

Female Sports Journalists: The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the experiences of female sports journalists in Sweden from a gender perspective. The theoretical framework is inspired by Yvonne Hirdman’s understanding of gender in a binary system and R. W. Connell’s definition of hegemonic masculinity. Data consist of 10 semi-structured interviews with the most prominent female sports journalists in Sweden. The sports journalists in this study express that there has been a change in the media industry, resulting in a better understanding of women’s working conditions within the industry. Even so, the work is still grounded in a culture signified by hegemonic masculinity, where women need to find their own strategies to build a successful career, handle harassment, and cope with other gender-related challenges.

Keywords

female sports journalism; gender; harassment; hegemonic masculinity; new media landscape; working conditions

1. Introduction

Researching women’s role in today’s sports journalism is imperative for a comprehensive understanding of the field’s dynamics. Investigating women’s presence within sports journalism contributes to the discourse on representation in the media. Given the historically male-dominated nature of sports journalism, exploring the experiences and contributions of women in this domain is crucial for addressing gender disparities and challenging prevailing stereotypes.

Sweden is ranked within the top five most gender-equal countries in the world (World Economic Forum, 2021), which manifests itself in an equal number of women and men in Sweden's media newsrooms (SCB, 2020). In this article, we will explore the experiences of Swedish female sports journalists. The following research questions guide our work:

1. How do female sports journalists experience changes connected to gender within the media industry?
2. How do female sports journalists relate to gender roles and structures in contemporary sports media?
3. How do female sports journalists handle harassment due to their work?

The article is structured based on these questions.

2. Previous Research

Men have long dominated sports journalism, and when women work within the field, they are often found in less prominent roles than their male colleagues. This applies both to Swedish and international contexts (Cooky & Antunovic, 2022; Reimer, 2002; Schoch & Ohl, 2021). Djerf-Pierre (2003) has claimed that this is connected to the structure and history of journalism. Journalism was, in line with politics, the church, and science, part of the public sphere reserved for men. It was not until the 20th century that women began to gain access to journalism as a professional field. Their positions were inferior to men's positions, and men held all the influential and decision-making posts (Djerf-Pierre, 2003, pp. 31–33). In the middle of the 20th century, journalism became divided into gender-related areas of responsibility. Women were responsible for questions related to the home, household, child-care, and relationships, areas that were considered to have low status. Men were responsible for politics, economics, and foreign affairs. During the 1970s, social issues such as environment, education, healthcare, and care work grew in importance and became areas for female journalists, while men kept dominating sports journalism (Djerf-Pierre, 2003, p. 37).

Over time, the number of female journalists has increased. In 2018, 52 percent of all practicing journalists in Sweden were women, while 48 percent were men (SCB, 2020). However, these numbers are not reflected within sports journalism, where men are still overrepresented (Hovden & von der Lippe, 2019). From a global perspective, a study from 2015 shows that 76 percent are men in news media and that the areas of politics and sports are standing out as the most male-dominated spaces (Edström & Jacobsson, 2015). A study conducted in 2019 showed that only 20 percent of those who spoke in sports news were women (A. Hirdman, 2019). Swedish female sports journalists testified to an uneven work distribution within a patriarchal and discriminatory work environment, where men received better job offers and higher status than their female colleagues, even when the men had lower educational levels (Nordlander, 2018). A slightly older study, from 2008, showed that female sports journalists experienced that they had to choose between their careers or having children (Hardin et al., 2008).

One aspect of being a female sports journalist is threats and harassment. Research has shown that female journalists have received threatening and harassing comments online, and often these comments have been criticism in the form of misogynistic attacks as well as sexual violence (Masullo Chen et al., 2018). A study from 2022 showed that the most frequent comments female sports journalists received on Twitter were sarcastic, targeted their physical appearance, and involved physical threats (Demir & Ayhan, 2022). To deal with online threats and harassment, a study from 2019, showed that female sports journalists used strategies to avoid the

attacks. These strategies involved limiting audience engagement, reporting the comments, and quitting their jobs (Stahel & Schoen, 2019). A study from 2018 showed that another strategy was to connect with other female sports journalists (Everbach, 2018).

