

Chapter 6

Women's Sport and the Media

Introduction

6.1 Writing in response to submissions to this committee inquiry, journalist Greg Baum remarked:

Women's soccer is a joke...Women's cricket is not much better. Netball is OK, sometimes, when there is nothing else on. But women's basketball is not...Women runners, jumpers, throwers, cyclists and swimmers do their best, but it is, by definition, second-best.¹

6.2 Meanwhile, on morning commercial television on the day of one of the committee's hearings, Mr John Mangos of Sky News said

There's no way to say this nicely without sounding sexist, but the fact of the matter is blokes hit the ball further, kick the ball harder, go in harder, it's better to watch, end of story.²

6.3 These remarks may have been meant in good humour, but indicate an entrenched sexism that underpins the lack of balance in coverage of sport. It is sexism not because there are no differences between men's and women's sports, but because those differences cannot explain the differences in media coverage. Commentators such as those quoted above appear to be looking for excuses for the prejudices of either themselves or of media outlets.

6.4 Australian women's sport includes high-achieving teams and magnificent individual efforts. Australian sportswomen at international meets have given brilliant performances, sometimes outshining the men, such as when the Australian women's swimming team at the 2004 Olympic Games secured more medals than their male counterparts.³ The women's hockey team, the Hockeyroos have frequently dominated international competition, winning Olympic gold and international championships on many occasions.⁴ The Australian women's netball team has won eight of the eleven world championships.

1 Greg Baum, 'Count me out: women must earn coverage', *The Age*, 5 August 2006, p. 6 (sport).

2 Channel 7, *Sunrise*, 3 August 2006.

3 4 gold, 3 silver and 2 bronze to the men's 3 gold 2 silver and 1 bronze. See Australian Olympic Committee, Aquatics – swimming, <http://www.olympics.com.au/sports.cfm?SportID=1&DisciplineID=14>, accessed August 2006.

4 Hockey Australia, Hockeyroos Major Achievements, <http://www.hockey.org.au/natteams/hockeyroos.asp>, accessed September 2006.

6.5 Individual performances also abound. Golfer Carrie Webb has won more major championships than any other Australian golfer, male or female. Lauren Jackson is not just Australia's best female basketball player: she was a member of the US National Women's Basketball League's All-Decade team, as well as being the competition's youngest-ever player to reach 1000 points, and its 2003 Most Valuable Player.⁵ Zoe Goss was one of Australia's top women cricketers when in 1994 she famously dismissed Brian Lara in a charity match.⁶ Her compatriot Belinda Clark retired with nearly 4000 runs at an average better than that of Steve Waugh or Alan Border. Of Australia's many gifted swimmers, it is Susan O'Neill who has won the most national titles. In the final days of this inquiry, Australian swimmers Liesl Jones and Libby Lenton broke two swimming world records in the one night – and both of them have multiple world record times to their names.⁷ This was closely followed by the Sydney Swifts being only the second team in any Australian league of modern times to complete a season undefeated in any game – the first to do so were the St George rugby league team in 1959.⁸

Why does women's sport get so little attention?

6.6 Despite many great achievements, women's sport gets little media coverage. This has been analysed in a number of studies, particularly in *An Illusory Image*, published by the Australian Sports Commission in 1996. Studies of print media coverage of women's sport in 1980 concluded that two per cent of print sports coverage was about women's sport.⁹ Data gathered for *An Illusory Image* suggested newspaper coverage had increased to 10.7 per cent.¹⁰ When the South Australian Premier's Council for Women commissioned similar research in 2006, it found that coverage was just 4.1 per cent, and that was despite a number of high-profile women's sporting events occurring during the study period.¹¹ Even these poor figures may overstate the impact of women's sport. *An Illusory Image* showed that most newspaper

5 Women's National Basketball Association, <http://www.wnba.com>, accessed August 2006.

6 Nabila Ahmed, 'Goss still living with her instant of fame that has lasted a decade', *The Age*, 7 December 2003, <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/12/06/1070625580792.html?from=storyrhs>, accessed August 2006.

7 Swimming Australia, 'World record bonanza to close short course champs', 28 August 2006, <http://www.swimming.org.au/News/Latest%20News.aspx?nwid=%7B6E4C15A3-2CB8-448C-AF97-1FFFD7957A29%7D>, accessed August 2006.

8 Amanda Lulham, 'Swifts target unbeaten season', *The Australian*, 31 August 2006.

9 See Helen Menzies, 'Women's sport: treatment by the media', in K Dwyer (ed.) *Sportswomen Towards 2000: A Celebration*, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, 1989, pp 220–31.

10 Murray Phillips, *An Illusory Image: A Report on the Media Coverage and Portrayal of Women's Sport in Australia*, Australian Sports Commission, Canberra, 1996.

