

Opinium

The Media and Women's Sport



Professional sport viewership

Men's sports dominate media coverage

The most watched sport by UK adults in the last 12 months, either live or televised, is football (66%); above tennis (52%), rugby (47%), athletics (46%), cricket (39%), golf (32%) and boxing/fighting (17%).

When asked whether they watch men's or women's football, UK adults were most likely to say that they watch 'mostly men, but some women' (27%), which is encouraging considering the historical domination of the men's game. Interestingly, this is more likely to be reported by those of a higher social grade (30% vs 23%). Furthermore, gender parity is shown by nearly a sixth (13%) who report watching men and women equally. However, one fifth (20%) still report just watching men, which dwarfs the 2% who only watch women. Moreover, respondents who watch women's football exclusively are over five times more likely to be gay or lesbian than straight (11% vs 2%), revealing strong support for women's sports from the gay community.

Athletics (including running) proves to be the sport which UK adults are most likely to watch men and women equally (30%), which is closely followed by tennis with 28%. For other sports, however, it appears to still be highly male dominated where people are most likely to exclusively watch men. For rugby, a quarter (24%) just watch the men, followed by football (20%), cricket (18%), boxing (17%) and golf (13%).

Media representation of womanhood

Only two fifths believe that the media promotes inclusive portrayals of women

Media representations can significantly impact how society views groups based on their immutable characteristics, such as age and sex. As such, over two-thirds (64%) of UK adults agree that how women are represented in the media (both fictional or non-fictional), can support gender roles, expectations and stereotypes. Equally, seven in ten (70%) agree that how women see other women represented in the media can affect their self-image, and three-quarters (73%) agree that it's important for the media to present balanced portrayals of womanhood. However, the reality is far from the ideal, as less than half (39%) agree that media companies promote inclusive portrayals of women, revealing that there is still a significant way to go in reaching a fair and well-rounded representation of women in the media.

As female professional athletes offer a refreshing alternative to the often more passive roles given to women, giving them airtime is a great opportunity to balance out representation. In fact, nearly half (47%) agree that media coverage of women's sport can help challenge negative female stereotypes.

This sentiment is more strongly felt by young adults aged 18-34 compared to over 55s (54% vs. 38% respectively). Seven in ten (70%) also agree that it's important to have female professional athletes represented in the media. However, nearly two thirds of UK adults (62%) agree that there are more male than female sporting role models, revealing a stark gender gap in representation. But on a more positive note, two fifths (40%) express enjoyment for watching women's professional sport, and two thirds (67%) agree that sport is a suitable career path for women. Attitudes have also improved greatly across generations as 18–34 year-olds are much more likely to enjoy watching women's sports than those aged over 55 (32% vs. 52%), affirming that there is reason to be optimistic.

To further stress the importance of achieving balanced gender representation, another 7 in 10 (68%) agree that how women are represented in the media can affect women's interest and participation in sports. The potential positive impact of women's sport is exemplified by one third (32%) of UK adults who agree that watching professionals (of either gender) encourages them to play sport themselves. Similarly, seven in ten (69%) agree that watching women's professional sport will specifically encourage more women and girls to participate in sports with another seven in ten (69%) agreeing that watching women's sport will encourage more women and girls to consider a career in professional sport.

Socio-economic standing

Higher socio-economic standing associated with greater interest in women's sport

It appears that socio-economic status (SES) has a strong impact on viewership of women's sports. When asked if they enjoy watching women's football, UK adults of higher SES were more likely to agree than those of lower SES (42% vs. 36% respectively). Then when looking at individual sports, respondents who watched at least "some" women's football were 30% from higher SES vs. 23% from lower SES, and for tennis, 17% were from higher SES vs. 10% lower from SES. Of those who watched men's and women's tennis equally, 30% were from higher SES and 24% from lower SES, and of those who watched men's and women's athletics equally, 32% were from higher SES vs. 27% were from lower SES. These are interesting, but not altogether unsurprising, findings as personal background can impact how people interact with parts of culture, such as sport, mainly because of access to resource.

