

## A New Age for Media Coverage of Women's Sport? An Analysis of English Media Coverage of the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/soc](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/soc)**Kate Petty**

Durham University, UK

**Stacey Pope** 

Durham University, UK

### Abstract

This article examines English print media coverage of the England national women's football (soccer) team during the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup. It draws on a content analysis of five English national newspapers from 24 May to 14 August 2015. A wide body of research has demonstrated that women's sport continues to be greatly underrepresented in the media but our findings are important as they demonstrate that during this tournament, women's football received a significant amount of print media coverage and that this coverage was largely positive. We argue that we have entered a new age of media coverage of women's sport in the UK, with a shift towards greater gender equality.

### Keywords

football, gender, media, new age, sport, women, Women's World Cup

### Introduction

This article examines English print media coverage of the England national women's football (soccer) team during the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup. Studies have consistently demonstrated that male and female athletes are portrayed differently in newspapers

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#### Corresponding author:

Stacey Pope, Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Durham University, 42 Old Elvet, Durham, DH1 3HN, UK.

Email: [stacey.pope@durham.ac.uk](mailto:stacey.pope@durham.ac.uk)

as well as other media (Biscomb and Matheson, 2017; Cooky et al., 2015). Women's sport is greatly underrepresented and where such coverage does occur, a number of techniques are used to devalue their sporting achievements (Christopherson et al., 2002; Kian et al., 2008). This article offers new insights into gender equality by demonstrating a recent, more positive shift in the media representation of women's football in England, signalling a hopeful new direction from existing research on this topic. By locating our findings within the wider context of recent developments around women's sport in England, we suggest that we have entered a new age of media coverage of women's football and women's sport. Women's football provides an interesting case study focus as in the UK this sport is seen to promote an orthodox form of masculinity (Magrath, 2017).

This article examines how the England women's national team were portrayed in English newspapers in the lead-up to, during and post the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup. We begin by briefly overviewing the history of women's football in England and introduce the notion of a new age for women's sport. We draw theoretically upon the work of Connell (1987, 2005) as well as building upon and extending existing feminist studies on gender, media and sport. Our findings examine three themes: the amount of coverage of the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup; task relevant themes; and task irrelevant themes.

## **A Brief History of Women's Football in England and a New Age for Women's Football and Women's Sport?**

In England, women's football can be traced back to the end of the 19th century and emerged as a popular sport during the First World War, attracting thousands of spectators. However, following the war, there were calls for 'normalization' of the sexual division of labour (Dunn and Welford, 2015). There were also medical claims that playing football was 'damaging' for women and could lead to infertility (Williams, 2003). In 1921 the FA stated that the game was unsuitable for women. FA affiliated clubs were forbidden from allowing women's football on their grounds (Dunn and Welford, 2015), instigating the decline of women's football in England. The ban was not overturned until 1971, causing a profound effect on women's football in England, with the game struggling to recover its early popularity in terms of status and support (Williams, 2003).

The FA formerly took over the running of women's football in 1993. It was intended that this would increase participation levels in women's football and improve the fortunes of the national team (White, 1993). Yet this takeover did little to change negative perceptions of women's football and the FA plans to establish a professional league by 2003 did not materialize (Dunn and Welford, 2015). All this was to change in 2011, however, with the formation of a semi-professional league in women's football. We argue, tentatively, that in this period we have entered a new age of media coverage of women's sport and women's football in England.

A number of events in 2011 revealed the deeply embedded institutional sexism in broadcast and print sports journalism in Britain and their lack of focus on successful female athletes (Pope and Williams, 2014). These included the exposure and eventual sacking of key male members of the Sky Sports (BSkyB) Premier League presentation team for their sexist abuse, and the media furore regarding the absence of any

sportswomen on the BBC Sports Personality of the Year shortlist (Ashdown, 2011) – an annual sporting event which is viewed as the pinnacle of the sports year in England. Arguably there has since been a wider, more positive shift in media representations of women's sport in the UK. In women's football, two events in 2011 were critical in this shift. First, the FIFA Women's World Cup in Germany saw high quality women's football played in front of packed stadia and televised across the globe (FIFA, 2011). Second, the semi-professional FA Women's Super League was launched in England in March 2011.

These developments in women's football also coincided with changes in the perceptions of women's sport more generally in UK media coverage around the London 2012 Olympic Games (Pope and Williams, 2014). In the UK media, this was widely declared to be 'The Women's Games' (Godoy-Pressland and Griggs, 2014). As Wensing and Bruce (2003: 393) argue, the conventional techniques used to report on women's sport can be 'bent' during international sports events, with national identity overriding gender as the primary framing device, and this certainly seemed to be the case for the extensive media coverage of UK female athletes. The 2012 Olympic women's football tournament also saw high attendance figures – 80,203 fans watched the final between the USA and Japan – the second highest attendance for a women's game in history (FA, 2012).