11 Ms Pat Mickan, SA Premier's Council for Women, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 4 August 2006, p. 50.

stories on women's sport were relatively poorly positioned in the paper, and mostly appeared when there was less men's sport – during the week.¹²

6.7 A 1992 report stated that in 1988 only 1.3 per cent of televised sport was women's sport.¹³ The picture painted of television sports coverage by *An Illusory Image* was scathing: only 2 per cent of coverage was for women's sport, and this was carried almost exclusively by non-commercial networks. There was however more coverage of mixed sport, particularly due to the Wimbledon Tennis Championships falling during the study period. The little coverage provided was certainly not a reflection of the limited time available:

One program detailed the minutiae of guinea pig racing for more than six minutes, whereas the only woman's story on the same show was given 15 seconds.¹⁴

6.8 None of the commercial free-to-air networks provided data on their sporting coverage to the committee. Approximately 10 per cent of sport broadcast on Fox Sports is women's sport.¹⁵ The balance is better on the ABC, with around one third of national televised sport being national women's competitions (Table 6.1).¹⁶

Table 6.1 ABC TV Broadcasts of women's national sporting competitions

Year	Women's Sport: National Competitions (hours)	% of National Sport***
2001-02	82	31
2002-03	80	38
2003-04	98	33
2004-05	107	38
2005-06*	131**	44

Source: ABC, *Submission 59*, p. 3.¹⁷

12 Murray Phillips, *An Illusory Image: A Report on the Media Coverage and Portrayal of Women's Sport in Australia*, Australian Sports Commission, Canberra, 1996, p. 8.

13 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, *Half Way to Equal*, April 1992, p. 118.

14 Murray Phillips, *An Illusory Image: A Report on the Media Coverage and Portrayal of Women's Sport in Australia*, Australian Sports Commission, Canberra, 1996, p. 14.

15 Mr Malone, CEO, Premier Media Group, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 2 August 2006, p. 33.

16 Note this does not take account of regional sport telecasts, about which the committee did not receive data.

17 * projected figures to end Financial Year; ** includes 34 hours broadcast on ABC2; *** Women's sport as a percentage of total National sport broadcast.

6.9 The only information on radio coverage of sport came from *An Illusory Image*, and provided the most disturbing picture of all. The study of two radio stations, one commercial and one non-commercial, revealed almost no women's sport (1.4 per cent), little mixed sport (3.5 per cent) with over 95 per cent of coverage being men's sport.

6.10 Many submitters were of the view that coverage of women's sport was improving only slowly, and that something needs to be done about it.¹⁸ With so many successful female individuals, women's teams, and with such extensive participation by women at grassroots level, reasons have to be found as to why coverage of women's sport is deficient. Sports writer Patrick Smith observed that the reason that golfer Carrie Webb did not receive good coverage was 'not her swing but her sex'.¹⁹ Many however argue that there are other reasons that women's sport lack media coverage.

6.11 The major argument sometimes made is that women just are not as good at sports as men, and people want to watch and read about the best. Journalist Julie Tullberg told the committee that she thought fans tended to be attracted to male performances, although that also appeared to be a function of what sports had media coverage.²⁰

6.12 However, there is also evidence to suggest performance is not necessarily related to media coverage. There are some sports that only women play at the elite level, and others that only men play. Even in these cases, the sports dominated by men get far more media coverage. If the argument were valid, then those sports where only women play at the elite level and are therefore by definition 'the best' would get media attention. Yet in general they do not. Only women play elite netball in Australia, but the media coverage of that competition is dwarfed by the coverage of any of half a dozen male team sports. Also, the argument does not get applied in men's sport. As sociologist Lois Bryson pointed out during a parliamentary inquiry in 1991:

Geoff Fenech is not considered a kindergartener because he probably could not last a round with a mediocre heavy weight boxer. Yet this is the framework applied to women.²¹

6.13 There are also occasions when women's events get equal or greater media coverage when broadcasters perceive something worth covering, such as successful women competitors at Olympic events.²² In New Zealand the 1999 netball World

18 Ms Reid, ACTSport, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 4 August 2006, p. 10.

19 Patrick Smith, 'Webb greatest of all but unable to break through grass ceiling', *The Australian*, 2 August 2006, p. 19.

20 Mrs Tullberg, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 3 August 2006, p. 66.

21 Lois Bryson, *A Sociological Perspective on Women and Sport in Australia*, in *Equity for Women in Sport Seminar papers*, 28 February 1991.

