted 30 pieces of «more than ½ page» to men (versus 19 to women) and 11 pieces of «one page» to men (versus 3 to women). That being said, men and women were given exactly the same number of pieces with a length of between one and two pages ( $n = 3$ ). In *The Washington Post*, the articles of one page were devoted exclusively to men (M: 4; W: 0). Surprisingly, there were more pieces of «more than ½ page» devoted to women ( $n = 22$ ) than to men ( $n = 16$ ). At the same time, women had one article with a length of «between one and two pages», a circumstance that was not found in the case of men.

**Table 5. Distribution by gender and length of the pieces published in The New York Times.**

Extent	Male		Female		Mixed	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Brief piece	111	54.41	117	57.35	47	42.34
Less than a ¼ page	12	5.88	15	7.35	0	0.00
From ¼ to ½ page	36	17.65	47	23.04	34	30.63
More than ½ page	30	14.71	19	9.31	21	18.92
One page	11	5.39	3	1.47	6	5.41
Between one and two pages	3	1.47	3	1.47	3	2.70
More than two pages	1	0.49	0	0.00	0	0.00
Total	204	100.00	204	100.00	111	100.00

Source: Own elaboration.

**Table 6. Distribution by gender and length of the pieces published in The Washington Post.**

Extent	Male		Female		Mixed	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Brief piece	139	69.85	116	65.17	85	57.82
Less than a ¼ page	6	3.02	4	2.25	3	2.04
From ¼ to ½ page	34	17.09	35	19.66	33	22.45
More than ½ page	16	8.04	22	12.36	16	10.88
One page	4	2.01	0	0.00	4	2.72
Between one and two pages	0	0.00	1	0.56	4	2.72
More than two pages	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	1.36
Total	199	100.00	178	100.00	147	100.00

Source: Own elaboration.

Focusing on the Spanish press, in *El País*, 61 pieces of «more than ½ page» belonged to men while only 30 focused on women. The pieces of «one page» in length also revealed inequalities: while 27 were devoted to men, only 9 of them were dedicated to women.

**Table 7. Distribution by gender and length of the pieces published in El País.**

Extent	Male		Female		Mixed	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Brief piece	24	10.96	15	14.56	4	4.88
Less than a ¼ page	28	12.79	13	12.62	7	8.54
From ¼ to ½ page	63	28.77	23	22.33	27	32.93
More than ½ page	61	27.85	30	29.13	25	30.49
One page	27	12.33	9	8.74	8	9.76
Between one and two pages	10	4.57	12	11.65	11	13.41

More than two pages	6	2.74	1	0.97	0	0.00
Total	219	100.00	103	100.00	82	100.00

Source: Own elaboration.

Last but not least, *La Vanguardia* dedicated a greater number of articles of «more than ½ page» (M: 41; W: 36), «one page» (M: 12; W: 1) and «between one and two pages» (M: 12; W: 6) to male athletes.

Table 8. Distribution by gender and length of the pieces published in *La Vanguardia*.

Extent	Male		Female		Mixed	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Brief piece	98	40.00	49	36.30	23	19.66
Less than a ¼ page	36	14.69	13	9.63	18	15.38
From ¼ to ½ page	46	18.78	30	22.22	43	36.75
More than ½ page	41	16.73	36	26.67	16	13.68
One page	12	4.90	1	0.74	5	4.27
Between one and two pages	12	4.90	6	4.44	11	9.40
More than two pages	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.85
Total	245	100.00	135	100.00	117	100.00

Source: Own elaboration.

## 4.2. Qualitative results

In qualitative terms, the newspapers examined took the historic opportunity of London 2012 to showcase sportswomen's triumphs. The media conveyed a positive and respectful image of them through a wide range of adjectives: «competitive», «focused», «fearless», «hard-working», «intelligent», «skilled», «tenacious», «effective», «brilliant», «committed», «determined», «concentrated», «meticulous», «extraordinary», «impressive», «courageous», «wholehearted» and «inspiring», to list but a few, which contributed to raising awareness of their qualities.

To illustrate this, the media attributed Jessica Ennis' successes to her «natural ability, hunger and steeliness» (Jones and Kessel, 2012). Female boxers, who competed for the first time in London 2012, were depicted as «terrific athletes», whose abilities challenged preconceptions and defied expectations. *The Telegraph* pointed out that «the ring-craft was often exceptional» and that the contests were «skilful duels rapturously received by an audience who identified these fighters more by their upper cuts than their ponytails» (Brown, 2012a).