We theorize that as a result of these recent interconnected developments in women's sport, there have been early signs of a transformation in the typical gendered media coverage of women's sport in the UK. While this is not to dismiss some of the ongoing inequalities in coverage of women's sport – for example, in the UK women's sport makes up just 7 per cent of all sport media coverage (Women in Sport, 2015) – there has arguably been a shift towards more positive media coverage of women's sport. For example, perhaps in an attempt to rebrand a more 'female friendly' image after the sexist remarks of male Premier League football presenters, the global sports broadcaster BSkyB has expanded its coverage of women's sport, televising women's netball, golf, cricket, international rugby and a weekly Sportswomen show (Sweney, 2016). In 2015, Sport England launched *This Girl Can*: the first marketing campaign of its kind to celebrate women of all sizes and abilities, with empowering messages designed to encourage more women to become physically active (Sport England, 2017). We locate our research on the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup within this wider context and propose that our findings lend empirical weight to the notion that media coverage of women's sport is entering a new, more positive age for gender equality.

The 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup was hosted by Canada and featured 24 teams. The USA became the first nation to lift the trophy three times. The England women's team also secured their highest ever ranking in the competition, finishing in third place. This tournament set a new total attendance record for the FIFA Women's World Cup (FIFA, 2015). In Britain, average television viewing figures were 1.7 million for each match, with the semi-final peaking at 2.4 million, despite the late kick off times (Magowan, 2015).

## **Theoretical Considerations: Connell and the 'Gender Order'**

We draw theoretically on the work of Connell (1987, 2005), who uses patterns of power relations between the sexes to explain the 'gender order' in society. In short, Connell's

(1987, 2005) ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is at the apex of the gender hierarchy. This embodies the ‘most honoured way of being a man’ and legitimates women’s global subordination to men (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832). This ‘ideal’ of masculinity is centred upon ‘authority, physical toughness and strength, heterosexuality and paid work’ (Pilcher, 1999: 12), and while only a small number of men may express this form of masculinity, most are ‘complicit’ towards it because they benefit from the subordination of women or the ‘patriarchal dividend’ (Connell, 2005: 79).

The concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ was originally developed in tandem with the concept of ‘hegemonic femininity’, but this was renamed ‘emphasized femininity’ to recognize ‘the asymmetrical position of masculinities and femininities in a patriarchal gender order’ (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 848). ‘Emphasized femininity’ is ‘orientated to accommodating the interests and desires of men’ (Connell, 1987: 183). It is focused upon the display of sociability and is linked to the private domain, especially marriage and childcare.

Connell (2005: 54) identifies sport as the ‘leading definer’ of masculinity and football in the UK is particularly associated with masculinity due to its association with physical strength, skill and power (Magrath, 2017). Professional sportsmen are held as ‘exemplars’ of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ – symbols that have authority despite the fact that most males do not live up to them (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 846). This is supported by research highlighting how sport and the mass media maintain male dominance through an overwhelming bias towards male coverage while trivializing female sporting success (Biscomb and Matheson, 2017; Kian et al., 2008), to which we shall now turn.

## **Feminist Research on Gender, Media and Sport**

An extensive body of research since the 1980s has examined the underrepresentation of women’s sport in the mass media, demonstrating how men’s sport is generally constructed as the pinnacle of sporting value and achievement and women’s sports are considered less worthy of attention (Biscomb and Matheson, 2017; Bruce, 2015; Hargreaves, 1994; Godoy-Pressland, 2014; Godoy-Pressland and Griggs, 2014; Wensing and Bruce, 2003). Studies have also found that the *type* of sporting activity influences the amount of media coverage it receives. Women who participate in sports considered to be ‘feminine-appropriate’ (Hargreaves, 1994) generally receive far greater media coverage. When women do participate in traditionally ‘masculine’ team sports, the media focus on performance-irrelevant aspects such as their private lives or physical looks (see Crossman et al., 2007; Kian et al., 2008). This has a number of potential consequences for the coverage of women’s football – a sport which has typically been associated with masculinity (Magrath, 2017).

