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Visible Women: raising profiles, changing attitudes

Amie Samba reports on the work of Visible Women, a support network for women working in male-dominated industries, and argues that we can raise the profile of women in sport when the audience and leaders become visible

The challenges in raising the profile of women in sport are complex but a reflection of society. There is no straightforward answer. It will take a collaborative effort from all concerned. First, we need to bring the conversation to the public more often and in March Visible Women, a network that champion women in male-dominated industries, did just that by organising a discussion on raising the profile of women in sport as part of celebrating International Women's Day. The panel for this event comprised: Lena Calvert, equality officer at the National Union of Journalists; Samantha Johnson, presenter and journalist at the Sun; Alison Oliver, managing director of the Youth Sport Trust; and me. Ruth Holdaway, chief executive of the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation (WSFF) chaired the debate.

With the debate on sport scheduled for later in the afternoon, I arrived at University of East London early enough to sit in on the other debates. The first discussion I observed was a heavy topic in domestic violence, the next a workshop about saving money and I began to wonder: what if the topic of women in sport was brought to the public in the same way? Over lunch I took the opportunity to mingle with attendees. The audience was relatively young and ambitious, and it seemed that many women here drawn by the variety of discussions focusing on areas of life affecting women. All the women I spoke to wanted to make a difference and become leaders in their sector.

The session on sport began with Ruth Holdaway introducing herself and WSFF. One by one the members of the panel shared our stories as women operating in male-dominated environments. Referring to the media's obsession with women's image in sport, Lena Calvert asked: "Who decides what sexy is?" She also put to the audience the idea that people would rather see women working up a sweat in a pornography video than playing sport. While this drew some laughs, I believe it also provided some food for thought. It does not seem to be the case that the public is not interested in women's sport. A study by WSFF showed 75% adults would like increased media coverage of women's sport. The Sport and Recreation Alliance reported a total of 75 million attendances of major events in UK in 2012, a huge figure relative to the UK's population. We can argue the London Games 2012 made a contribution but the potential is there for all to see if we are persistent.

Samantha Johnson explained how it was persistence and nagging that helped her get a foot in the door at Sky Sports. She was facing the challenge of being a woman of colour on TV with no individuals who looked like her on any of the UK's major sport channels. Working in journalism, Samantha still has to deal with the typical comments along the lines of: "You're a woman, what do you know about sport?" Alison Oliver spoke about the importance of giving women in sport confidence from an early age so they are self-assured in going after what they want, just as Samantha did. Women do have the confidence – the England women's cricket team proved that by beating Australia in the

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Ashes – but the England men’s team failed miserably and still the media focus was on them.

Only 5% of media sports coverage is dedicated to women’s sport so it is no surprise that viewers of women’s sport are also invisible; they are not being spoken to or for. This audience has yet to find its voice and until they have profile, women will be tagging along waiting for next big sporting competition for the momentary chance to shine. Lena pointed out the fact that Match of the Day was presented by middle-aged men and I agree that the lack of diversity for a publicly funded channel on the BBC is not good enough. Some 3.9 million people watched Team GB women’s football match against Brazil during the 2012 Olympic Games and we have to build on the momentum taken from interest in women at major events. Failing to do so will be a missed opportunity for raising profiles but we need to know more about this audience than just the numbers. Tune into Sky Sports on a typical Saturday afternoon. Commercial breaks are filled with shaving, vehicle and betting adverts. Is this is what people who watch football are usually into? It may be true for some but the point is that they have a good idea of about who they would like to attract. We need to build a relationship with the audience of women’s sport in order to help raise profiles.

We should also consider leveraging relationships and networks of women in leading positions to see significance progress. There is a huge appetite for female leadership and lots of talented women across sectors; it might be worth tapping into. It is vital that sport considers support from outside the industry to boost the profile of women. Journalist Natasha Henry is soon to launch Women in Sport magazine which will be the only magazine dedicated to elite women’s sport in the UK. Girl Sport Talk is another website led by women and presenting sport in a more female-friendly way. These are the platforms on which women in sport will be featured in the near future and we must help build on it. There are numerous examples out there that are on the road to establishing an audience; and once that audience has formed a coherent voice and is visible, we are more likely to see the commercial investment that is desperately required.

The debate ended with a question about what the audience can do to help. I stressed the importance of challenging misconceptions of women in sport. Lena encouraged the audience to write to editors demanding diversity and switch on the TV when women are playing. Alison and Samantha highlighted the need for all of us to keep pushing and having perseverance. These are simple actions we can take to help raise the profile of women in sport. For it to be effective its audience and leaders must become visible.

Amie Samba the director and founder of Run Fun Starz. Find them online at www.runfunstarz.com

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Women in Sport magazine
You can register your interest in Women in Sport magazine at
wismagazine.co.uk

Girls Sport Talk is online at girlssporttalk.co.uk

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