22 Mr Lozan, Womensport and Recreation NSW, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 2 August 2006, p. 27.

Championship final between Australia and New Zealand out-rated the Bledisloe Cup Rugby held a few months earlier (1 002 000 viewers, against 873 000).²³ In the US, the television audience for the men's tennis Grand Slam in the period 1997 to 2000 was less than that for the women's on eight out of 12 occasions.²⁴

6.14 Another complaint about women's sport is that it lacks depth of talent.²⁵ Yet, as Patrick Smith argued, there is great depth at the top of women's golf. The US Basketball leagues' Most Valuable Player Awards are equally likely to be won by different individuals, suggesting the women's and men's competitions have similar depth of talent.²⁶ Just as many different women have won major individual sporting events as have men (Table 6.2)

Table 6.2 Numbers of different individuals winning sporting competitions in the last ten events, by gender

Event	Number of male winners	Number of female winners
Australian Open, Tennis	7	6
French Open, Tennis	7	8
US Open, Tennis	7	7
Wimbledon, Tennis	4	7
World championships, 100 metres swimming freestyle	7	10
The Open (UK), Golf	8	7
The Open (USA), Golf	8	8

6.15 Do women watch other women play sport? The evidence suggests they do and, perhaps just as importantly, men watch women's sport as well. Premier Media

23 Margaret Henley, 'Going mainstream: women's televised sport through a case study of the 1999 Netball World Championships', in Roger Horrocks and Nick Perry (eds), *Television in New Zealand: Programming the Nation*, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp 167–183.

24 Alina Bernstein, 'Is it Time for a Victory Lap?: Changes in the Media Coverage of Sport', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 37, no. 3–4, 2002, p. 423.

25 Patrick Smith, 'Webb greatest of all but unable to break through grass ceiling', *The Australian*, 2 August 2006, p. 19.

26 National Basketball Association, http://www.nba.com/history/awards_mvp.html, accessed August 2006.

Group indicated that most of the audience for Fox Sports was male, but that this varied from event to event, with strong ratings for events with an even gender breakdown, such as major tennis competitions.²⁷ Womensport and Recreation NSW noted how the National Rugby League have recognised that half their audience are women, and see this as a positive.²⁸ Although 70 per cent of the audience at a USA Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) game may be female, the television audience is around 50-50 men and women.²⁹ The New Zealand television audience for the 1999 Netball World Championship was similarly evenly balanced. Margaret Henley's conclusion was that this confirmed 'the television scheduler's popular wisdom that men will watch any sport if it is quality sport, even if played by women'.³⁰

6.16 If women are just as ready to participate in and watch sport, and if women's sport is capable of being successfully reported, why is there so little coverage? There are several likely reasons.

6.17 First, men's sport has the advantage of incumbency. Men's sports have been reported for decades. They gain numerous advantages from this: familiarity to audiences; loyalties that have developed amongst viewers, including loyalties that are handed down within families; established business models and business experience, reducing the risks of failure; cash flows that allow them to continually advertise and promote their products, and so on. Chris Isidore, a commentator with CNNfn, in reviewing progress of the WNBA in US broadcasting, noted 'just how difficult it is to turn any new sports league into a money maker'.³¹

6.18 Second, the sporting marketplace is crowded, with four football codes being played and broadcast nationally, in addition to cricket, several other national sporting leagues, and widespread interest in other sports that might rate little attention in many other countries, such as swimming. There are also business linkages between some men's sports and broadcast media.³²

6.19 Third, the coverage of sport is to some affected by the attitude of the media and sports organisations.³³ Most reporting is by men, under male editors or program

27 Mr Marquard, Premier Media Group, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 2 August 2006, p. 42.

28 Ms Boon, Womensport and Recreation NSW, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 2 August 2006, p. 27.

29 WNBA, History of the WNBA, http://www.wnba.com/about_us/historyof_wnba.html, accessed August 2006.

30 Margaret Henley, 'Going mainstream: women's televised sport through a case study of the 1999 Netball World Championships', in Roger Horrocks and Nick Perry (eds), *Television in New Zealand: Programming the Nation*, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 178.

31 Chris Isidore, 'WNBA: lovable money loser', 17 August 2001, CNNfn, http://money.cnn.com/2001/08/17/companies/column_sportsbiz/, accessed August 2006.

32 Ms Reid, ACTSport, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 4 August 2006, p. 12.

33 Mrs Tullberg, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 3 August 2006, p. 66.

managers. Several witnesses thought that women's involvement as journalists could result in good coverage of women's sport.³⁴ Liz Ellis remarked on how there was more coverage of women's sport in *The Australian* when its sports editor was a woman. She also argued that the journalists influenced the gender balance of content:

I think the last statement in particular—that people would not be interested in women's sport—is a bit of a furphy. I think it is more that the journalists want to write about football because that is what they know about.³⁵

6.20 She also made the point that the perceived minor status of women's sport also affects the way newspapers go about covering it. She spoke of how one paper would:

assign their junior reporters, their cadet reporters, to cover netball. So every year we get a new junior reporter who comes in and you have to explain the competition to them, the people they need to look out for and the history of what is happening.³⁶

The marginal interest shown by some individuals or businesses in media may also be reflected amongst some sporting organisations, one of which in its submission to this inquiry referred to women's sport, along with some men's sports, as 'minority sports'.³⁷

6.21 A fourth, and perhaps most important, reason for the neglect of women's sport is that it is trapped in cycles of neglect, poor funding, poor infrastructure and low levels of interest.

