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Women in Sports Journalism: Breaking the Glass Ceiling

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Abstract

Sports journalism is considered a man's domain. However, over the years, women have also gone on to make a mark in the field. Today, female professionals serve sports journalism in various roles like those of reporters, editors, commentators and media managers. In this chapter, an attempt has been made to document women's involvement in sports journalism over the years, besides highlighting the challenges they face. The paper also examines the life and times of some of the famous female sports journalists.

Keywords: Sports Journalism, Female Sports Journalist, Glass Ceiling, India etc.

For all the talk about gender equality, men have continued to dominate professional sports for years. Though in principle, men and women are considered equal in every sporting discipline, there are only a few sports where the two genders have a similar status in terms of popularity and remuneration.

Tennis is one discipline where following Wimbledon's decision to ensure equal payment to male and female participants in 2007, both genders receive the same amount of prize money in all the four Grand Slams.ⁱ Female tennis stars like Martina Navratilova, Serena Williams and Maria Sharapova have become household names in the same manner as their male counterparts like Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Pete Sampras.

Tennis is an aberration, though. In other popular sports like football and cricket, there is a daylight between the male and female players in terms of fan following and economic benefits. The 2018 edition of men's FIFA World Cup in Russia was watched by 3.572 billion people worldwide. In comparison, 1.12 billion people watched the women's FIFA World Cup in 2019.ⁱⁱ The prize money for the men's football World Cup winner was \$38 million while for women's champion, it stood at \$4 million.ⁱⁱⁱ While male football stars are among the most followed personalities on social media platforms, hardly anyone knows female footballers outside their countries.

In India, gender disparity in sports is even more palpable. While an international male cricketer from the lowest-level grade contract gets Rs 1 crore annually, a top female cricketer takes home only Rs 50 lakh (The Board of Control for Cricket in India, the premier body of cricket in the country, has divided cricketers into various grades. Male cricketers with Grade A+ contract receive an annual fee of Rs 7 crore).^{iv} Though in recent times, women's cricket has developed some following, there are only a handful of female cricketers whom people outside the cricket fraternity can recognize.

Female athletes are not alone in playing second fiddle to their male counterparts in the field of sports. The case of female sports journalists is no different either. Despite a growing number of women in professional sports, when it comes to women writing about sports, the number has always been quite low.

According to a study conducted by the prestigious British newspaper 'The Guardian' a few years ago, it was found that only 1.8 per cent of sports articles were written by women in England.^v Though such studies have not been conducted in other countries, the figure is unlikely to change with the change of geographical location. That the instances of women serving as sports editors of major newspapers have been rare further underlines the male ascendancy in sports journalism. On television, the situation is relatively better,

but in most of the cases, women are roped in as anchors and not expert journalists.

Early Years

There is hardly any chronological documentation of women's involvement in sports journalism. It is believed that sports developed as a separate beat in the newspapers post the First World War. However, until the 1960s, female reporters were a rare sight in the press box across the world.^{vi} A few female sportscasters had called the games in the United States of America, but newspaper editors continued to balk at the prospect of sending women to cover men's sports.

Despite women making inroads in sports journalism during the 60s, a major problem they faced involved their entry into the locker room. Most sports teams barred the entry of female reporters in their locker rooms. The restriction put women journalists at a disadvantage. Since male reporters were able to interview players in the locker rooms, the players would often not come out after the end of a match, leaving female journalists to write their reports without quotes from the top performers.^{vii}

Women journalists finally earned the right to enter players' locker rooms during the late 70s following a dispute between Time Magazine and New York Yankees. After Yankees had stopped Time's female reporter from interviewing their players in the locker room, the prestigious magazine sued the baseball team that resulted in the relaxation of the rule.^{viii} Soon, other sports too opened the doors of their locker rooms for female journalists.

Indian Context

Since the 70s, women's representation in sports journalism began to grow. In India, though, it was not before the late 80s when female journalists started to make their presence felt in the press box. Sharda Ugra, who is regarded as one of the country's first female journalists, had shared in an interview her experience of being the lone woman in the press box during the early 90s.