Kian et al. (2008) discuss how the exclusion and trivialization of female athletes and women’s sports are major themes that consistently emerge in research. Thus, where sportswomen do receive media coverage they are often trivialized by: focusing on their physical characteristics or describing them as sex objects; emphasizing femininity; minimizing their accomplishments and skill level through unfavourable comparisons with men; and/or discussing their personal lives or using denigrating humour (Biscomb and Matheson, 2017; Christopherson et al., 2002; Kane et al., 2013). The sexualization of

female athletes has important implications for the promotion of women's sport. Kane et al. (2013) discuss how female athletes may desire – or feel obligated – to increase interest in their sport by 'selling sex'. For example, members of the German national women's football team appeared in erotic poses for *Playboy* before the Women's World Cup in 2011. This may also have been in part a response to longstanding associations between women's football and lesbianism (Caudwell, 1999), as such sexually suggestive images focus upon feminine heterosexual attractiveness rather than performance and skill (Godoy-Pressland, 2014; Vincent, 2004).

Although there has been considerable research in the area of women's sport and the media, less work has examined media coverage of women's football. Christopherson et al.'s (2002: 182) research on media coverage of the 1999 Women's World Cup US team found that there were contradictory messages around women and sports. Paradoxically, players were presented as 'nice' and 'feminine' women who could simultaneously be 'strong' and 'muscular' with heterosexual sex appeal due to their athleticism. At the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup, Crouse (2013) discusses how during the first week of the tournament there was barely any coverage of the matches in England, except when England played, and the coverage was sometimes patronizing. In Germany, Pfister (2015) found that although some of the media reporting was positive, women's football was presented as 'inferior' to men's football, with suggestions that women 'by nature' were not made for 'real' football. Women's football was also marginalized by feminizing and sexualizing the players.

Dunn's (2016) study of the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup offers a discussion of media coverage, but she suggests that, 'British newspapers were limited in what they could publish from the tournament because of the time difference and the awkward kick-off times in Canada' (2016: 64), without offering any empirical evidence to support this. Black and Fielding-Lloyd (2017: 7) have undertaken an analysis of the media coverage during this World Cup. These authors suggest that the England women's team was positioned as inferior to the men's team by comparing the women players against an established 'male standard'. This was effected by making direct comparisons with the men's game and by judging the women's team against popular cultural representations from the men's game. However, it could be suggested that comparisons with the men's team are in part the result of journalists' and readers' lack of knowledge about female players and that such comparisons with successful men's teams can help to break down gendered distinctions by positioning women's football as 'real' sport – which we discuss further in our findings.

Although Black and Fielding-Lloyd (2017) provide examples of negative reporting – for example, making reference to 'political correctness' – a very small number of examples are used to support this discussion. There is also some confusion with the negative examples cited as the titles of these articles appear to suggest that the article as a whole is positive, for example: 'Women's Football Is a Hurricane of Fresh Air' and 'Brilliant Girls Show Us How'. Black and Fielding-Lloyd (2017) discuss how claims that 'even women' are not watching women's football are used by reporters to try to defend themselves from accusations of misogyny, but this is also reliant on a very small number of media examples. While we do not seek to dismiss the impact that such negative reporting can have on attitudes towards women's football, we argue that it is crucial

to look at the 'typical' coverage presented in the media and that this can be done most effectively through a mixed-methods approach to content analysis.

## Methods

This study employed a content analysis of five 'British/English' newspapers: *The Times*, the *Independent*, the *Guardian* (broadsheets) and the *Sun* and the *Daily Mirror* (tabloids); and their Sunday papers. These newspapers were chosen because of their national prominence and UK wide circulation. 'Quality' broadsheets and 'popular' tabloids were selected to allow for a comparison between the two types of newspapers and because of the differences in how these types of newspaper have typically represented women. Whereas the *Guardian* is regarded as a progressive newspaper with a relatively strong record on women's rights, the *Sun* continues to regularly feature scantily clad female models and has been criticized for its sexist reporting (Owens and Hawes, 2015).

The newspapers were collected in hard copies daily from 24 May to 14 August 2015. This allowed for an analysis of coverage of the England team before, during and after the 2015 World Cup. In total, there were 181 articles published in the specified timeframe about the England team. Many of these provided basic factual information such as the line-up of teams, and upcoming fixtures. A total of 124 articles contained additional information that warranted closer analysis. This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, using both quantitative and qualitative content analysis of articles and photographs of the England national team. Thus, we aimed to draw from the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative approaches (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

We adopted a directed approach to the content analysis, using theoretical concepts as initial codes. Any data that could not be coded were then analysed to determine if they represented a new category or a subcategory of an existing code. Based on an extensive review of the literature, some predetermined categories were generated prior to data analysis. The first was skill of players/team (task relevant). Task relevant was defined as articles related to football. Appearance and personal life, including relationships and gendered hierarchy of naming and infantilization (task irrelevant) were the other predetermined categories.