6.22 Football Federation Australia (FFA) pointed out that limited media exposure means limited commercial opportunities for sport. This severely curtails revenue-raising capacity, and limits interest from broadcasters. Lack of revenue prevents both expensive competitions (for example, flying teams interstate for national league games) and puts mainstream advertising (such as television spots) out of commercial reach. It also limits venue quality, and that can affect the willingness of fans to attend games. These factors all in turn reinforce a lack of media exposure, and thus a lack of media engagement.³⁸

6.23 This vicious circle, FFA suggested, could only be broken 'through government intervention, particularly in terms of a mandatory minimum coverage of women in sport or some kind of affirmative action'.³⁹

34 Ms Janice Crosswhite, *Submission 6*; Ms Mickan, SA Premier's Council for Women, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 4 August 2006, pp 53–54.

35 Ms Ellis, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 2 August 2006, p. 59.

36 Ms Ellis, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 2 August 2006, p. 60.

37 VicSport - The Sports Federation of Victoria, *Submission 31*, p. 7.

38 Ms Buckley, FFA, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 2 August 2006, p. 13.

39 Ms Buckley, FFA, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 2 August 2006, p. 13.

Gendered coverage of women's sport

6.24 It is not only the quantity of coverage that is at issue. There are differences in the way the media portray women's and men's sport, mostly reinforcing gender stereotypes, or undermining women's achievements. As Ms Jackie Frank said in response to Mr Mangos's remarks on Channel Seven's *Sunrise* program, one of the issues with coverage is that 'The word is exposure. Women have to expose themselves to get a bit of airtime'.⁴⁰ This is a longstanding concern surrounding women's sport. Women's sport is more likely to be sexualised, and women are more likely to emphasise sexuality in fundraising for their sport.⁴¹ However, while this kind of portrayal is frequently used to secure media coverage, it can also create problems for the sport. One newspaper sports editor was reported in *An Illusory Image* as saying:

You would be surprised at the number of excellent action shots involving women sport-stars from tennis, netball and hockey, which get thrown in the bin simply as a result of their uniforms being short and their sports pants showing. It is not worth the grief we get from a very loud minority public to run these photos and that is a shame.⁴²

6.25 ACTSport raised the concern that stereotypes of what women play may create barriers to the media portrayal of sport:

I do not want to be disrespectful of netball, but it is an easy sport for the media to grab because it epitomises the ultimate in the feminine, non-threatening aspects of sport. It is 95 per cent played by women, for women. They wear skirts. There is a very feminine kind of presentation in the whole sport of netball.⁴³

6.26 The analysis presented in *An Illusory Image* highlighted how dominant were various stereotypes of women in media coverage. They were often referred to as girls; were more likely to be shown in passive poses; far more likely to be shown in posed, and sometimes sexualised, images; and subjected to stereotyped descriptions (as, too, were men).⁴⁴ One submission forwarded an example to the committee of coverage on one page of a newspaper, which printed a story about female competitors in terms of their appearance and emotions while in the other story, on the same page and covering the same sport, reported news on their male counterparts without any such language.⁴⁵

40 Channel 7, *Sunrise*, 3 August 2006.

41 Mark O'Keefe, 'Sexploitation or pride? Female Olympians' revealing poses stir debate', Newhouse News Service, 15 September 2000, <http://www.newhouse.com/archive/story1a091500.html>, accessed August 2006.

42 Murray Phillips, *An Illusory Image: A Report on the Media Coverage and Portrayal of Women's Sport in Australia*, Australian Sports Commission, Canberra, 1996, p. 24.

43 Ms Reid, ACTSport, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 4 August 2006, p. 11.

44 Murray Phillips, *An Illusory Image: A Report on the Media Coverage and Portrayal of Women's Sport in Australia*, Australian Sports Commission, Canberra, 1996, pp 8–11, 14, 17, 20–21.

45 Ms Jennifer Riatti, *Submission 23*.

A study of ABC online coverage of the 2000 Olympics found that while women and men athletes received relatively balanced amounts of coverage, the women were more likely than men to be infantilised and to be described in emotive terms, and there was limited breadth in the coverage of women in the Olympics.⁴⁶

6.27 Reporting of women's sport that reinforces stereotypes and trivialises women's achievements could be worse than no coverage at all.⁴⁷ However the overwhelming view of writers in the field, and of participants in this inquiry, is that there needs to be greater media coverage of women's sport, and that strategies need to be found that will achieve this outcome. One example of success that was regularly noted was that of the broadcasting of netball in New Zealand.