"You are going to cover an event and you are the only woman there. So, you feel like you are carrying the entire burden of womanhood on your shoulders when you step into a press box. You feel like you will either ask a stupid question or behave stupidly or you'll be unprofessional. So, you had to sort of make up for all those imagined responsibilities that you carried with you. I literally tried being as invisible as possible," Ugra was quoted as saying by The News Minute.^{ix}

During these years, women also found themselves at the receiving end of mental bullying from male scribes. In the words of Ugra, "The problem or the resentment was not from athletes or officials or people who were associated with the sport-part of it. It was the other journalists – not all, but some – who were around, the slightly older generation of men. They pretended like I was not there. I was so terrified of being the girl who asked the stupid question that it took me four-and-a-half years to ask my first question at a press conference."

Shalini Gupta, the only female member of Hindustan Times' national sports team, echoed similar sentiments. "Dealing with male ego was my biggest challenge. I was bullied by my male colleagues at the start of my career. When I appeared for an interview at The Tribune, the editor-in-chief was shocked to see a female sports reporter and mocked me," said Shalini who lives in Chandigarh and has covered several international cricket matches.

Another problem women scribes faced in those days was the lack of ladies' toilets at stadiums. "If we had to go to the toilet, we had to ask someone. We almost felt embarrassed about asking someone to go to the toilet. As if it was a strange activity that only 'you' were doing. Like it completely upset the scheme of things," Ugra had said in the interview.

Things have changed for better over the years. With more and more young girls joining sports journalism, these days it is no longer uncommon to come across several female journalists in the press box. Unlike what Ugra faced in the early stage of her career, today's rookie female reporters hardly suffer from any stage fright and don't mind wearing their heart on their sleeve during a press conference.

"My life has been great as a professional sports journalist. I have never faced discrimination from anyone during my career. Even top cricketers address me as ma'am. I am never afraid of asking anyone anything. And of course, these days there are all facilities for female reporters in every stadium," said Mandakini Shalya who is part of Times of India's sports desk in Jaipur.

The Trailblazers

One of the reasons as to why a greater number of women have begun to opt for a career in sports journalism is because they have several role models from their gender to look up to. Here are some of the influential female sports journalists from across the world who have broken the glass ceiling with their exemplary work in the coveted profession.

Adeline Daley

Adeline Daley was regarded as one of the first female sports journalists in the world. The Minnesota-born woman began her career as a baseball reporter with a Californian newspaper called the San Francisco Call-Bulletin where she worked for several years. Later, she made a name for herself by writing columns for famous publications like Sports Illustrated, Variety, and the Los Angeles Time. She died in 1984 aged 63.^x

Sally Jenkins

A renowned American sportswriter, Sally Jenkins has worked for various marquee newspapers and magazines such as The Washington Post and Sports Illustrated during her long career. The 60-year-old, who currently lives in New York, has received USA's top sports columnist award from the Associated Press on four occasions. In 2005, she was inducted into the National Sportscasters and Sportswriters Hall of Fame, making her first woman to achieve the coveted honour. She is also a co-author of cyclist Lance Armstrong's best-selling autobiography, 'It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life'.^{xi}

Jackie MacMullan

Currently working as a freelance sportswriter, Jackie MacMullan has inspired young girls from across the world to make a name for themselves in sports journalism. Her columns on National Basketball Association (NBA) league for ESPN.com are among the most read sports pieces in the USA. The 60-year-old had begun her career as an NBA reporter for Sports Illustrated during the 90s. At present, apart from writing columns, she also appears as an expert on several TV channels.^{xii}

Judy Battista

Another influential female sports journalist, Judy Battista has carved a niche for herself as a football writer. The 54-year-old, who hails from South Florida, started her career as a student reporter for The Miami Hurricane. She achieved

international fame as a writer when she joined The New York Times and began covering widely followed National Football League (NFL). After years of association with the renowned daily, she joined NFL.com in 2013 where she has worked since then.^{xiii}

Doris Burke

A leading sports analyst and commentator for Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN), Burke has been calling NBA games for years. A basketball-player-turned sports journalist, Burke holds the distinction of being the first woman to cover an NBA game featuring the New York Knicks. Apart from ESPN, she has also worked for American Broadcasting Company (ABC). For her service to basketball broadcasting, she was inducted into the New England Basketball Hall of Fame in 2006.^{xiv}

Lesley Visser

Lesley Visser is among the most successful female sports journalists in the world. The 67-year-old is the only woman to have covered the Olympics, NBA Finals, NFL, the Super Bowl, the US Open and the World Figure Skating Championship. In 2015, a poll conducted by the American Sportscasters Association saw her walk away with the tag of the No 1 woman broadcaster of all time. She currently works with the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), apart from writing columns for several major publications. In 2020, the Massachusetts-born journalist became the first woman to be conferred the Sports Emmys Lifetime Achievement Award by ESPN.^{xv}

Alison Mitchell

English cricket commentator and broadcaster, Alison Mitchell, has been instrumental in paving the way for the entry of women in the commentary box. In 2007, she became the first female member of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)'s Test Match Special, a world-famous radio programme dedicated to the coverage of Test cricket. Since then, she has been commentating in men's and women's international matches for various BBC channels. Post Mitchell's success in cricket broadcasting, several women broadcasters started getting commentary opportunities across the world.