Gender scholar Kleberg (1988) has argued that the theories used to understand gender in journalism are simplified since they do not explain the complexities surrounding the field in an adequate way. She has challenged the dominant assumption that more women in news production would change the industry. Kleberg's main hypothesis is that if female journalists choose to enter male-dominated subject areas, such as sports journalism, without simultaneously changing the perspective, the content will not change. Gender differences will be concealed, and existing structures preserved (Kleberg, 1988, p. 46). According to Jarlbro (2013), it doesn't matter if there are as many women as men in the newsrooms if nothing is done about the gender routine which is conservative and contributes to maintaining the gender order. In contrast to Kleberg and Jarlbro, recent research highlights that change has occurred in the new media landscape and that researchers must focus on the media opportunities the post-feminist movement provides (Toffoletti, 2016). Post-feminism, a complex and evolving concept, has emerged as a response to and in conversation with earlier feminist movements. Post-feminism emphasizes individualism, positing that women have agency and autonomy to make their own choices and pursue their goals, free from traditional gender norms. However, this emphasis on individual agency can sometimes overshadow the systemic barriers to gender equality that persist in society (Toffoletti et al., 2018). Cooky and Antunovic (2022) claim that post-feminism itself becomes a part of the sports media narratives and the new media landscape through websites, blogs, podcasts, and social media (p. 4). Even so, sports pose a challenge compared to other social institutions and popular culture as sports are gender-segregated in their organizational structure through the dichotomy of women's and men's sports, a dichotomy we do not find in popular culture, for example (p. 11).

3. Theoretical Framework

To answer our questions, we use a theoretical framework combining R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity and Yvonne Hirdman's binary understanding of the gender system.

Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity that is culturally idealized and upheld as the norm within a particular society. It represents the set of traits, behaviors, and attitudes that are valued and rewarded within a given social context, often associated with power, dominance, and control. In the context of sports journalism, hegemonic masculinity can have a significant impact. Sports journalism has historically been male dominated, reflecting and perpetuating traditional gender norms and stereotypes. Male sports journalists often occupy positions of authority and influence within the field, while women may face barriers to entry and advancement (Dahlén, 2008).

Y. Hirdman (1988) divides men and women into a binary system, where "women" and "men" come with preconceptions and expectations, which result in reiterative patterns. That is to say, the gender system is bound to the separation of men and women and, following this, the regulation of power and order where the man is the norm (Y. Hirdman, 1988, p. 7). Central in Yvonne Hirdman's framework is a gender contract which creates conditions for gender-bound rationality and affirmation of the order. This contract can explain continuity in the gender order in history (Y. Hirdman, 2001, pp. 88–94). The gender order remains even though masculinity and femininity may be constructed in new ways (Y. Hirdman, 2001, pp. 129–130).

Yvonne Hirdman also points out the paradox of making gender a “woman’s job,” a specialty that is perceived as a perversion of the mobility women have achieved. This illustrates one of the unintended consequences of integration and gender-emphasized roles (Y. Hirdman, 2001, p. 200).

According to Hardin et al. (2008) women entering sports journalism encounter strong gender barriers through “patronizing treatment by sources and colleagues, conflicting expectations in terms of family roles and career plans, and patriarchal structures, which ultimately contribute to women’s exit [from] the industry” (Hardin et al., 2008, p. 73, also cited in Cooky & Antunovic, 2022, p. 44). This quote summarizes the challenges faced by female journalists, while also opening up towards Yvonne Hirdman’s idea of a binary understanding of gender. The association between hegemonic masculinity and sports journalism contributes to the highlighting of gender hierarchies and inequalities within society.

The purpose of employing two distinct theoretical perspectives is to endeavor to capture the complexity that mirrors today’s sports media landscape. R. W. Connell and Yvonne Hirdman each have the potential to contribute to a deeper understanding of gender structures within the industry. We use the concept of hegemonic masculinity as a theoretic concept in our analysis, and we use the binary gender system as a theoretical lens through which we understand the material and how female sports journalists speak about gender.