Some quantitative categories were also decided prior to analysis. The total number of articles and the location of articles were recorded, as well as the frequency and type of photographs. Drawing on Godoy-Pressland and Griggs's (2014) categorizations, five possibilities were identified for the location of articles (see Table 1). Qualitative categories were also devised for photographic coverage of the England team. Each photograph was placed in one of the following categories, as utilized by Rintala and Birrell (1984): competitive (player/team was depicted actively competing in football); non-competitive (the player/team was not actively participating in football but the uniform or setting made the sport apparent); or posed (the player/team was depicted in a non-sport setting). An inductive approach was also taken; any other themes that emerged from the data during the analysis were examined to see if they fit within a subcategory of an existing code or formed a new category. The data analysis was undertaken manually. Newspapers were first colour coded before being entered into a word processor, with categories inputted into separate documents.

**Table 1.** Location of articles in each newspaper.

Newspaper	Number of times a World Cup article/headline appears on:					Total
	Front page	Inside pages	Front page of sports section	Inside pages of sports section	Back page	
<i>The Times</i>	0	3	0	23	0	26
<i>The Independent</i>	4	3	3	19	2	31
<i>The Guardian</i>	1	0	3	8	1	13
Total for broadsheets	5	6	6	50	3	70
<i>The Sun</i>	0	4	0	17	2	23
<i>The Daily Mirror</i>	2	4	0	25	0	31
Total for tabloids	2	8	0	42	2	54

## English Media Coverage of the 2015 FIFA World Cup

### Amount of Coverage

*Frequency of Articles.* The World Cup took place between 6 June and 5 July 2015. Of the 124 articles published, 70 of these were from broadsheets (56%) and 54 from tabloids (44%). We found that coverage peaked for all newspapers once the tournament had started and there were only a few articles published on women's football outside this period. This is perhaps unsurprising given the typical lack of coverage of women's team sport in the UK press on a daily basis (Women in Sport, 2015).

However, our quantitative analysis showed that media coverage of women's football during the World Cup was not marginalized. In *The Times*, the World Cup featured three times a week. There was an article on the World Cup every other day in the *Daily Mirror* and the *Guardian* had an article every day between 8 and 12 June, before dropping to an article three times a week for the remainder of the tournament. The *Sun* featured the World Cup three times a week and then coverage increased from 24 June to 7 July to include an article in six out of seven days. The *Independent* had the most consistent coverage; it featured the World Cup every day of the tournament, bar one.

In contrast to previous findings on media coverage of women's sporting mega-events in the UK (Crouse, 2013; Godoy-Pressland and Griggs, 2014), our study showed that the Women's World Cup featured regularly in all five newspapers. This suggests that media coverage of the 2015 Women's World Cup in England increased in frequency in comparison to previous tournaments (see Crouse, 2013), demonstrating a more positive shift in media representations of women's football since 2011.

*Location of Articles.* As discussed by Godoy-Pressland and Griggs (2014), the location of articles and photographs highlight the importance awarded to the news. We categorized articles by location drawing upon their classifications (see Table 1). The broadsheet newspapers had more articles on the front and back pages; however, the tabloid *Daily Mirror* did have two front page stories. The *Independent* was the only newspaper to have an article feature in every category and also had the most articles feature on the front cover.

*Frequency and Type of Photographs.* A total of 159 photographs of the England team were examined. Of these, 82 were from broadsheets (52%) and 77 from tabloids (48%). The *Daily Mirror* published the greatest number of photographs (48) and the *Guardian* published the fewest (15). In addition to analysing the number of photographs, it is important for us to consider the *type* of photographic coverage. The majority of photographs were competitive: 110 of the 159 (69%) photographs showed the England players/team actively competing in football. This concurs with Crossman et al. (2007) and Godoy-Pressland and Griggs (2014) who found that female athletes were depicted as active/competitive more than they were non-active/posed.

In contrast to previous studies which report how women's sport – and especially traditionally 'male-defined' sports – are greatly underrepresented in the media (Biscomb and Matheson, 2017; Cooky et al., 2015), we argue that, unlike for previous FIFA Women's World Cup tournaments, women's football was regarded as a newsworthy subject in the English print media during the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup. Our findings show that the England women were widely reported on through articles and images, and in some newspapers, were deemed important enough for front page and/or back page news. The World Cup tournament took place alongside other male events (2015 UEFA European Under-21 Championship) and major mixed events (Wimbledon). But rather than maintaining women's inferior position by marginalizing the achievements of the England women's national team, comprehensive coverage was provided of the England women's football team. We suggest tentatively, therefore, that this may signal a new age of media coverage of women's sport in England, potentially representing a significant step towards greater gender equality in media reporting of women's sport. However, in addition to the amount of media coverage it is also important to consider the *type* of this coverage and it is to this we now turn.

