

Female Sports Journalists: Are We There Yet? ‘No’

by Marie Hardin and Stacie Shain

While female sports journalists have made their way onto sports desks and into locker rooms, some say they haven't gained acceptance. Now they are asking if the sacrifices of time and family are worth it.

A female sports columnist at a major metro daily recalled a visit to her newsroom by a group of third-graders. The children came to the sports department, where they gazed at the televisions, sports memorabilia, toys and bobble-head dolls. The columnist then described what happened:

This little girl raises her hand, and she looks at me and said, 'Why do you write sports?' It was like, so did you get forced into this terrible [job], you know. She was perplexed by this. She was a little sorry for me.¹

The idea that a woman writing about sports is unnatural—perhaps a little pathetic—is still common enough to elicit comments even from children more than 30 years after Title IX opened doors for women in sports and, consequently, sports journalism.² Indeed, the sight of a woman in a sports department is still a relative rarity. An informal survey of 50 high-circulation newspaper sports departments in 2001 showed that women constituted just 13 percent of employees, mostly in the ranks of clerks, copy editors and reporters. A more recent report shows that just 11 percent of employees in sports departments are women.³ Many sports departments still have no women.⁴ No definitive numbers exist on the number of women who work in sports media, although the Association for Women in Sports Media several years ago estimated it at 500.⁵

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Employment of women in other parts of the newsroom—although still not equal to that of men—is much higher. A recent ASNE study estimates that 38 percent of newsroom personnel are women.⁶ Even in other pages of the paper where female bylines are relatively scarce, such as op-ed, the percentages of female representation are higher than in sports.⁷

The average career span for women in sports is 10 years, and most never reach management ranks.⁸ Joanne Gerstner, president of the Association for Women in Sports Media (AWSM), a national organization of women who work in the industry (most of whom are journalists), wrote in a 2005 *Editor & Publisher* column:

You look different, you are different, and you might not fit into the paradigm of how that editor feels his paper should look. I've had members tell me stories of applying for editors or columnists, only to be told that the paper wasn't 'ready' to have a woman in that position.⁹

Literature Review

Several surveys over the last decade support Gerstner's assertion and add to it concerns about discrimination against and harassment of women who are hired. A 1995 survey of about 200 AWSM members by Miller and Miller found that although respondents reported job satisfaction, they also reported discrimination and an "invisible" status in their sports departments.¹⁰ Aspiring female sports journalists should "expect to face sexual harassment, not only in the locker room but also in the workplace."¹¹ This advice may not be far off the mark 10 years after it was offered. The NBA announced in March that it was investigating a locker room incident where a player made a lewd remark to a female television reporter.¹² A series of interviews with sports journalists published in 2002 underscored the difficulties women in locker rooms face; Bruce's interviews with 33 AWSM members, all of whom worked in newspaper sports departments, described the gender-related difficulties they face in doing locker room interviews.¹³

A 1998 mail survey of 89 female sports journalists by Hoshino found similar results.¹⁴ One respondent wrote that salary inequity and lack of promotion were the "biggest problems." One respondent cited male editors "who feel threatened by smart, athletic, talented female writers" as a source of discrimination.¹⁵ Almost half (48 percent) of the respondents reported being sexually harassed, most often by sources. One respondent reported having players masturbate in front of her or throw jock straps at her. Others reported being on the receiving end of sexually suggestive comments.¹⁶ A 2003 survey (n=78) by Smucker, Whisenant and Pederson that focused on female sports journalists' job satisfaction found that they were satisfied with their work but were unhappy with promotion opportunities.¹⁷ The researchers found that the women they sur-

veyed believed “that the only way to advance their careers is to move to another organization.”¹⁸

The most recent survey of women working in sports media (n=144) was conducted by Hardin and Shain in 2004. Most respondents believed that opportunities for women are better than ever but that female sports journalists have a tougher job than do men and that women in sports media are not taken as seriously by fans as are men doing the same jobs.¹⁹ More than half of respondents reported that they had experienced on-the-job discrimination, and 72 percent indicated that they had considered leaving their careers.²⁰ Billiott and Grubb’s interviews with 26 women in sports broadcasting, published in 2005, indicated that there were few substantive differences between the experiences of women in print and those in broadcast; for instance, the female broadcasters interviewed expressed concern about their non-advancement into managerial ranks and “unfair treatment” that gave advantage to their male colleagues.²¹