4. Method

In this study, we conducted ten semi-structured interviews with Swedish female sports journalists. In the preparatory work for the interviews, we analyzed Swedish media coverage of gender and sports journalism. We have chosen to reproduce some of the quotes, written by Swedish female sports journalists, which problematize the theme. Achieving in-depth understanding through semi-structured interviews involves a multifaceted approach where the exploration of personal experiences is encouraged, allowing participants to share anecdotes related to the research topic. These qualitative narratives offer a vivid and contextualized understanding of their perspectives, contributing to a richer analysis. Contextual inquiry is another critical dimension, wherein researchers delve into the factors that influence participants’ views and behaviors. Understanding the broader environment, cultural influences, and situational dynamics adds depth and context to the analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). The interviews varied in length, from 40 minutes to 1.5 hours, but most of the interviews lasted for around one hour. Since we wanted to speak with the most experienced female sports journalists, we reached out to the top names, and they all responded positively. We established contact with 10 out of the top 15 most professional women sports journalists. Our participants’ ages range from 35 to 70 years old.

We used an interview guide with different themes and a set of questions. The themes consisted of changes in female presence in sports journalism, knowledge and skills, challenges within the field, equality and diversity, and perspectives on the future. We had a set of questions under each theme, but we were flexible in which turns the interviews took since we wanted the participants to be free to tell their personal stories. The interviewees’ stories differed since they all had different backgrounds and various experiences.

The interviews were conducted on video calls (Teams). We saved the audio files and transcribed them. The interviews were conducted in Swedish and have been translated by the authors. Both authors read the

interviews several times before we started to discuss topics and categories. After that, we coded the material according to different categories, such as “women in sports journalism,” “to be a woman,” “changes in the media landscape,” “language,” “social media and digitalization,” “knowledge,” “women’s sports,” “threats and harassment,” “salary,” and “challenges.” Our research questions guided how we analyzed the interviews, based on the themes. To be fair to our participants, we have tracked all the citations we use. This means that, first, we categorized according to different themes. Then, we selected citations from some of the categories. Finally, we tracked the citations back to the original transcription to make sure that the citations mirrored the bigger picture presented by the participants. The participants are numbered from interview 1 to 10.

There are limitations of the study, and due to the sample size, one can ask how far these results may be able to be transferred to other contexts. Since there are not that many female sports journalists of this high rank of professionalism, we were limited to a few names. Ten interviews with the top female sports journalists give an insight into contemporary gender and power structures from a Swedish perspective. Since each country has its own media structure and laws and regulations regarding equality, public service channels versus private channels, etc., it is difficult to generalize our analysis to other countries and contexts.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. *The Experience of Female Sports Journalists Connected to Gender Within the Media Industry*

In the first theme, we focus on how female sports journalists experience the industry’s structural changes. Previous research has pointed out that the Swedish TV sports’ editorial office consisted almost exclusively of men in the early years, and that the few women who were found there worked as secretaries, scripters, or clerks (Reimer, 2002, p. 155). The number of female journalists has increased since then, but progress has been slow. The first episode of Sportspegeln (a Swedish public service TV) was broadcast in January 1961, but it took another 20 years for the first female presenter to be appointed:

You should remember that, in 1980, when Ann-Britt Rydh Pettersson was the first female presenter for Sportspegeln, it was still not allowed for women to compete in Vasaloppet [the world’s largest public ski race]. So, there we are. The Gender Equality Act came in 1979 in Sweden, so around that time an evolution began, and it would take some time. (Interview 5)

Just as Djerf-Pierre’s (2003) research shows, a breakthrough occurs at the end of the 20th century when women gain access to one of the most masculine-bound journalistic spheres—sports journalism. The first women in the field had to endure a lot of resistance, but the development has mostly been positive since the pioneers started, according to those interviewed. The number of female sports journalists has increased, and the interviewees express that their presence has become more self-evident and that they have been accepted. But it has been a long journey with a lot of resistance, both internally in the media industry and among media consumers:

I have absolutely been told that I only got this job because I’m a woman. You get remarks about filling a diversity quota and comments that you don’t understand sports. There are male football coaches who have called me “little girl” over the years, who use that kind of power technique to show that they know

better. But I also think that it gets better and better. I can't remember having experienced anything like that in recent years. (Interview 8)

The age span between those interviewed in this study is about 35 years, and although there are many different perceptions of how Swedish sports journalism has changed, everyone agrees that there has been a positive development in terms of gender equality and female representation within the field. Some of the interviewees point out that it has been a lonely struggle for improved conditions since neither men nor groups that otherwise work for increased gender equality (in the quote below presented as feminists) have contributed:

I think it's underreported...the revolution that this actually is, with female sports journalists. Especially in Sweden. Nobody else has given this to us, we need to talk about it sometimes—the landscape has changed so much. But sports journalists, the men, they're not that interested in this. And feminists are not that interested in sports. So, there's a bit of a vacuum here. No one pays attention to what's happening. (Interview 4)

The statement above, that feminists are not interested in sports, does not align with Cooky and Antunovic's (2022) research in the book *Serving Equality*, where they claim that post-feminism has been an important part of the increased gender balance in media reporting.