Media success: netball in New Zealand

6.28 In New Zealand netball is, as it is in Australia, a popular sport amongst women. As in Australia, there is a national netball league and a national team. Ten years ago, the code received similar levels of media coverage in both countries.⁴⁸ Today however, the sports share diverging fortunes, as netball in New Zealand has become a top-ranking sport behind Rugby Union.⁴⁹ The coverage of the sport is so good that Australian captain Liz Ellis was able to follow the Australian league results by reading the New Zealand papers.⁵⁰

6.29 Netball receives televised coverage in New Zealand on the free-to-air channel TVNZ. In 2006 TVNZ broadcast 18 National Bank Cup competition games including two matches each weekend for the seven weeks of the tournament, plus the four finals games, spread over three weekends. It also broadcast international games against Australia and South Africa, and the Commonwealth Games gold medal match (against Australia), and three Scottwood Trust games.⁵¹ TV viewing data indicates that netball secures a healthy share of New Zealand audiences, with the weekly national league games typically securing 20 to 30 per cent audience share. Feature events such as series finals and international matches secure much larger shares – up to two thirds of viewers in their time slots.

6.30 There have been several suggestions about why media portrayal of netball in New Zealand has undergone such a change. One concerns governance: Netball NZ

46 Dianne Jones, 'Half the Story? Olympic Women on ABC News Online', *Media International Australia*, vol. 110, pp 132–146, 2004.

47 Alina Bernstein, 'Is it Time for a Victory Lap?: Changes in the Media Coverage of Sport', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 37, no. 3–4, pp 415–428, 2002.

48 Mr Blandthorn, AWU, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 3 August 2006, p. 57.

49 Mrs Ellis, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 2 August 2006, p. 61; Mr Blandthorn, AWU, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 3 August 2006, p. 57.

50 Mrs Ellis, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 2 August 2006, p. 61.

51 TVNZ – TV One, *Submission 81* and attachments.

has a board with passionate business people from outside the sport bringing valuable business perspectives to bear on the sport's future, and they have worked to create a detailed blueprint for giving the sport a higher profile.⁵² Another reason for the change may be marketing success: the organisation has hit upon the right marketing strategies, getting the sport to the point where it is something that journalists and editors want to cover.⁵³ A third suggestion was that a franchise business model was keeping administrative costs down as well as bringing revenue and management expertise to bear for the sport.⁵⁴ A fourth factor may have been that the sports market is less crowded in New Zealand, with fewer football codes in particular competing for attention.⁵⁵ A fifth suggestion was media leadership:

Some 10 or 11 years ago apparently there was a network executive who took a punt. Netball in New Zealand was no different from netball in Australia... He took the punt, put his job on the line and said, 'If this sport does not rate or we do not get ratings, I am happy to lose my job.' What happened from that day was that the sport rated, and then the television networks decided it was a good idea to invest in it... The television networks were the ones who took the leap of faith.⁵⁶

6.31 It is likely that many factors influenced the process by which netball has become widely watched and widely reported in New Zealand. Margaret Henley, a New Zealand sports media researcher, has undertaken detailed analysis of media coverage of women's sport in New Zealand.⁵⁷ In her submission, Margaret Henley argued that a combination of initial broadcasting opportunities, and a leadership within the sport that saw televised coverage as a priority for the game, were critical to netball's success. She recognised that netball's initial opportunities for broadcast, while making it the envy of many women's sports overseas, were:

a fragile position which had to be continually fought for by the Netball executive at the time. Within this Executive body there was a small group of farsighted women such as Marjorie Jenden, who correctly assessed that if the sport didn't fight for a greater share from the broadcaster and demand greater respect for the value of the game, that it would be forever locked within a paternalistic relationship with the broadcaster and the sport would not flourish in the future.

52 Mrs Ellis, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 2 August 2006, p. 61.

53 Mr Blandthorn, AWU, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 3 August 2006, p. 53; Ms Roffey, VicSport, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 3 August 2006, p. 15.

54 Mr Shorten, AWU, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 3 August 2006, p. 56.

55 Ms Roffey, VicSport, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 3 August 2006, p. 15.

56 Mr Blandthorn, AWU, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 3 August 2006, p. 57.

57 See, for example, Margaret Henley, 'Going Mainstream: women's' televised sport through a case study of the 1999 Netball World Championships', In *Television in New Zealand: Programming the Nation*, Roger Horrocks & Nick Perry (Eds), Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2004; Margaret Henley, 'Sports Media: Our world on their Shoulders?', In *Media Studies in Aotearoa/New Zealand*, Luke Goode & Nabeel Zuberi (Eds), Pearson Longman, Auckland, 2004.

They were unshakable in their belief that the survival of the sport depended on continued and increased exposure on television, and were realistic enough to recognise that the sport itself had to make changes making it more attractive the broadcaster.⁵⁸

6.32 Netball's evolution in New Zealand, particularly since its ratings success in 1999, have not put netball on the same footing as the major male sporting codes, such as rugby union. However, the high ratings, higher player pay and higher profile of the sport are clear, and appear clearly related to the capacity to maintain good quality live broadcasts on national television.⁵⁹

6.33 The media successes of some sportswomen, some events, and some sports – such as netball in New Zealand – show that better coverage is possible. The question is how it can be achieved.