### *Task Relevant*

*Skill of the Players/Team.* Bernstein (2002) has suggested that more media coverage is not necessarily 'better' if this means more sexualized images of female athletes. But our analysis of the newspaper articles featuring the England team revealed that the coverage was generally very positive. Our findings showed that of all the categories, skill, rather than sexualization was the most prevalent. Thus, this suggests a move away from reducing female athletes to sex objects, contradicting previous research studies (Christopherson et al., 2002; Pfister, 2015; Vincent, 2004), and therefore is a welcome finding in the field of gender and sport.

Most of the articles commented on individual players within the England squad, for example: 'Carney's incisive passing began to carve open a resolute Mexico defence' (*The Times*, 15 June). It was common for the newspapers to refer to goals scored by the England players: 'Lucy Bronze's strike was one of the goals of the tournament' (*Independent*, 24 June). As well as referring to players' skill, the coverage also highlighted the ability of the England team more broadly: 'England were very good without the ball. They [...] battled doggedly and remained in the game to the final whistle' (*Independent*, 10 June). Previous studies have shown a lack of media coverage on the skill/athleticism of sportswomen (Vincent, 2004). However, our findings demonstrate a challenge to this trend, certainly for the newspaper coverage of this major event.



Out of a total of 124 articles, only one referenced appearance. The *Independent* commented on England striker, Fran Kirby, but in a non-sexualized way: 'Kirby was turned away from the Sports bar [...] because she did not have ID to prove she was 21 [...] The elfin-faced Reading striker does look as if she is still in school' (*Independent*, 15 June). Black and Fielding-Lloyd (2017) similarly did not find the sexualization of female football players to be a major theme, although this is not mentioned in their analysis. For us, this is a highly significant finding as it shows a change in the typical media reporting of sexualizing female athletes (Biscomb and Matheson, 2017; Pfister, 2015), and perhaps reflects a more positive shift in attitudes towards women's sport in media coverage.

In light of our findings, we suggest that Connell's (1987, 2005) dichotomy between 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'emphasized femininity' could be further developed as this does not allow for the construction of other forms of femininity which do not fit 'emphasized femininity'. Thus, this serves to exclude women who exhibit characteristics typically associated with 'hegemonic masculinity', including and of interest to our research, *being good at sport*. Indeed, Connell (2005: 69) herself acknowledges that the definition of 'hegemonic masculinity' does not allow for 'the usage in which we call some women "masculine" and some men "feminine", or some actions and attitudes "masculine" or "feminine", regardless of who displays them'. Our findings show female athletes competing in a sport which has typically been associated with masculinity enacting characteristics associated with 'hegemonic masculinity' (such as skill, determination and physical strength) rather than characteristics associated with 'emphasized femininity' (such as heterosexual attractiveness). Furthermore, such women are recognized as a source of national celebration rather than being 'hidden from history' (Connell, 1987).

*Comparison of Female Players/Team to Male Players/Team.* Our second most prevalent task relevant theme was a comparison of female players to male players and the England women's team to the men's team. The newspaper coverage was again positive, often applauding the England women's achievements. Both types of newspapers drew comparisons in their coverage of the England team but it was much more common in the tabloids. Some articles depicted the England women's team as having a greater desire to win than the men's team. For example: 'Our women showed more creativity, character and desire than our men did throughout last year's World Cup in Brazil' (*Daily Mirror*, 25 June).

We found that gender comparisons increased during the men's Under-21 European Championship campaign, particularly in the tabloid newspapers. The successful England women's team were compared favourably to the unsuccessful men's Under-21s team: 'Watching the proud Lionesses show team cohesion and battling spirit has been in stark contrast to seeing Gareth Southgate's lads crash out of the Under-21 European Championship' (*Sun*, 27 June). Additionally, the England women were also compared against the senior men's national team; for example: 'England's women have filled the void left by the men, serial failures for a generation' (*Independent*, 1 July). Characteristics such as passion and competitiveness are more typically associated with 'hegemonic masculinity' rather than 'emphasized femininity' (Connell, 1987). As noted previously, a limitation of Connell's theory is that there is little scope to include those women who exhibit characteristics typically associated with 'hegemonic masculinity', including the

very attributes needed to play elite sport. We argue that there is a need to disassociate such characteristics with 'hegemonic masculinity' as this risks 'naturally' associating these characteristics with men and masculinity, thus reinforcing the gender hierarchy and not allowing space for women to enact such characteristics.

The media reporting appears to celebrate the women's teams' achievements by drawing comparisons with the unsuccessful men's senior and Under-21s teams. However, in Connell's (1987: 183) 'gender order', 'emphasized femininity' is always constructed as inferior to 'hegemonic masculinity' and so it could be interpreted that these comments are intended to be more of a critique of the men's team than a celebration of the women's team, especially given the frequent jokes and criticisms that have typically been levelled at the men's football team's performances. We acknowledge therefore that another interpretation of this reporting could be that 'our men are so bad that even the women are better'.