Mitchell has covered other prominent sporting events including the Olympics, Wimbledon, Australian Open and Open Golf. She also holds the distinction of being the first female commentator to have called a men's international cricket match on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio. Her columns regularly appear in major newspapers like The Times, The Mail on Sunday and The Guardian.^{xvi}

Sharda Ugra

Arguably India's first female cricket journalist, Sharda Ugra has been writing and commenting on the gentleman's game for over three decades. She has worked as a senior editor at the world's most popular cricket website, ESPNCricinfo.com, for several years. She is also the author of cricketer Yuvraj Singh's biography and appears regularly as a panellist on TV sports shows.

Sharda began her career with Mid-Day, a popular Mumbai-based daily, in the same year cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar made his Test debut for India – 1989.^{xvii} Just as Tendulkar caught the imagination of the nation with the willow, Sharda made a mark with the pen and went on to inspire young girls to enter the male-dominated realm of sports journalism.

Ugra developed a penchant for sports reporting during her college days in Bombay (now Mumbai). As a student, she, along with two of her friends, managed to interview former Pakistan captain, Imran Khan when the legendary all-rounder visited India in 1987. The interview made her famous in the college and she decided to make a career in cricket journalism. The rest is history.

Kadambari Murli

If one woman, who can be credited with the breaking of the glass ceiling in sports journalism in Indian newspapers, it has to be Kadambari Murli. Murli holds the distinction of being the first female sports editor of a national newspaper in India. She achieved this feat when she was appointed national sports editor of Hindustan Times (HT) at the age of only 31 in 2007. Prior to this, she had served as the sports editor of HT's Delhi edition from 2005 to 2007. She headed a team of more than 40 staffers and looked after both the print and web editions of the renowned media house.

Born in Mumbai, Kadambari grew up in Delhi where her family had settled during her childhood. After earning a bachelor's degree in political science from the Hindu College, she began her career with Asian Age in 1996. A year later, she left Asian Age to join The Pioneer and went on to cover Earth Summit II in the USA.

In the beginning, she used to write only occasionally for sports pages but later, she took to full-time sports journalism. She joined HT's sports desk in 2000 and carved a niche for herself with in-depth reporting of sporting events. After leaving HT, she edited reputed sports magazine, Sports Illustrated. She was the recipient of Sports Journalist Federation of India's cricket writer of the year award in 2005. She was also selected by India's National broadcaster – Doordarshan -- to air messages to inspire women. She currently lives in the USA.^{xviii}

Mayanti Langer

A hugely popular sports journalist and presenter, Mayanti Langer, has become a household name in India over the years. The 37-year-old has hosted pre-match and post-match shows during big tournaments like the ICC World Cup and the Indian Premier League (IPL) on the Star Sports network. With her keen understanding of the nuances of the game, she has managed to carve a niche for herself in the cricket broadcasting that is dominated by former male cricketers in the country. Langer's expertise is not limited to cricket. She also hosted the 2010 FIFA World Cup broadcast on ESPN, Football Café on Zee Sports and the 2011 Commonwealth Games. She is married to India cricketer Stuart Binny.^{xix}

Melinda Farrell

Australia's Melinda Farrell has established herself as a renowned cricket journalist in a very short span of time. Her articles on ESPNCricinfo are widely followed. She has also been part of a popular cricket chat show, Polite Enquiry, on ESPNCricinfo. Apart from covering several international cricket tournaments including the ICC World Cups in 2015 and 2019, she has served as a host for the World Superbike Championship in England.^{xx}

Future Prospects

The challenging times for female sports journalists seem to be over now. As stated by young Mandakini above, female sports journalists of today don't face the kind of problems that their seniors had to undergo in the past. With the work environment becoming more conducive to women, their representation in sports journalism is only expected to grow. With an increase in the women workforce in the field, there

is bound to be more instances of female sports journalists reaching the top and heading the sports desks. *Achhe Din* for women in sports journalism are in the offing.

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