The sports-related workplace has been characterized by Coakley as generally hostile to women, who are viewed as outsiders.²² Although it has been desegregated, it has not been integrated. A desegregated workplace is one in which the majority group (men) tolerate the presence of the minority group (women) but do not make an effort to meet women on their terms.²³ An integrated workplace offers “a recognition of difference but an embrace of that difference and an incorporation of difference as something healthy, important, and valuable.”²⁴

The entire newsroom (beyond the sports department) may be considered a male-dominated workplace, as men hold the majority of jobs and authority.²⁵ An annual survey of newsrooms by ASNE has tracked a slight increase—less than a percentage point—since 2001 in the percentage of women who work in newsrooms; women make up almost 38 percent of newsroom employees. The percentage of newsroom supervisors who are women has hovered around 34 percent since 2000.²⁶ Further, the culture of newsrooms has been characterized as male; many newsrooms are “aggressive/defense,” meaning they value independence, competitiveness and confrontation.²⁷

According to recent studies assessing the numbers and experiences of women, some areas of the newsroom may be more desegregated than integrated. Research published by *Editor & Publisher* earlier this year found that the number of women Op-Ed writers in syndication remains low, and the percentage of female editorial cartoonists (only about 4 percent of the total) is “pathetic.”²⁸ Of the 135 syndicated columnists in the United States, 33 are women; of the eight regular columnists on *The New York Times* op-ed pages, one is a woman.²⁹ Astor’s interviews with women in these positions reveal that they believe male editors sometimes discriminate in hiring and that a woman’s point of view is not valued in the editorial setting.³⁰

Discrimination against women who want to enter sports journalism careers may also take place for the same reasons. Hardin’s survey of sports editors revealed that only 59 percent felt an obligation to have female representation on

their staffs, and a substantial percentage (one-quarter to one-third) felt that women were “naturally less athletic” or “naturally less interested in sports” than were men.³¹ (This is despite the fact that almost 27 percent of female newspaper readers say they regularly read sports sections, although such sections give paltry coverage to women’s sports and do not regularly feature sports women say they prefer.)³²

Discrimination in male-dominated workplaces is not the sole concern for women; work-family balance persists as a gender-defined dividing line.³³ Family issues such as marriage and children influence women’s goal aspirations and attainment, and professional women are “caught in a double-bind between the competing models of the ideal worker and ideal parent.”³⁴ The average woman spends 35 hours on domestic chores each week while the average man spends about 17 hours; women average 11.5 years out of the paid labor force performing care-giving responsibilities, and men average about 1.5 years.³⁵ Such gender-related disparities in familial roles, combined with work sites that have been slow to integrate women, have been cited by researchers as much of the reason that women continue to work on the margins in fields such as technology and science.³⁶

Women in journalism report the same factors as barriers to career growth. Although much of what has been written has been anecdotal in the form of articles in trade publications, several studies over past decades have focused on the experiences of women in the journalism field.³⁷ These studies highlight the conflict between women’s career and domestic roles and their struggle to balance work and family in a field that generally does not provide flexibility in hours or responsibilities.³⁸

Participants were uniform in their call for employers to correct gender-related salary inequities and promote more qualified women up through the ranks.

Research Questions

Newspaper sports departments, at least in part because of their status as desegregated (as opposed to integrated) and reputations as a bastion for male values,³⁹ may be the most unforgiving in the newsroom with regard to demands on time and stress on work-family balance.⁴⁰ Further, survey research demonstrates that women in sports departments work in environments where they are tolerated but have not been integrated. This research seeks to explore the kind

of impact these factors have on the long-term career decisions by female sports journalists.