There were also some examples of gendered language which highlighted differences between the men's and women's game. While this was not a dominant theme, a few articles contained language that could be construed as highlighting Connell's (1987) 'emphasized femininity' rather than athletic accomplishments. For example, the England team: 'battled through Group F [...] with smiles on their faces' (*Sun*, 27 June). Other studies have similarly found media coverage refers to female athletes' smiles to emphasize femininity and deflect from physical accomplishments (Wensing and Bruce, 2003). The *Guardian* (10 June) also wrote that: 'women's football is very pure'. Previous research shows that men may refer to women's sport as technical and a purer form of the game, which is a subtle form of gendered othering that is also common in sports media (Fink et al., 2016). This could be viewed as a politically correct form of suggesting that women's sport is 'not as good' as the men's game. Women's football is often viewed as a 'purer' version of the sport because it has not been as financially driven as elite men's football, with the commercialization of English men's football following the formation of the FA Premier League in 1992 (Pope, 2018).

Our findings showed that female players were also directly compared to male players: 'Left back Claire Rafferty tackles like Stuart Pearce' (*Daily Mirror*, 30 June) and 'Laura's tears [...] were reminiscent of Paul Gascoigne crying after the men's World Cup semi-final loss in 1990' (*Daily Mirror*, 3 July). Williams (2003) suggests that a major consequence of the 1921 FA ban is that there are no central archives for women's football records. Perhaps this lack of knowledge of the history of women's football can in part explain why the media directly compare female players to male players who readers are more likely to have knowledge of, which may help them to identify and connect with female players. Cooky et al. (2015) discuss how stories are included around the 'human side' of men's sports on sports news broadcasts to help build audiences, but this information is lacking for women's sports. The dearth of media coverage of women's football more generally has arguably prevented readers and potential fans from developing a connection with elite female players in the way they can with male football icons (Pope, 2018).

We recognize that by using the men's game to frame and measure women's success, it could be argued that the women's team are being judged against an established 'male' standard and that this may serve to trivialize the achievements of female athletes (Black and Fielding-Lloyd, 2017; Pfister, 2015). We suggest that this was perhaps used as a 'quick fix' by sports journalists to address readers' lack of knowledge of female players

and the England women's team. Thus, in contrast to previous research we suggest that these gender comparisons could be viewed positively by assisting readers and potential fans to develop a connection with female players. The *Independent* and the *Daily Mirror* also discussed the gender differences in players' salaries: 'Their [England women] bonus to win the World Cup will be £35,000 each. Had the men won in Brazil they would have received £350,000' (*Independent*, 1 July). This is in contrast to Pfister (2015: 645), who found the differences emphasized between male and female footballers were in relation to bodily attributes and technical skills. Our findings show that the comparisons were generally favourable towards the England women.

We argue that female footballers – for the duration of this tournament at least – were not only accepted but considered *equal* to their male counterparts, demonstrating a positive shift in media representations of women's football. The national importance attached to the success of the England women's team is best illustrated by how the England team, on progressing through to the semi-finals, were regularly reported as the most successful England team since 1966 (when the men's national team won the World Cup) and 1990 (when the men's national team reached the semi-finals of the World Cup). For example: 'Sampson is proud of the England squad that shamed the men by reaching the final four for the first time in 25 years' (*Daily Mirror*, 1 July) and 'It matches Sir Alf's 1966 golden heroes and Bobby Robson's Italia 90 squad' (*Sun*, 1 July). It is interesting to note that the England women's team previously reached the final of the Women's European Championships in 1984 and 2009, but these achievements are not mentioned in media reporting. Perhaps these feats have been invisibilized due to the lack of a central archive on women's football, leading to inaccuracies when reporting on women's football (Williams, 2003).

We acknowledge Black and Fielding-Lloyd's (2017) claims that by using significant 'moments' from the history of the men's games to measure women's success and making direct comparisons between male and female players, it could be suggested that the women's team is represented in relation to an established male standard, consequently re-establishing men's football as superior. However, we propose that such comparisons can serve to break down gendered distinctions which usually serve to present men's football as 'real' sport and women's football as an inferior version of this – something which has not been seen in coverage of women's football in England until now. The England men's team competing at the 1966 and 1990 FIFA World Cup tournaments are examples of Whannel's (2002: 56) 'magic moments' in sport, which evoke popular memory and are constructed through media representations. Men's sports are typically viewed as representative of national identity, with women's teams 'unable to harness patriotic following through sporting achievement' (Godoy-Pressland and Griggs, 2014: 817). We argue that by positioning the success of the England women's national football team at the 2015 World Cup on a par with the most successful and iconic England men's teams up until this point in time,<sup>1</sup> the women's team appears to represent a sense of national identity.