Improving coverage of women's sport: the options

6.34 The committee agrees with many witnesses, that media coverage of women's sport is poor and improving only extremely slowly. It notes the concerns of Ms Mickan, that given the great successes of women in sport in recent years, there is even scope for the coverage to deteriorate from current already low levels.⁶⁰ Indeed, the data from the *An Illusory Image* report and the Premier's Council of South Australia suggests that print media coverage may have already declined from 1996 to the present day.

6.35 Improving media coverage is also important because it is inextricably linked to other issues in women's sport. It is tied into issues of the financing of women's sport, which in turn affects the capacity of sports to be professional, the availability of female role models the encouragement women get to participate, the quality of venues available, and so on.

6.36 The committee recognises that governments are already doing things that help ensure better media coverage of sport. First, the charter of the ABC requires it to 'broadcasting programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community'⁶¹ and in responding to this, it broadcasts significant amounts of women's sport. Both women's bowls and netball are benefiting from the broadcast of national and international games on ABC channels, as are other sports played by women.

58 Margaret Henley, *Submission 80*, p. 1.

59 Margaret Henley, *Submission 80*; TVNZ – TV One, *Submission 81*; ANPA / AWU, *Submission 62*.

60 Ms Mickan, SA Premier's Council for Women, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 4 August 2006, p. 51. See also Mrs Crosswhite, AWRA, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 3 August 2006, p. 73.

61 ABC, *Submission 59*, p. 1.

6.37 Second, the government is planning for the future of television to include multichannelling (already undertaken by the ABC), which will ensure more television channels are available to viewers. As these channels become available, their owners will be looking for new content. This will create new opportunities for sports that currently may be being 'crowded out' by the many existing, well-funded men's sports.

6.38 Third, government is supporting leadership and development activities in sports organisations, through its Sport Leadership Grants for Women, as well as having run education programs to assist women's sports in dealing with the media.⁶²

6.39 Nevertheless, the committee accepts that more can and should be done to promote women's sport in the media, and to give women a greater chance of being professional sportspeople.

Better coverage through growth in media

6.40 There may be scope for the coverage of women's sport to be improved through the increasing availability of additional channels, both through subscription television and through multichanneling, which is set to be introduced progressively in the next three years.⁶³ The ABC for example notes that:

If the multichannel genre restrictions are lifted later this year, as planned, ABC2 will be able to broadcast international women's sporting events, including games between Australia and New Zealand and potentially the World Cup qualifier.⁶⁴

6.41 It is true that subscription television sports channels, such as Fox Sports 1 and 2, have limited reach. Less than a quarter of households have subscription television,⁶⁵ and not all of those would have sports channels. Furthermore, the ratings of subscription sports channels are dwarfed by those of the main free-to-air broadcasters.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, recent figures from the ABC do demonstrate that increased coverage of women's sport is one possible outcome from the availability of extra channels (see Table 6.1, above).

62 ASC, *Submission 30*, pp 13, 22.

63 Senator the Hon Helen Coonan, Media Release, 'New Media Framework for Australia', 13 July 2006, http://www.minister.dcita.gov.au/media/media_releases/new_media_framework_for_australia, accessed August 2006.

64 ABC, *Submission 59*, p. 5.

65 Australian Subscription Television & Radio Association (ASTRA), *Submission 72*, p. 2.

66 See ratings data produced by OzTam, <http://www.oztam.com.au/archives.aspx?Year=2005>, accessed August 2006.

Better coverage through regulating broadcast media

6.42 Media content regulation for television broadcasting was frequently suggested to this committee.⁶⁷ This possibility was tentatively examined by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs in 1992. That committee recommended that

the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal inquire into whether there is an 'adequate and comprehensive coverage' of women in sport in the media and consider whether there is a need to establish a program standard for the coverage of women in sport.⁶⁸

6.43 The government responded indicating it supported this in principle, and agreed to pass the recommendation on to the then newly created Australian Broadcasting Authority.⁶⁹ At around the same time, the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal released a study of people's perceptions of television. This study showed that, when it came to sport, there was significant support for the broadcast of more women's sport.⁷⁰ However, this was also a period when the regulation of programming was increasingly being devolved to broadcasters, and it is not clear that this issue was taken further by any party.

6.44 Content regulation requiring certain amounts of women's sport to be broadcast could be similar in nature to some other content regulation already in place. The Commercial Television Code of Practice already regulates content in a number of ways, such as the placement and timing of commercials, the nature of news and current affairs coverage, and what sort of programs can be shown at what time with respect to program classification. Australian content is regulated through the Broadcasting Services (Australian Content) Standard 2005, which is a legislative instrument under the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*.⁷¹ It requires minimum levels of Australian content in general, but also regulates some types of content, and the times in which it must be broadcast.

67 For example, Mrs Janice Crosswhite, *Submission 6*; Women in Sport Media Group, *Submission 16*, Ms Mitchell, Women in Sport Media Group, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 2 August 2006, p. 46; Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (ACHPER), *Submission 17*; Womensport & Recreation NSW, *Submission 20*; Australian Womensport & Recreation Association, *Submission 71*.