The triumph of the Spanish female water polo team was portrayed as a clear example of «effort, comradeship, compromise, solidarity, generosity and tenacity» (Martín, 2012a). Likewise, the gold-winning performance exhibited by the US gymnastics team was described as a «steady beat of excellence» (Jenkins, 2012). These are only a handful of examples that provide a sense of the fair recognition awarded to female athletes' achievements throughout the newspapers' pages.

According to Fuller: «the vocabulary was different, balanced and fair. London 2012 was a game changer» (Linda K. Fuller, interview, June 2013).

#### *4.3. Raising awareness of the pending challenges to be faced on the way towards achieving equality*

As is widely known, one of the greatest landmark achievements of London 2012 was the increase in participation by women. For the first time in history, no national team was male only. Thus, as well as showcasing the triumphs of female athletes at London 2012, the newspapers strove to shed light on the increase in women's participation, delivered positive coverage of the inclusion of female athletes from Muslim countries and explored the wide range of inequalities that still persist in the world of sport. Articles such as «A giant leap for women, but hurdles remain» (Longman, 2012a), «Lightning a cauldron for change» (Martinson, 2012) and «La igualdad sigue siendo un desafío» (Bachelet, 2012) provided critical accounts of the advances, broken-down barriers and pending challenges in this day and age. Those include: the lower salaries and sponsorships associated with women's sports; the lack of equal access to facilities; the scarce and sexualized media coverage; and the absence of leading women in sports' governing bodies. In the case of Muslim sportswomen, the struggles also include: the opposition to women's practice of sports by Islamist conservative rulers, leaders and groups (Graham-Harrison, 2012); the ban on taking part in PE at school or attending sporting events (Addley, 2012b); and the obstacles related to government policies (Al Nafjan, 2012).

#### *4.4. The persistence of stereotypes*

So far, this section has reflected on how the quality media dedicated sports-women a positive language and critically examined the challenges to be faced in advancing towards equality. However, there is solid evidence to suggest that the six newspapers persisted in the widespread use of overt and covert forms of gender stereotypes.

—*Sexism and mentions of physical attributes.*

On a broader level, it should be borne in mind that the media sampled did not continually portray overt sexist stereotypes. This was in contrast to the reporting style of popular newspapers, especially in the British context. An illustrative case in point can be found in the treatment of beach volleyball. While publications such as *The New York Times* focused on the athleticism of gold medal winners May-Treanor and Walsh Jennings and their contribution to raising the popularity of the sport (Pilon, 2012), British tabloids overemphasized the beach volleyball coverage purely for the attractiveness and attire of female competitors (Lyll and Robertson, 2012).

Having said that, it is important to critically reflect on the few cases where the quality press did disseminate objectifying stereotypes. This reveals that overt

sexist language and imaginary was in fact an element of serious papers. First, in the article «It's all bikinis, beer, and Benny Hill» *The Telegraph* included expressions such as «the majority of the 15,000-strong crowd cared not for nationalities, skill or technique —they were here to see the girls in their bikinis» (Gordon, 2012). In an opinion article published in the same newspaper, the author (Boris Johnson, London's mayor at that time) highlighted the fact that the «semi-naked women playing beach volleyball in the middle of Horse Guards Parade» were «glistening like wet otters» (Johnson, 2012). Some of the photographs that were published, Russia's Anna Vozakova «giving team-mate Anastasia Vasina a pat» (Aldred, 2012), for example, clearly sexualized female athletes. This aspect contradicts recommendations that urge the media not to exploit sex in their messages and images (Council of Europe, Art. 35).

Second, we should reflect on the four-page article «The Olympic Gaze». Although it was published in G2 (*The Guardian's* supplement with a lighter approach), it is arguable whether the newspaper should have published a piece with 15 photographs that not only objectified male and female athletes showing parts of their bodies but also included expressions such as «you take notice here that my buttock is actually rounder than a ball» (Williams, 2012).

Third, certain language needs to be considered. Leryn Franco was described as «the sexiest athlete of Paraguay» (Mur, 2012), Sara Algotsson Ostholt was mentioned as «the pretty Swede» (Cuckson, 2012) and Keri-Anne Payne was presented as «the glamorous 24-year-old» (Barkham, 2012). All the aforementioned examples connect with the «soft news» mode of sports writing (Rowe, 1992) and the on-going process of tabloidization, which has spread across the wider journalistic culture, including the quality or elite press and its materials, modes of production, news agenda and values (Conboy, 2014). According to Kari Fasting, focusing on physical appearance has serious consequences for the way in which female athletes are perceived and evaluated:

If you focus on women's appearance, you are trivializing sport, it is like you don't take them seriously, you don't treat them as serious athletes (Kari Fasting, interview, May 2013).