This focus-group study was conducted as a follow-up to a survey conducted by the researchers, one with findings that generally replicated earlier studies.⁴¹ Focus-group research was deemed appropriate to probe the “why” and “how” questions that naturally arose from survey results. Surveys have been a popular method for examining the experiences and attitudes of women in sports journalism and are useful for gauging attitudes and conditions.⁴² The method is not as useful, however, for probing the motivations, experiences and values of respondents in their own voices.⁴³ Qualitative measures such as focus groups are useful in providing depth and texture in explorations of issues, problems and opportunities faced by a social group, and they allow participants to speak in a comfortable setting that uses natural conversation prompts to recall their own experiences and attitudes.⁴⁴

Such qualitative research is not meant to generalize, but to explore the particular experiences of participants in ways that could deepen understanding of a particular trend—in this case, the continuing underemployment and low retention of women in newspaper sports departments.⁴⁵ Although qualitative approaches have been used in recent years to explore specific issues for women in sports journalism (such as locker room incidents), this research is designed to probe the factors that impact their job satisfaction and potential for tenure in the profession. This research also seeks to understand how these women believe the difficulties they face may be remedied, thus encouraging more women to enter and to stay in the profession.

The following research questions were used:

RQ1:

How do women in sports journalism characterize their career choice?

RQ2:

How do women in sports journalism characterize their job satisfaction?

RQ3:

How do women in sports journalism characterize the factors that could impact their tenure and promotion, and how do they see the resolution of these factors?

Method

Women who attended the 2004 AWSM annual convention were recruited to participate in focus group sessions that took place during the convention in an on-site conference room. The participants were not paid, but researchers made a donation to the AWSM scholarship fund. Most women who attend the AWSM convention work at newspapers; consequently, all attendees who

volunteered to participate had experience (either current or recent past) in newspaper journalism.

Five focus groups, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, were conducted. Each group involved three to six participants for a total of 20 participants. The principal researcher conducted the sessions, which were all audiotaped. Before each session, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire. Questions were open-ended and involved job experience and satisfaction, perceptions about promotion and factors in decisions about tenure. Although the same list of questions was used for each group, the researcher allowed participants to pursue topics of the most salience to them and was flexible in presentation of questions to allow for a free flow of dialogue among participants. Such an approach capitalizes on a key strength of focus groups: a "natural" conversational setting that allows participants to share experiences and reach collective sense on issues.⁴⁶

Tapes were transcribed, and transcripts were then arranged by both researchers (both female, one a former sports journalist) into patterns and themes that emerged across groups, with anomalies noted.⁴⁷ To triangulate the findings, one focus group participant was asked to read and comment on the themes the researchers found; further, a female sports journalist who was not a member of AWSM or a participant in the focus groups also reviewed the findings. Only themes that resonated with all are reported in this study.

Findings

Participants had a range of experience in newspaper sports journalism. For instance, one respondent was a sports reporter with fewer than two years' experience, and another was a sports editor with more than 20 years in the industry. Participants included sports editors or assistant sports editors, columnists, reporters, copy editors and freelance writers. The average age of participants was 39; the youngest participant was 25 years old and the oldest, a sports editor at a major daily, was 60. The newspapers they represented, in terms of circulation and geography, varied. They included some of the largest-circulation dailies in the U.S. and a handful of smaller, locally focused newspapers.

RQ1: How do women in sports journalism characterize their career choice?

Participants characterized their choices to practice sports journalism as gratifying, rewarding ones. They used words such as "fun" and "love" to describe how they felt about their careers, and "rush" to describe the feeling they got from pursuing stories. One participant, although she described her job as sometimes difficult, saw her career as rewarding and important:

*When you ask me about what I actually do, and the impact I've had on some of these people's lives and stuff like that, I'm like, that's awesome. Can I change the world in my job? Maybe.*⁴⁸

They expressed a desire to encourage other women to make the same career choice. For instance, one woman described how she learned about the field through a flier about AWSM distributed to college students. She talked about the importance of informing young women about career options in sports journalism.

It's an unbelievably rewarding and exciting profession to be involved in. I think it starts with getting more people involved in trying to become more visible to younger people to let them know what's available and what's out there because there's such strong-willed young women these days, especially in college and stuff, just to find them and steer them toward this.⁴⁹

Participants expressed the belief that interpersonal support and solidarity with other women in the industry were important, and they expressed a sense of duty when describing their roles in supporting younger women. One participant talked about the impact of a five-minute phone call from a colleague at another paper; others mentioned the annual AWSM convention as an important source of support. Another participant said:

I just think that there's not enough emphasis placed on how important it is for people to mentor each other. It's especially hard when you're in—you know, you're one female in an entire sports department. It's really hard. So I just think it's so important.⁵⁰

RQ2: How do women in sports journalism characterize their job satisfaction?