68 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, *Half Way to Equal*, April 1992, p. 146.

69 Government response to 'Halfway to Equal' by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, presented by the Hon. Paul Keating Prime Minister and the Hon. Wendy Fatin, Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women, 17 December 2002, p. 63.

70 Stephen Nugent, Linda Sheldon, Kate Aisbett, Cherie Harkness and Nick Herd, *What we want from our TVs*, Australian Broadcasting Tribunal Monograph Series, No. 4, 1992.

71 <http://www.acma.gov.au/acmainterwr/aba/tv/content/documents/broadcasting%20svces%20-%20australian%20content%20standard%202005.pdf>, accessed August 2006.

6.45 Journalist Greg Baum had raised the concern that requiring minimum coverage could encourage people to report any sport, however obscure, just to meet the quota.⁷² This is highly unlikely to be a problem. Whatever the regulatory requirements, media outlets will work to maximise their profits, which in broadcasting will mean ensuring audiences are as large as possible. One of the strengths of a quota system in fact could be in harnessing the skills and ambition of broadcasters toward making the coverage as good as possible, simply because they will be disadvantaged commercially if they fail.

6.46 Nevertheless, some witnesses had misgivings about regulation that required some sport broadcasting to be women's sport. The WA Sports Federation opposed broadcasting regulation:

There should be no regulation of the media regarding what is published or produced re sport coverage. Public support for a sport or event will determine what the media covers. If increased media coverage of women's sport, or any activity for that matter, is a priority for government then government should do more by way of education, promotion and implementation of support systems to increase the public interest.⁷³

6.47 It is also clear that implementing such regulation would be difficult, as was acknowledged by some of its supporters.⁷⁴ This would be a regulatory balancing act that would be hard to get right, and easy to get wrong. Furthermore, it would be hard to implement a level regulatory playing field between the commercial broadcasters, the ABC, SBS and the subscription services, and probably impossible to extend it across television, radio and print journalism. There are also risks to women's sports if they are dragged into broadcasting before they are ready, and put on show purely because regulations required it. Requiring television channels to broadcast women's sport might result in them just increasing the use of overseas content. Australian television could end up with more women's sport, but less Australian sport, with no benefits for Australian women players. In any case, netball in New Zealand has demonstrated that it is possible to achieve significant media coverage without it being forced by heavy-handed regulation.

6.48 The committee also believes that broadcasting is changing, particularly through the introduction of multichanneling, and that now might not be a good time to introduce new content regulation. To give just one example, it is possible that forcing some existing free-to-air channels to host women's sport broadcasting might undermine the ability of some subscription television channels and production companies to forge links with sporting organisations to produce women's sporting competitions for niche markets. If this happened, Australia could end up with reluctant free-to-air broadcasters grudgingly doing a second-rate job of producing some

72 Greg Baum, 'Count me out: women must earn coverage', *The Age*, 5 August 2006, p. 6 (sport).

73 WA Sports Federation, *Submission 37*, p. 3.

74 Ms Buckley, FFA, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 2 August 2006, p. 15.

women's sport, instead of enthusiastic partnerships between sport and media working to bring first-rate sports productions to audiences through digital channels or pay television. Both approaches might result in a certain number of hours of women's sport being broadcast, but enthusiastic partnerships are likely to be more sustainable. While the committee would like to see more coverage of women's sport, it is not convinced that regulation is the right approach to achieving it.

Better coverage through partnerships of sporting and media organisations

6.49 Success in creating a nationally broadcast league competition is likely to require the backing of a national sporting organisation, a broadcaster, and probably both. Broadcast of the WNBA in the USA is strongly backed by the National Basketball Association. While still struggling to achieve large audiences, the WNBA is growing and appears entrenched as a broadcast sport, with games on both free-to-air and subscription television.⁷⁵ A similar example at the other end of the scale is that of lawn bowls in Australia, where equal coverage of women's bowls on the ABC was achieved by Bowls Australia taking a stand and making that a condition of the broadcast deal.⁷⁶

6.50 A contrasting situation can be seen in the international organisation for football, Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), and its limited support for the women's game. FFA pointed out that when a men's team qualifies for the World Cup and makes the second round, as Australia recently did, it receives 9.5 million Swiss francs from FIFA. A women's team with a similar achievement receives nothing. Given how widespread and popular the women's game is internationally, this is a disappointing approach for FIFA to take. If even well-resourced sporting organisations such as FIFA will not back their women's codes, then they will find it very difficult to develop. This is reflected in the widespread disappointment expressed about poor coverage of the Matildas' success in qualifying for the women's World Cup.