—*The emotionality of sportswomen.*

The analysis revealed that emotionality was one of the major stereotypes that the media consistently employed to depict female athletes. A distinction should be made between two mechanisms: (1) the use of expressions related to tears; and (2) the use of expressions related to nerves, which affect the outcome of athletes' performances.

In the first case, it was reported that: «Emily Seebohm broke down in tears» (Clarey, 2012); Charlotte Dujardin «wept uncontrollably» (Moss, 2012a); the Spanish water polo players «hugged each other, crying» (Martín, 2012b); and that Ruta Meilutyte «melted in tears» (Martínez, 2012), among many other examples. Surprisingly, it should be noted that there were also mentions of emotionality linked to male athletes. For instance, it was said that: Sugoi Uriarte «flooded into tears» (Sámano, 2012); Paul Goodison was in «tears of agony» (Cary, 2012); and

that Andy Murray «released his emotions and wept tears of exultation» (Mitchell, 2012). Nonetheless, it should be noted that London 2012 was widely described as «the crying Games» (Leapman, 2012), a trend both for male and female athletes.

With regard to the second focus of analysis, it is worth mentioning that when it comes to nerves negatively affecting their performances, almost all the cases pointed to sportswomen, conveying the notion that they fail or struggle in crucial moments because of nerves or lack of focus. A noteworthy case can be found in the treatment that Mireia Belmonte received in *El País*. After failing to win the 400 metres medley, Torres (2012a) argued that her tension and anxiety prevented her from coping with the psychological demands of the elite championships. It is worth noting that when she achieved two silver medals (200 metres butterfly and 800 metres freestyle), becoming the first Spanish female to win an Olympic medal in swimming, she was then described as «the strongest, the most versatile and the best trained» (Torres, 2012b) and «the best Spanish swimmer that had ever existed» (Torres, 2012c).

Additional cases reinforce the association between nerves and women's under-performance. Although she had won a bronze medal, Rebecca Adlington was criticized by *The Guardian*: «Like so many other British swimmers, she seems to have got stage fright. She has bowed down under the burden of the occasion, rather than been boosted up by all the support she has had» (Bull, 2012a). *The New York Times* highlighted the fact that Mariel Zagunis' emotions led the US fencer to lose concentration: «Zagunis collapsed to the point that she did not even make the medal stand [...] She said she got 'too excited' because she was 'thinking I had it'» (Borden, 2012). *The Washington Post* reported that gymnast Julie Zetlin's nerves «rattled her composure» (Clarke, 2012a). The effect that nerves could have on performance was far exaggerated with the weightlifter Natasha Perdue: «When she entered the arena, she was so nervous she could barely walk. She never looked as if she would make her first lift. And she didn't. Perdue was distraught, on the verge of collapsing» (Hattenstone, 2012a).

Haynes criticizes the media insistence on stereotypes that wrongly associate emotionality with poor performances by sportswomen: «The idea that women fail because they are emotional where men aren't is a fallacy, because on most occasions it has to do with physical conditions, injuries and circumstances of other kinds» (Richard Haynes, interview, October 2013).

—*Infantilizing women.*

Certain journalists did not refrain from evoking a childish conception of women. Gabrielle Douglas was described as «America's newest golden girl» (Clarke, 2012b), Rebecca Adlington as «the nation's sweetheart» (Addley, 2012a), Gemma Gibbons as an «overwhelming crowd darling» (Robertson, 2012) and Katherine Grainger as «rowing's eternal bridesmaid» (Brown, 2012b). The members of the Spanish handball team were constantly referred to as «Jorge Dueñas' girls» (Vivanco, 2012) and «the warrior girls» (López Jordà, 2012).

With regard to teenagers, the infantilizing clichés went further: they were not only described as «kids» or «schoolgirls», but it was also reported that Gabrielle Douglas slept with a teddy bear (Macur, 2012) and that Missy Franklin adored «Justin Bieber and One Direction» (Braiker, 2012). During the coverage, certain

infantilizing stereotypes were also used in the case of men, though to a lesser extent. Isolated examples can be found in Sam Oldham, who was referred to as «Baby gymnast» (Heritage, 2012) and the Brownlee brothers, who were mentioned as looking «so young» (Hattenstone, 2012b).