Even though there are indications of increased gender equality, the interviewees express several fears linked to the new media landscape. The new media landscape has brought about both openings and closing doors for female journalists. Social media and digitalization have diversified sports journalism and created many new arenas for the dissemination of sports, but women have restricted access to these arenas:

There were a few years when I actually felt it was going backward. Especially when social media became big, and these football podcasts came along and there was a lot of profile building. A bit outside of traditional journalism. Women were simply pushed out. Or rather, they were somewhat made invisible. (Interview 4)

The field has changed in different ways. Respect for female sports journalists has increased, according to the interviewees, and several of the interviewees highlight how important their (male) bosses have been for that development:

The mindset of the editorial staff has also improved. They have become more receptive to listening to what it's like for women in the field. And I also think there has been a greater understanding, among bosses, of how vulnerable one can be in such situations. I think everyone better understands what you can actually go through. (Interview 8)

Nowadays, the participants experience that they get support when they are subjected to gender-specific harassment, and that today's bosses have the knowledge and skills to handle difficult situations. Furthermore, the participant quoted above points out the strength of having several women working together and supporting each other:

It's a strength that we are more female sports journalists now, who can point out the essentials, what it's all about. We have more allies to vent with. We talk quite a lot about it on the editorial team, amongst us women. (Interview 8)

This quote is in line with the aforementioned study by Everbach (2018).

Although there are positive changes as discussed above, one of Sweden's leading journalists, Frändén (2017), writes that female sports journalists are vulnerable because they operate in a male-dominated environment. She claims that a female sports journalist must always be on their guard and look out for sexist and male chauvinistic editorials. Frändén (2017, p. 16) highlights the importance of discussing these issues with female colleagues:

The talk between female colleagues moves in risk-calculating arguments of the type: "He's a bit chauvinistic but still okay, but watch out for this one, especially when he's drunk," and "That boss hates and breaks down women, so don't take that job if you want to keep your health intact."

The quote is one of many examples given in the interviews of how women must navigate a structure that is marinated in a culture based on masculinity, where being female is cause enough for needing to find strategies to be able to continue working in the industry.

The two quotes above show the complexity of the field, where female sports journalists experience improvements in the field that point to a positive development towards more gender-equal sports journalism. But still, women are working in a field where the man is, and has always been, the norm. To understand this environment from Yvonne Hirdman's and R. W. Connell's theories, one can say that female sports journalists navigate the industry from a subordinate perspective "as women" and that the industry has not changed its culture, but instead, female sports journalists take part in the industry although they face structures of discrimination due to gender binarity. This conflict—to be a part of a masculine culture as a female sports journalist—results in the women using different strategies, as shown in the quote above, to survive in the field.

Schoch and Ohl (2021) write that both male and female journalists are trapped in a gender-specific role, where masculine values and practices take precedence, contributing to upholding the existing gender order within sports journalism that favors men and disadvantages women. Editors-in-chief appear to wield significant influence in this procedure, particularly through their hiring practices and biased assumptions regarding journalists' genders, consequently indicating that the gender bias in skill perception can detrimentally affect not just women's professional trajectories but also their workplace satisfaction (Schoch & Ohl, 2021, p. 278).

The participants say that many women disappear from sports journalism. One of the interviewees problematized the fact that although female presence has increased, the positions women fill are not in the higher hierarchical levels, such as bosses or editors:

What I see as a challenge, as a female sports journalist, it's still that glass ceiling. The sports pages, sports journalism, still lack female bosses. Female editors. More women need to get these positions. It's still very male-dominated. (Interview 8)

Another problematization for understanding female sports journalists' working conditions is the pressure of outstanding knowledge, leading to a lack of tolerance against female journalists:

You have to be so damn much better than a man in such an environment [sports], for the men to be like, "we accept her." And then, you can't make any mistakes. So of course, the presence of women has increased, but the criticism never waits....There are more women now [in the industry], yes. But it's still a completely different treatment and a completely different tone and a completely different tolerance for and against women. (Interview 9)

The quote shows that the tolerance towards women is lower than for men and that you cannot afford to make any mistakes if you want to survive as a woman in sports journalism.