It's therefore not surprising that people of lower SES are less likely to agree that professional sport is a suitable career path for women (63% vs. 70% respectively), that representing women's sport in the media can challenge negative female stereotypes (39% vs. 54%), that watching women/s professional sport encourages more women or girls to consider a career in professional sport (66% vs. 72%) or that there should be more opportunities for women to play sport (59% vs. 64%).

Closing the gender gap in sporting opportunity

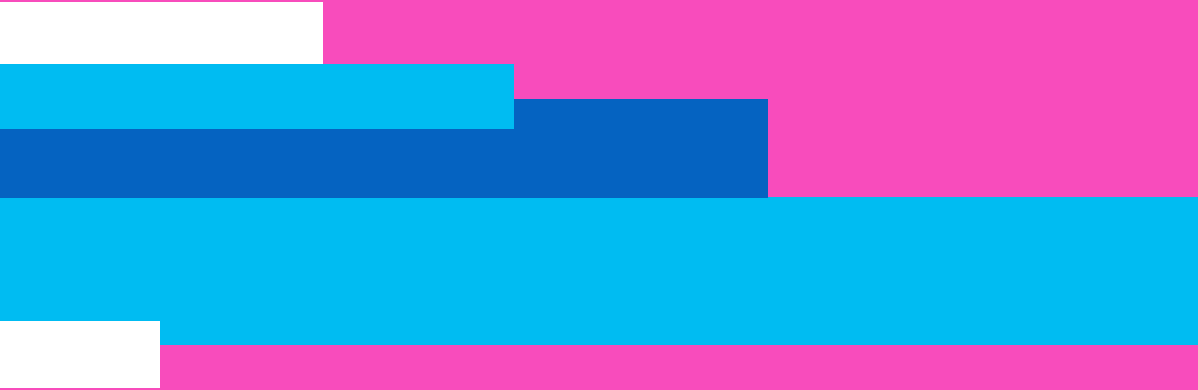
UK adults believe funding for young female athletes is the best way to boost the popularity of women's professional sport

Lack of opportunity is a significant barrier for girls to get involved in sport at a young age, which makes them less likely to develop into professional athletes. Participation in sport is dominated by men, resulting in a vast gender gap in opportunity between men and women. Echoing this concern, nearly two thirds (62%) of UK adults believe that women and girls should have more opportunities to participate in sport. On a more positive note, however, three quarters (74%) believe that young girls growing up today have more opportunities to play sport than previous generations. This belief is most likely to be held by those who are older aged 55+ (78%) compared to those who are younger aged 18-34 (69%), suggesting there has been a significant change over the years.

To improve the opportunity gap, UK adults believe that increasing funding for young girls is the most effective path to increasing the popularity of women's professional sports (42%). Furthermore, instead of competing with men's sports, UK adults believe that promoting women's sport alongside the men's is the second most effective way to increase its popularity (37%). This takes a more collaborative approach to the problem by taking advantage of the high level of viewership of men's sport.

A further (37%) believe that equal pay and funding opportunities for female professional athletes by governing associations would be the equal second most effective way to increase the popularity of women's professional sport. Increasing the level of pay and funding for female athletes will make professional sport a more viable career for women which would increase the number of women able to play at the highest levels. The subject of equal pay is often a controversial topic, which has been echoed by the results of this project as men were found to be less likely to agree that this should be enacted to increase the popularity of women's sports (30% male vs. 42% female.)

Next, a third (32%) agree that more sponsorship deals by big brands will increase the popularity of women's sport, followed by stronger investment by media companies and more general media coverage (both 31%). All these suggestions will increase the exposure and reach of women's sports on the world stage, in turn increasing viewership and the opportunity to inspire the next generation of female athletes.



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