Participants delineated clearly between their career satisfaction and their job satisfaction. Although they saw the job site as a source of discrimination and potential harassment, they did not transfer these barriers to overall satisfaction with sports journalism as a career.

Almost all participants described a gender-related lack of respect from male colleagues and fans as a routine part of their work experience. Some mentioned insults by colleagues and readers; several, for instance, described readers who would call but refuse to talk to a female reporter or editor. One participant described moving her workstation next to those of other women in the department to insulate herself from comments by male colleagues. Another reporter described being subject to comments about her weight on a local sports talk radio program.

Female columnists, especially, described hostile treatment. One said:

It's cruel. It's vicious. It's personal. It's attacking. And if you put an opinion with your picture, oh Christ. You can't imagine the stuff I get.⁵¹

Participants, however, generally delineated between what they saw as individual job-related problems and their ability to enjoy a satisfying career. One participant, a sports reporter for 12 years, summed it up when she said: "My whole theory on it: I hate the job, but I love what I do."⁵² Another, a sports editor who has 38 years of journalism experience, talked about the harassment she faced as a young college basketball reporter in locker rooms and how it strengthened her resolve:

And those kind of basic things in the beginning really formulate where you're going and where you want to go. How you fight it. They were character-forming for me and made me more determined to assure that I wanted to do this.⁵³

RQ3: How do women in sports journalism characterize the factors that could impact their tenure and promotion, and how do they see the resolution of these factors?

Participants said that systemic discrimination in ways that limited their promotions was a source of frustration. They acknowledged their gender as a potential advantage in getting entry-level jobs, but also they saw gender as giving them token status. A reporter characterized the attitude she saw among her managers: "We got our zebra in the zoo, and that's good enough."⁵⁴ One woman, a copy editor for 20 years, added:

There are no women in management, but I can't imagine a man, you know, applying [for] a sports editor opening and [management] saying, 'Oh, they already have a man.' They aren't going to do that. When they get their woman, they got their woman.⁵⁵

Most mentioned that they felt constant pressure to "prove themselves" to their male colleagues and editors. One reporter said, "They are going to test you more. And then you may not move up. I mean, you might be covering high school for a very long time."⁵⁶

One copy editor described a "macrame ceiling. You cannot get through it. It's like, 'OK, well, we got our numbers here.' You start feeling that."⁵⁷

A sports editor who has worked in the industry 30 years said she's been disappointed with the progress of women in sports departments:

I firmly believe that women in sports media are not as far along as I thought we would be when I first started, and it continues to be very discouraging. And I think that it's because you have a problem with retention. We lose a lot of people. You should have seen more advancement when it comes to women—when it comes to women moving on up into positions of authority in sports.⁵⁸

Demands on time and strain on family responsibilities, however, were the primary reasons women cited for possibly leaving the industry. Overwhelmingly, participants said lack of flexible schedules and amenities such as onsite childcare made it difficult for them to sustain their careers and their family responsibilities. One woman lamented:

We're losing so many. If you look at our membership and look at some of the names that disappear. We know they're leaving. We're not sure why. We think it's family.⁵⁹

Perhaps the typical female sports journalist who leaves the profession is like one participant, a reporter who has been in the business for 13 years. Her mother was suffering from breast cancer:

I'm taking care of my mom, and how do you balance what you need to do, versus your job? I need my job, and I need to take care of my mom, too. How do you do that? I'm not saying it's something unique to women, but I think we bear more of a caregiver responsibility.⁶⁰

Participants in every group discussed what they see as the dilemma between fulfilling their traditional domestic responsibilities and pursuing a career that demands long hours and involves more intense travel and deadline-driven stress than do other areas of the newsroom. They talked about the toll their jobs take on their family and social lives. One woman talked about missing events in her daughter's life, and another talked about assessing the difficulties she would face if she had a child.

During one session, a participant named women who have reached prominence in sports journalism and added: "So, what I see at the top are powerful women who don't have families."⁶¹

Another articulated the dilemma:

It's kind of like, you have to make a choice whether you're going to be the sports editor, or are you going to be a mom and wife to two kids because we don't really think you can have it all.⁶²

For the most part, participants saw the work-family challenges they faced as primarily their individual responsibility to resolve; they talked about juggling schedules with their spouses, for instance, as a stopgap for dealing with work-family pressures.