### *Task Irrelevant*

*Personal Life.* Previous literature has suggested that articles focused on players personal lives is one way in which the achievements of female athletes are trivialized (Kian et al.,

2008; Wensing and Bruce, 2003). Thus, the gender hierarchy is perpetuated by the sports media highlighting non-athletic accomplishments and neglecting women's sporting ability. In our study, although Connell's (1987) 'emphasized femininity' was not discussed in relation to players' appearance, this was apparent in the traditional coverage of the players' roles as wives and mothers (Cooky et al., 2015). One example of this can also be seen from the Football Association's tweet to welcome home the England women, which was widely criticized on social media: 'Our #Lionesses go back to being mothers, partners and daughters today, but they have taken on another title – heroes.' This undermines the players' athletic accomplishments and reduces women's primary role to the domestic sphere.

We found that *The Times*, the *Independent* and the *Daily Mirror* made reference to players' partners. Some of these were loosely related to football: 'The newly-wed Ellen White had her husband with her for the group stages' (*The Times*, 1 July). Others were not related to football, for example, an article commented on gender role reversal: 'A reversal of traditional roles applies to goalkeeper Siobhan Chamberlain – fiancé Leigh is at home arranging their wedding' (*Independent*, 1 July). But not all media coverage followed the traditional heterosexual expectations of female athletes that have typically been portrayed in the media (Bruce, 2015). The newspaper coverage also positively mentioned two gay players in the England squad, but did not dwell on their sexual orientation. For example: 'Two players are role models in the gay community having come out: striker Lianne Sanderson and former captain Casey Stoney, who recently had twins' (*Independent*, 1 July).

Some articles focused on the players' personal lives by exploring the barriers they have had to overcome to play football at an elite level. For example, Fran Kirby's mother died when she was young which contributed to her developing depression: 'Kirby sank into a deep depression. In 2011, Kirby stopped playing football, stopped school, stopped everything' (*The Times*, 17 June). Fara Williams also received a considerable amount of coverage as she spent part of her early England career homeless: 'Incredibly she spent years playing for England while living in hostels and on the streets, hiding her status from team-mates' (*Independent*, 1 July). Initially, this focus on players' personal lives may appear to reinforce 'emphasized femininity', by focusing on the private domain and undermining players' athletic accomplishments. However, we argue that this media coverage is moving in a similar direction to that of the 'soap opera' style of coverage around the men's game (Blackshaw and Crabbe, 2004), and so perhaps signifies a movement towards constructing the female players as 'celebrities'. It could also be suggested that this task irrelevant content is intended to help readers to 'get to know' the players, who are not household names. Given that the vast majority of newspaper coverage was dedicated to players' skills and achievements rather than their personal lives, we argue that this is not necessarily a negative shift and served to provide a more rounded image of the players to the public.

*Gendered Hierarchy of Naming and Infantilization.* Gendered hierarchy of naming is the establishment of a dominant/subordinate relationship through the differential use of forenames and surnames (Gratton and Jones, 2010). We found that none of the broadsheet newspapers identified female athletes by their first name but this was common among

**Table 2.** Frequency of infantilization in each newspaper.

Newspaper	Frequency of:			
	'Girls'	'Lady/ladies'	'Lionesses'	'Heroines'
<i>The Times</i>	1	1	11	3
<i>The Independent</i>	3	2	7	0
<i>The Guardian</i>	0	0	6	0
<i>The Sun</i>	10	2	32	2
<i>The Daily Mirror</i>	18	1	50	1

the two tabloids. The majority of first name use in the *Sun* appeared in article titles: 'Katie after a final high' (28 June) and 'Super Steph' (29 June). Similarly, titles in the *Daily Mirror* referred to the players by their first name: 'Tell Laura we love her' (3 July), as well as frequently calling players by their first name within the article text. This is not typical of reporting on male footballers in England and previous studies have also shown that women are more likely than men to be identified by their first name (see, for example, Wensing and Bruce, 2003).

Another way in which infantilization tempers the symbolic threat posed by successful adult sportswomen is to refer to them as 'girls' and 'young ladies' (Fink et al., 2016; Wensing and Bruce, 2003). Our findings showed there was a tendency to infantilize the England team in this way in both broadsheet and tabloid newspapers. This can be seen in Table 2, with the number of articles referring to 'girls' and/or 'lady/ladies'.