The quotations in this section demonstrate that while women are allowed entry into sports journalism, they experience a working culture where they are relegated to subordinate roles compared to their male counterparts. Women experience that they are required to over-perform in comparison to their male colleagues.

The pendulum movement between progress and backlash is made visible in the interviews by the fact that there are more active female sports journalists today compared to before, but the interviewees still experience bias due to gender roles. Masculinity is the norm in sports journalism, and female sports journalists acknowledge this in different ways. One way is in the lack of women in certain positions within the industry, such as bosses. Another way is in the exclusionary culture, where new media channels, such as podcasts, and festive gatherings, exclude female voices without consequences. These experiences signal a persistent culture of hegemonic masculinity, which will need to be further addressed in order to change the media industry at its core.

5.2. Relating to Gender Roles and Structures in Contemporary Sports Media

In this section, we discuss how female sports journalists' individual experiences influence not only their own professional careers but also how these experiences contribute to shaping today's media landscape. We do this from a critical gendered position, understanding Y. Hirdman's (1988, 2001) binary gender system as a part of Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity, constructing gender differences based on a set of imagined qualities that leads to a separation between "men" and "women," and keeps men in a dominant position and female in a subordinate position.

The quote below shows the complexity between the individual and the structural level, where the man is the norm who sets the agenda and determines who is included or excluded (see also Y. Hirdman, 1988):

I like men, I should add. I think it's fun to work with men. But it's always the case that men are the majority, and the majority has the privilege of interpretation. And men see men, choose men, and admire men. (Interview 1)

A counterfactual quote replacing man with woman in the aforementioned quote—"I like women...And women see women, choose women, and admire women"—also illustrates the power within R. W. Connell's

concept of hegemonic masculinity, where women are subordinate to men and must constantly navigate within a masculine-coded context.

During the interviews, we found that some of our participants told us stories based on a gender-discriminating structure—hidden in the culture of hegemonic masculinity—that they themselves did not find problematic:

There is such a wonderful well-known story, when I came to do my very first presenter shift. Back then, we used to wear burgundy blazers during autumn and wintertime. And they looked at me and said: “You can take Janne Svanlund’s [a male reporter’s] jacket; we think it will fit you.” There was no question if I would wear something feminine, like a feminine jacket, or that we would have a stylist to see to it. It was just like; you can take Janne Svanlund’s jacket; it will be fine. And I mean, I didn’t react either. I didn’t demand to get anything else. In the summer we had bright yellow blazers, and the first summer I worked, I got another men’s jacket. It was not until next summer, when we were going to have blue blazers and I had been around long enough to figure out for myself that I should ask the managers if I could possibly get something more feminine than a male blazer. And then they were like: “Why didn’t we think of that before?” So really, it was mutual. (Interview 7)

This quote above is interesting from the perspective of hegemonic masculinity. The people within the industry, and the female sports journalist in question, are all mutually uncritical of the culture and the dominant masculine structures within it, and they overlook how the culture shapes women’s working conditions. The interviewed journalist told this story as a “wonderful story,” since she did not reflect on it as something other than an anecdote of the time, even though she thought about the male jacket from the beginning. It took her at least three different male blazers to feel comfortable to ask for a female jacket. Although this perspective is hers to hold, the hegemonic masculinity works in this way, keeping us blindfolded in seeing the norms upholding a masculine hierarchy.