—*Out-of-context reporting.*

In certain occasions, the media overemphasized non-sport-related elements. *The Guardian's* depiction of fencer Valentina Vezzali was characterized by mentions of her celebrity status —her appearance on the Italian version of *Strictly Come Dancing* and her marriage to footballer Domenico Guigliano (Moss, 2012b). In *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, Alex Morgan was valued for her performance, but she could not escape mentions of her life away from the football field, particularly her fashion pose for *Sports Illustrated's* swimsuit issue, where she only wore body paint (Svrluga, 2012).

Another illuminating example can be found in Victoria Pendleton. *The Guardian* recalled that she tried to capitalize «on her good looks by regularly undertaking fashion shoots» (Williams, 2012). Some of these photographs were reproduced in the newspapers' pages, as they were in *The Telegraph's* supplement «London 2012 Heroes after the Games», where Pendleton appeared in a suggestive pose occupying more than half a page (The Daily Telegraph, 2012). A similar case can be observed in the US context, where the coverage of hurdler Lolo Jones was focused mainly on her self-promotion, including her nude appearance both in ESPN's magazine and *Outside Magazine* (Longman, 2012b). This lack of balance was criticized by readers through a series of letters to the editor at *The New York Times*, entitled «Putting image aside: a hurdler's qualities» (The New York Times, 2012). From Bissell's viewpoint, Jones received excessive criticism:

I thought she was probably under a little more scrutiny than deserved. There was a lot of talk about her appearance, her earrings, the jewellery she would wear, the hair, we did get a lot of out-of-context information. I don't think that everything was intentional, but I do think that in her case, the coverage wasn't made to build a fan base (Kim Bissell, interview, July 2014).

Another frequently reported feature was women's relationships and their marital status, both of which to some extent should be considered as private (UNESCO, Art. 6; Council of Europe, Arts 23-24; NUJ, Art. 6; IPSO, Art. 3; SPJ, Art. 2; FAPE, Art. 4; CPC, Art. 9). Illustrative examples include Marina Alabau, related to French coach Alex Guyader (Martín, 2012c); Laura Bechtolsheimer, who competed against her former boyfriend in the dressage event (Fanning, 2012); and Brigitte Yagüe, married to former Olympian Juan Antonio Ramos (Iribar, 2012), to list only a few.

An especially noteworthy example was swimmer Federica Pellegrini. Not only did *The Guardian* describe her as «implausibly glamorous, improbably beautiful and a complete diva», but the author also mentioned her relationships: «Before she settled down with her current partner, former world 100 metres freestyle champion Filippo Magnini, Pellegrini was in a relationship with another Italian

swimmer, Luca Marin. He had been engaged to her French freestyle rival Laure Manaudou but he left her for Pellegrini» (Bull, 2012b).

Finally, the status of women as mothers was also a common feature. Considerable attention was given to shooter Nur Suryani Mohamed Taibi, who competed in an advanced state of pregnancy (Ronay, 2012). Occasionally, the language greatly overemphasized her condition, referring to her as «the most heavily pregnant woman ever to compete», an expression that clearly reinforced the notion of «otherness» (The Guardian, 2012). Others referred to were Paula Radcliffe, Mary Kom and Kerri Walsh Jennings. In the case of wrestler Maider Unda, her maternal instinct was questioned: «Has a partner, Aitor, and wants to be a mother. Hits and travels do not go well with her maternal instinct» (Galán, 2012). In contrast, only brief references to their status as fathers were foregrounded in pieces devoted to Bradley Wiggins (Lewis, 2012) and Roger Federer, who was reported to be the only father in the world top ten tennis players (Mateo, 2012).

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

While we should not generalize the results for the whole profession and all contexts, it is safe to say that in London 2012, the six newspapers sampled contributed to contesting the long-standing imbalances in sports journalism highlighted by previous literature (Cooky et al., 2013; Crolley and Teso, 2007; Godoy-Pressland, 2014): they considered sportswomen's triumphs as salient content, raised awareness of the profile of female sport and delivered a message which conveyed the need to advance towards non-discrimination. These findings are consistent with the positive signs observed by other recent studies concerning the coverage of London 2012 from the gender perspective (Billings *et al.*, 2014a).

Despite that figures indicate that sportswomen lagged behind sportsmen in certain newspapers (especially when it comes to the largest pieces), the gender gap was smaller than in any other context outside the Olympic Games, where overwhelming disparities still remain (O'Neill and Mulready, 2015). Several factors, including the structural underrepresentation of women in media organizations, the predominantly male audience, the «tyranny of football» in the British and Spanish contexts, as well as the attention on the «big three» professional sports (football, baseball and basketball) by the US media, unfortunately do not usually leave space for female athletes to find their niche in the mainstream media.