Although some participants seemed resigned that their dilemmas could not be solved in the workplace ("There isn't much that they can do,"⁶³ said one about her employers), others talked about family-friendly initiatives newsrooms could take. The idea of childcare accessibility came up as an issue that employers could help solve:

Participant 1: My place has no daycare. [T]he men have all had traditional arrangements to take care of their families and whatever needs they had. They never had women in my department. They never faced this.⁶⁴

Participant 2: They don't have daycare at my paper, either. They have a women's caucus that did a whole proposal about daycare. They tried to submit it a couple of times, and it got turned down, and then I think the bottom line was liability. But they chose to do a gym instead.⁶⁵

Other participants discussed the need for their employers to be more flexible and creative in assigning hours and responsibilities, which would enable female employees with childcare responsibilities more flexibility. One copy editor, for instance, said she told her supervisor about the situation she wanted to have within two years:

Create a job for me. Do something different where I can help you out during the day. And I've even thought – we have a community sports wrapper thing. I've even thought about that. So, hopefully, I'll lay the groundwork.⁶⁶

Participants were uniform in their call for employers to correct gender-related salary inequities and promote more qualified women up through the ranks. These remedies were seen by participants as necessary and fair in light of their personal sacrifices to stay in the industry.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this focus group research suggest that although these women sports journalists cite discrimination and harassment as continuing, serious problems, these issues are not the reasons they might leave these careers. Instead, participants articulated frustration over sacrificing time and family relationships, compounded by tokenism, as the salient reason for leaving the industry. Essentially, they see no incentive to make the sacrifices; there is no “payoff” in the form of promotion.

These findings, of course, should not diminish efforts to lessen the individual discrimination and harassment that female sports staffers face on the job. Surveys of female practitioners and stories from locker rooms and sports departments have documented this for decades, yet it persists. It must be addressed by disavowing male athletes and journalists of the notion that sport (and, by extension, sports journalism) is a males-only domain.⁶⁷ The persistence of such basic harassment of women who dare to enter sports journalism seems to indicate a “backlash” that must be addressed through education and advocacy.⁶⁸ Organizations such as AWSM are important as a means to work toward

these measures. This research also points to the need for AWSM to continue to be a support network for female sports journalists who may otherwise feel isolated. Mentoring by women for women—either through AWSM or in sports departments that have enough women to provide it—should be institutionalized.

Further, this research highlights the need for the industry to address systemic the retention of women in sports departments. For years, industry leaders, including leadership in APSE, have expressed concern about the recruitment and retention of women in sports journalism, echoing similar concerns about diversity in other parts of the newsroom. A June 2004 Eichenberger column in the APSE newsletter chided sports editors who only “give lip service” to hiring women but fail to act on their obligation.⁶⁹ Diversifying the sports department staff is an obligation of editors, such as decisions reflect a commitment to social equity in the workplace.⁷⁰

Involved with such an obligation is more than equity in hiring and promotion, but, as Gerstner points out, the need for a diversity of voices in the sports department to lessen the likelihood of “photos of Anna Kournikova published in the sports pages without cause (but for a reason – sex sells), women’s sports being ignored and sometimes crude jokes within the newsroom about a female athlete’s sexuality or appearance.”⁷¹ Journalists are morally responsible for decisions that could keep them from their duty to “disseminate truth.”⁷² Prominent industry codes, including that of the Society of Professional Journalists, emphasize the need for news organizations to reflect diversity accurately.⁷³

Addressing the “glass ceiling” women face and the systemic barriers that make work-family issues a career-killer for women in sports journalism will take renewed commitment on the part of newspaper industry leaders and sports editors. They must be willing to cross over from simple desegregation to integration, which means treating the circumstances and concerns of women in their sports departments and throughout the newsroom as authentic and valid.

Sports journalism is not unique in this regard. Other traditionally testosterone-driven industries, such as high technology sectors, have addressed these issues. If sports editors simply looked beyond their desks—out into the rest of the newsroom—they would find a landscape that has been friendlier to women and has reaped the benefits.

From the discrimination and token status described by the participants in this study, however, leaders in newspaper sports departments still have not developed the will to integrate. When they do so, they may work harder to find creative ways to keep talented, dedicated women in sports departments.

Notes

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