Most of those involved in the study express an ambivalence about gender roles within sports journalism, both when referring to their own experiences and the structures they operate within. There is the everyday work that they often feel comfortable in and can handle, and then there are structures that make the working day more difficult but which the women themselves report are harder to put their finger on:

I actually haven’t experienced it [being treated differently due to gender]. I’ve always thought that I’m me. I’m [participant’s name]. I haven’t reflected so much on whether I’m a man or a woman. And I have never measured other people by that yardstick either, nor skin color, nor age. But then, there are patterns and structures. (Interview 5)

This quote shows that even if one has not personally experienced being treated differently due to gender, one is aware that there are structures that can exclude or limit women. An example of this is given by one of the participants while speaking about becoming a mother:

When you talk about women, it’s quite easy to be a part of the culture when you’re young, if you have thick skin. It’s fun when a woman comes into the newsroom, the guys also think it’s fun. And you work, and you go out, and you have no family. And then it gets harder when you have children. It all changes. Then the differences between men and women start to really show. I think a lot about that when I talk about gender equality. A lot happens, and at the same time, very little actually happens. (Interview 1)

Hardin and Shain (2005) examine women's limited presence in sports journalism and the lack of equality in the US within the field. Their study shows that female journalists often feel discriminated against and unfairly treated in relation to their male colleagues. Female journalists express that it is difficult to make a career and succeed within their field. One of the reasons discussed is the work-family dynamic, which they see as a real "career-killer." The quote above shows a gender complexity, where progress is being made in some areas, such as more women entering sports journalism, but the structures stay the same—"it gets harder when you have children." Even though Sweden is at the top of the world among comparable countries, the quote shows that female sports journalists experience the same obstacles as women do in the field in the US, which ranks 42nd place in the Global Gender Gap Index 2023 (Statista, 2023).

That a lot and a little happens at the same time is something that recurs in many of the interviews—progress is being made in several areas, but the women still answer to the same structures.

"The more things change, the more they stay the same" indicates a steadfastness in the gender order, according to Y. Hirdman (2001, p. 77). Frändén (2017) problematizes that it is always the female sports journalists who are asked why female sports journalists are marginalized:

After a few years of progress on the gender equality front in the early 2000s, the rules of sports journalism have slowly changed. The new online TV formats, podcasts, and social media channels have, it is becoming increasingly clear, meant a collective backlash for women in the profession. For many clients, it is not important if you have an obscure sponsor for your podcast, or—unthinkable in all other press ethics contexts—work extra for a gambling company. Openly cheering for a team is a good accessory! The new multi-journalist market actually favors football supporters with a media platform; those who hang out with the guys on the couch in front of the TV, live-betting on Premier League, and knowing every left-back in Wolverhampton since World War II. (p. 16)

There are several interesting observations one can make based on this quote. This new form of sports journalism, not translatable to the structure of traditional journalism, where the focus lies on journalists being supporters, opens up yet another form of exclusion of women. To talk about football in a podcast, or to hang out with the guys in front of the TV, and to live-bet is not reserved for men. However, these activities seem to take part in a hegemonic masculine environment, which disadvantages women and results in a collective backlash to gender-equal sports journalism.

5.3. Handling Threats and Harassment

The third theme—threats and harassment—demonstrates that although the majority of those interviewed can provide many examples of being subjected to threats and harassment due to their gender, their stories are complex.

Several participants have experienced threats connected to their work in sports journalism. Some point out that threats and hate have increased because of social media, but they emphasize that the threat level has increased for their male colleagues as well. The most decisive factor for the number of threats and harassment one receives is connected to the sports one covers—the specific sport means more than gender identity:

Yes, I have received threats, especially when I wrote about Allsvenskan. That was the worst. It was so nice when I stopped writing about it and moved on to write about international football. It wears on you....You are exposed, and as a woman you are always exposed in a different way, the attacks are always more personal. And there are a lot of men, when it comes to sports journalism, who are jealous, who want to be where you are. It's like a rage within them that I get to work with what they dream of. (Interview 1)

Reporting Allsvenskan (the highest-ranked football league in Sweden) seems to present the highest risk, while figure skating and equestrian sports seem to be free from a culture of hate and threats, according to our data. Another participant talked about the combination of being a female sports journalist covering male football and being around drunk men:

We had to report to the Police once when I was out covering a men's national match in football....To be at supporter gatherings, among drunk older people, there have been incidents with people groping me. And I have colleagues who have been more or less kissed on live broadcast, when I myself held the camera. (Interview 8)

In the quote above, the journalist expresses an unsafe environment while being in football matches and around drunk men. Yet another problem comes from within the industry:

Then the man that drove us says to the other man we met: "Look what a tasty little piece I brought for us." When you are in the middle of the forest with two men you don't know. And I reacted in the way I do, which means I get angry, and I just said: "Quit this shit, now." But everyone reacts differently. But I was scared. And they wouldn't have said that if it had been Lars [male name] who came along to do the report. So that sort of thing happens all the time. And the whole thing with pats on the butt and all that shit you go through. (Interview 6)

In addition to the harassment described in the quotes above, several participants bring up the issue of harassment on social media and the difference in the comments one receives as a woman versus a man. Some highlight that it is more sexist, and one mentions that it is a more raw and more violent sexist rhetoric when one can hide behind anonymized accounts. Many ugly words and epithets fall into women's various digital accounts and most often it is about them being incompetent, diversity in quotas, left-wing extremists, bitter feminists, cunts, ugly, and more. Many examples are given in the interviews:

These are the words of an "in-quoted, left bitch who has made a career sucking off Zlatan," comments like this, on Twitter. I can sometimes retweet it for others to see. That is, I can expose people who harass me. (Interview 1)

Several participants have developed their own strategies to deal with the tormentors—in this example above by retweeting and exposing the commentator. Another participant says that her strategy is to "kill them with kindness"—she responds respectfully to the harassment and asks why they write so threateningly. She says that she then usually gets an apologetic response, and that the person stops with the harassment. Kavanagh et al. (2016) write that women are more exposed to threats and sexual harassment compared to men, but that it is especially bad if they are also involved in sports. Demir and Ayhan (2022) write that one of

the main forms of harassment female sports journalists receive on Twitter are comments focusing on physical appearance.

Other examples of strategies our participants shared were that some have secret phone numbers and others have chosen different last names for their children to keep them from being connected through name. In addition, some participants make a habit of reporting incidents to the Police. One of the participants argues that threats and harassment play a part in women leaving the field:

One should remember that women often disappear from the industry, more often than men. And even if it's not always because of hatred and threats, because it's not, I think it can play a part. (Interview 4)

It seems that there may be generational differences between the interviewees in how they experience their work as journalists, as the older ones do not report as many challenges connected to threats and harassment as their younger colleagues. Which sport they report on the most is significant, and also in which media channel. The interviewees highlight that it is "nicer" in public service TV compared to the privately owned channels:

Absolutely nothing. Nothing [referring to threats]. But I also think that SVT [public service] is a bit pampered, in some way. It's still nice. Everyone thinks nicely about SVT. You have a familiar relationship with it. (Interview 3)

One interesting research finding is that some of the women who have worked the longest in sports journalism say that they have not noticed any discrimination due to gender during their long careers. One of the participants asked us: How do you know if you are treated differently based on gender identity and if you would have been treated any differently if you were a man? She also argued that some women today take the victim role in working life:

I have friends who have their tentacles out all the time, and who always think: "This is because I'm a woman; if I had been a man then this never would have happened." And I'm just the opposite. I try to think that it doesn't matter which gender we are. I rather believe it is about how I am as a person, if I'm well-read, if I'm knowledgeable, if I'm serious. Then, I'll be treated just like anyone else. That's my starting point. (Interview 3)

In addition to this, the material provides examples of having experienced the advantages of being a woman. One participant talks about the ability to more easily connect in interviews based on different gender roles:

Sometimes I feel that it can actually be an advantage to be a woman in these contexts [sports journalism] because one can be perceived as disarming. It sounds strange, or it sounds like it shouldn't have anything to do with it, but something happens. It becomes a different kind of tension, which can sometimes open up for other types of conversations. (Interview 10)

There is no consensus on how gender affects the individual female sports journalist. However, through this material, it is obvious that gender plays a central role in understanding the working conditions for female sports journalists. The participants' experiences vary a lot, but the younger journalists experience more hate than the older ones, and the journalists focusing on male football experience more hate than their

colleagues. Even though the participants have experienced harassment or gendered mistreatment in different ways, all of the female sports journalists in this study enjoy their work and speak positively about their profession.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we have given voice to ten prominent journalists who work in the Swedish sports media landscape. To understand their experiences from a gendered perspective, we used Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity and Y. Hirdman's (1988, 2001) understanding of the binary gender system as a theoretical framework in our analysis.