The specific results registered in London 2012 can be attributed to two complementary factors. First, as has happened in other Olympic powerhouses such as China and Russia, in the countries examined women obtained a significant amount of medals. American women won 58 medals out of 104 (including 29 golds). British female athletes were involved in 25 of the 65 medals achieved by Team GB. Spanish sportswomen were awarded more than two-thirds of the medals captured in London 2012 (11 out of 17). It is understandable, therefore, why the success of sportswomen was propelled to the fore and drove the agenda as salient content.

Second, it should be considered that, at the Games, for the media and the audiences, «nationality» tends to overshadow «gender». When addressing the

results presented here, Billings draws on his extensive experience in researching the Olympics to elucidate why media organizations and publics pay more attention to women's sport during the Games:

I have to separate the Olympics from every other sports context because you wrap anything in your national flag, and it becomes less about any other issue of identity whether that is race or gender [...] People would tune in to see if their home nation does well, not to see if their men or women do well (Andrew Billings, interview, July 2014).

That being said, a closer scrutiny of the available empirical material also revealed that there is a long way to go with regard to the nature of the coverage female athletes receive. It is of particular interest that different framing techniques underlined by prior research (Billings et al., 2014b; Daddario and Wigley, 2007; Pfister, 2015) —sexism and mentions of physical attributes, emotionality, infantilizing, out-of-context reporting— permeated the coverage. In the light of many recommendations (UNESCO, Art. 9; IFJ, Art. 7; Council of Europe, Art. 33; SPJ, Art. 1; IPSO, Art. 12; NUJ, Art. 9; FAPE, Art. 7; CPC, Art. 12), which urge journalists to avoid stereotyping for gender reasons, this represented a stark contrast with the favourable quantitative results and the positive evaluation of sportswomen previously discussed. Being presented with relevant examples from London 2012's coverage, Clifford Christians, one of the world's leading scholars on media ethics, argued that journalists should commit to develop a more egalitarian and dignified treatment of gender:

In the same way that advertising should learn how to represent women, with dignity instead of sexism, sports journalism is a field where that principle should also be implemented. When it comes to gender, journalism has to take it seriously. We should get rid of the sexist language and treat women with equality (Clifford Christians, interview, April 2013).

Given the power of the Olympic coverage to shape identities, the research suggests abandoning the incorrect assumption that «everything is equal now» (Pam Creedon, interview, June 2013). In point of fact, conscientious media, because of their social responsibility and the communicative power they hold, need to be as careful as possible in the language they use to depict sportswomen, avoiding biased stereotypes that have real-life consequences for the way in which female athletes are perceived and evaluated by the citizenship.

A vision of shared responsibility and proper education and literacy at all levels (in HEIs, within newsrooms and among citizens) constitutes a vital opportunity to raise awareness of the existing ethical shortcomings. In order to make an improvement of sportswomen's portrayal both in quantitative and qualitative grounds, media organizations must implement meaningful changes, from the decision makers (Hardin, 2013) to the different ranks of sportswriters and lead to changes for the better in the routines and values of journalists. Readers should also play their role to «demand parity in sports coverage» (Crouse, 2013: 240).

At higher education level, educators should encourage «their students to develop a more balanced perspective» (Schmidt, 2013: 262). Apart from the actors mentioned above, as Petca et al. (2013: 625) maintain, the IOC should also play a role in tackling these imbalances: «Although the IOC alone cannot change the way in which the media decides to portray Olympic athletes, it should at least criticize gender-based representation of sportsmen and sportswomen for this visual perpetuation of gender stereotypes legitimizes discriminatory regimes, which are essentially incompatible with the spirit of Olympism».

The celebration of forthcoming Olympic Games (Rio 2016, PyeongChang 2018 and Tokyo 2020) will provide first-class opportunities to continue monitoring the portrayal of female athletes. It would also be worthwhile to develop longitudinal studies to examine the trends in the day-to-day coverage. Additionally, a significant opportunity would be to widen the scope of the analysis to examine media outlets from different countries and journalistic cultures because they can reveal interesting variations and nuances in the results obtained. Regarding the production side of sports media, there is a considerable need to understand the situation behind the scenes: the work settings, newsroom cultures, resources, newsgathering processes, gatekeeping choices, and the cultural and ethical values under which journalists develop their work. Interviews with media professionals and decision-makers would allow an in-depth examination of professionals' values and attitudes towards gender issues. Finally, conversations with audiences will be useful to learn more about their ethical expectations towards content and the coverage of sportswomen. All the aforementioned knowledge would contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the field of sports journalism from the perspective of ethics and quality of information.

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