The newspaper least likely to infantilize players was the *Guardian*, with six references to the word 'Lionesses' and no mention of other terms. There was a clear difference between broadsheet and tabloid newspapers, with the *Sun* and the *Daily Mirror* infantilizing players significantly more than the broadsheets. The term 'Lionesses' was applied to the England women's team and was used extensively in all five newspapers, but especially in the tabloids. 'Lionesses' was also used in other media communications such as television and radio when referring to the England women. This name has been developed on the back of the men's more famous 'Three Lions' phrase. It has masculine and warfare associations, dating back to King Richard I (the Lionheart) in the 12th century, who died in battle and was also the tournament anthem at the men's 1996 European Championships (Hand, 2002).

One of the ways in which gender hierarchy is reinforced is through gender marking in sport. In UK media reporting, 'football' is usually assumed to be men's football, whereas the women's game is reported as 'women's football'. Similarly, when the men's national team compete they are referred to universally as 'England', without the need for gender identification. Consequently, this serves to reinforce men's football as 'real' sport, while the women's game is demoted to 'other'. We argue that the term 'Lionesses' is one way of challenging this. While 'Lionesses' marks out the England women's team by gender, it could be argued that this metaphor is an improvement on the phrases 'women's football' and 'England women's team'. The English lion is also associated with the qualities of bravery, power and courage (Hand, 2002). Such characteristics are typically associated with Connell's (1987) 'hegemonic masculinity' but as

we have argued there is a need to move away from associating such characteristics with masculinity. We suggest that 'Lioness' is an empowering term which shows that women can exhibit characteristics typically associated with 'hegemonic masculinity', such as bravery, courage and being good at sport. It also represents a sense of national identity for the women's team.

## Conclusion

We set out to interpret English newspaper coverage of the England national team competing at the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup. Existing research has shown how the sports media has typically marginalized female athletes and/or trivialized their achievements but we argue there has been a shift towards more positive coverage of women's sport. We used the work of Connell (1987, 2005) to look at this shift in social phenomena and argued that, perhaps for the first time, media coverage around this mega-event reported on sport *as sport*, whereby the gender of the athlete was largely irrelevant. However, while Connell's approach has been valuable, we also discussed some of the limitations of this theory. We suggest that Connell's (1987, 2005) dichotomy between 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'emphasized femininity' could be further developed as this does not allow for the construction of other forms of femininity outside of 'emphasized femininity'. Our findings show media representations of female athletes competing in a sport which has typically been associated with masculinity enacting characteristics associated with 'hegemonic masculinity' (such as skill, determination and physical strength). In order to further develop Connell's work we argue that there is a need to dissociate such characteristics as typical of 'hegemonic masculinity' as this reinforces their association exclusively with men, thus reinforcing the gender hierarchy. Future sociological work would benefit from greater sensitivity to issues of gender and fluidity when drawing on Connell's theoretical approach.

This is the first research to look at a positive shift in the media representation of women's football in England, signalling a hopeful new direction from existing research on this topic. We argue that as a result of a number of recent interconnected developments in women's sport, media coverage of women's sport in England has perhaps entered a new age, and we suggest that our findings lend empirical weight to this. Drawing on an analysis of the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup we have used one point in time to evidence this shift but we suggest that this mega-event has served as a tipping point in the media coverage of women's sport more generally. Since our detailed analysis was undertaken, other examples of mega-events have shown that this was not a one-off occurrence. For example, 2017 was widely declared to be the 'summer of women's sport' in the British media, with coverage of women's sporting events including tennis (Wimbledon), the Cricket World Cup, the Rugby World Cup and the Football European Championships. These examples suggest that the momentum of media coverage of women's sport may have been sustained.

Future research could compare our findings to media coverage of other traditionally 'male' sports such as women's rugby and cricket and these findings could also be compared to international coverage of the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup, to see if media coverage continues on a positive upward trajectory. Research could also examine the

responses of female athletes to media reporting and if they recognize this new age of media coverage of women's sport. Finally, this study has focused on one time period in one country; a cursory glance over the sports pages in newspapers on a 'typical' day shows that this continues to be male dominated. Future studies are needed to confirm if there have been any changes in this 'everyday' coverage and indeed if there will be a tipping point for this media coverage of sport to become more gender equitable.

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## Note

1. The England men's team have since reached the semi-finals of the 2018 FIFA Men's World Cup.

## ORCID iD

Stacey Pope  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0273-8493>

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Kate Petty's research interests lie in the area of the sociology of gender, media and sport. She is particularly interested in women's football.

Stacey Pope is Associate Professor in the Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences at Durham University, UK. She is especially interested in issues of gender and sport. As well as publishing in a range of international journals, she is author of *The Feminization of Sports Fandom: A Sociological Study* (Routledge, 2017) and co-editor (with Gertrud Pfister) of *Female Football Players and Fans: Intruding into a Man's World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

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