The participants in this study have all had strong and steady careers. They are symbols of success. But still, there seem to be many women who are being marginalized in today's sports media landscape. Cooky and Antunovic (2022) describe a "sexist backlash" characterized by "routine abuse" and "raw misogyny" directed at individual female journalists (p. 69). A. Hirdman (2019) and Hardin and Shain (2005) describe how women leave the sports media landscape due to discrimination, lack of career opportunities and/or support. Hardin et al. (2008, p. 76) note:

Liberal feminist initiatives and diversity-minded hiring in newsrooms have served women who aspire to work in sports media: They have opened doors. However, the institutions behind these doors have remained intact. The same door that turns to allow women in later turns them out.

In this study, the female sports journalists describe an increased number of women in the field, a better understanding from the bosses, and a more accepting environment. Although this is true, the culture of the industry can be understood through Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity. Firstly, our study demonstrates that the new media landscape, shaped by social media and digitalization, gives room for a new form of exclusion of female sports journalists. Several media platforms open up opportunities for multiple actors, but some of these do not include women, such as niche football podcasts. Secondly, the culture upholds men's central positions of hierarchy through a separation of gender roles. One example is the exclusion of women who become mothers, and another example is the absence of females who do not have thick enough skin to handle the industry and what follows, for example, harassment.

The participants in this study tell us about some of their strategies to avoid or limit harassment due to their career, such as exposing haters on social media or getting a secret phone number.

Two of the interviewees employ the strategy of "killing them with kindness," consistently responding to harassment with a friendly and inclusive tone, which disarms the angry men—as it is primarily men who threaten and harass.

Another research finding is the generational differences. Mannheim's (1952) generation theory suggests that individuals who experience significant historical events during their formative years share common attitudes, beliefs, and values that distinguish them from other generations. According to Mannheim, these shared experiences shape a generational consciousness, influencing their perceptions of society and their role within it. Our material shows that younger women experience a harsher work environment compared to the

older generation. Although the sample size is limited and the type of sport one primarily works with influences the work situation, the generational aspect is significant.

Although the generational differences are noticeable in our research, one must also reflect on the individuals' definitions of gender roles, discrimination, and harassment. One example from our research is an older journalist who says that she has never, during her whole career, experienced any gendered mistreatment. She proceeds to tell us the story of when she had to use a male jacket on the show she led because there were no female jackets and no one else thought of this as a problem until she found the courage to ask for it. This example could have been told as proof of gendered discrimination, but in this case, it was not. One's own understanding of the situation is crucial for the definition of it as discriminating or not. This is where the concept of hegemonic masculinity is important, since hegemonic masculinity is the shape male-centered culture takes to uphold the subordination of women (Connell, 2005). This means, for the culture to last, it must lure women into accepting it as well, hiding the hierarchical structure as much as is needed.

Our material shows stories of a changing sports journalism, but at the same time, it shows us persistent excluding structures endured by women who are thick-skinned and skilled enough strategically to be able to enjoy the field. As Y. Hirdman (2001) points out, the gender order does not change even if structures of masculinity and femininity change. Overall, the hegemonic masculinity in sports journalism can reinforce gender inequalities and limit opportunities for women to participate and succeed in the field. Challenging and dismantling norms is crucial for creating a more inclusive and equitable sports media landscape. It takes time to change norms, something that has emerged in this study. However, it is possible, and based on our research findings, leadership seems to be a very important factor. Having gender-aware managers seems to be a decisive factor in improving equality in sports journalism. Our study sheds light on the power structures and hierarchies inherent within the sports journalism industry. By examining the obstacles and challenges faced by women in the workplace, including issues of discrimination, harassment, and limited career progression opportunities, we hope to contribute to efforts aimed at creating a more equitable and supportive work environment. Understanding these power dynamics is essential for promoting gender equality within the profession.

Important research themes going forward are how the changed media landscape affects sports journalism and how this, in turn, affects gender structures in the industry. Several of the interviewees raise important issues that require more research, such as ethical issues where sports journalists are sponsored by gambling companies or where journalists are more supporters than professionals. Further research is needed around the niche media channels that are growing, such as football podcasts, and how this affect gender representation.

In conclusion, research on women's role in sports journalism serves as a critical endeavor in advancing gender equality, promoting diversity, and fostering more inclusive media practices. By addressing issues of representation, power dynamics, and societal impact, we hope that our research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities within the field and advocates for positive change.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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