6.51 Sporting organisations frequently lack the resources to try something new or to provide any significant funding that would help achieve media coverage. Some are stretched to put on a national league, even though they have teams and programs in every state. However there was confidence that they could make progress if the resources were there.⁷⁷

6.52 The committee acknowledges the concluding remarks of the Women in Sport Media Group when it urged this inquiry:

75 Thomas Heath, 'A matter of value instead of profit', *Washington Post*, 12 July 2006, p. E01.

76 Bowls Australia, *Submission 70*.

77 Ms Buckley, FFA, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 2 August 2006, p. 19.

to bring the benefits of regular increased media coverage on women's sport to the fore in its report and to recommend the adoption of strategies that will change the media scene for women in sport.⁷⁸

6.53 The committee also notes the ASC's view, that '[i]f Government were to increase investment in womens sport then opportunities to broadcast women's events would be a worthwhile investment'.⁷⁹ The committee believes this is an area in which the government can have a constructive influence.

Recommendation 15

6.54 The committee recommends that the Australian Government provide financial support, to be administered by the Australian Sports Commission, for initiatives that provide specific opportunities for greater ongoing coverage of women's sport. The committee believes the ASC should administer funding of up to \$3 million per annum, and that the initiative be reviewed after approximately three years.

6.55 One model for this support could involve sporting organisations forming partnerships with broadcasters, and then approaching the ASC with proposals. The ASC would provide support to partnerships that result in agreed media coverage outcomes.

The Paralympics

6.56 The committee received a submission from the Australian Paralympic Committee (APC), regarding scope for coverage of the forthcoming Paralympic events in Beijing in 2008. Australia has a significant Paralympic team, and is currently preparing for the Beijing Games.

6.57 Media coverage of the Paralympic Games in Athens cost the APC over \$380 000, and the APC indicated that '[n]o network would cover disabled sport without a direct payment to assist in the production and associated costs'.⁸⁰

6.58 The committee recognises the concerns expressed by Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA), that women with disabilities must overcome both gender and disability barriers in seeking to participate in sporting or recreational activities.⁸¹ This difficulty in participating and training may be reflected in the fact that women form a slightly smaller proportion of the Paralympic team compared to the Olympic team (39 per cent of Paralympic athletes versus 43 per cent of Olympic athletes at Athens in 2004). The committee notes that the APC recently ran a National Talent Search, and that one third of the 604 athletes identified in that process were

78 *Submission 16*, p. 3.

79 *ASC, Submission 30*, p. 22.

80 *APC, Submission 77*, p. 2.

81 Ms Salthouse, WWDA, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 4 August 2006, p. 3.

women, highlighting the need to engage more women with disabilities in sporting activities.

6.59 Making sport visible, and holding up inspiring sporting role models, are important parts of the process of encouraging participation, and the committee believes that televising good quality coverage of the Paralympics would be a positive step. This would be a suitable example of a situation where a sporting organisation and a broadcaster could partner, and in that context the government could provide support.

Recommendation 16

6.60 The committee recommends that the government consider allocating up to \$1 million to the Australian Paralympic Committee to assist with production and associated costs of televised coverage of the forthcoming Paralympics, and that the arrangement stipulate that a condition of accessing this funding be that there be balanced coverage of male and female athletes.

Better coverage through enhanced skills and commitment

6.61 As well as making sufficient commitments to women's teams and competitions, improvements can also be achieved in media awareness. This is an area in which the committee felt media organisations and sporting organisations all bear some responsibilities. As the Women in Sport Media Group said:

Our group acknowledges that a more consistent effort needs to be made by the sports administrators themselves and we have taken steps to introduce strategies for workshops and so on, as mentioned in our submission. But we are also cognisant of the fact that editorial staff and producers have the say about scheduling and programming. They might make deals with certain parties and they are the ones to decide that one event rates more highly than another, and it is sometimes very hard to get through that.⁸²

6.62 The development of good relationships between media and sport has been a strong theme in past and current inquiries.⁸³ Premier Media Group, who produce pay-TV sports, commented that:

We see our relationship with the sports administrations and the sports as a partnership, and the better organised they are and the more professionally organised the better outcomes are achieved for them and for us.⁸⁴

6.63 The committee also heard that media awareness of women's sport needs to be raised. One suggestion was a:

82 Ms Mitchell, WWDA, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 2 August 2006, p. 46.

83 Murray Phillips, *An Illusory Image: A Report on the Media Coverage and Portrayal of Women's Sport in Australia*, Australian Sports Commission, Canberra, 1996; Dr Lynn Embrey, *Submission 15*; Mrs Tullberg, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 3 August 2006, pp 67–69.

84 Mr Malone, Premier Media Group, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 2 August 2006.

summit of some of these key people in the media and looking at how they make policies about scheduling and yet are not flexible enough to fit in a Matildas' exciting final game or something like that, and just to look at some of those avenues and maybe open their eyes to what I say are so many stories and things out there. Once the media get a hold of them and lap them up, the audiences would follow.⁸⁵

Recommendation 17

6.64 The committee recommends that the Australian Government provide financial support, to be administered by the Australian Sports Commission, for the training of athletes and sports administrators to better utilise media opportunities.

6.65 Increasing the level of training and skills in organisations promoting women's sport will help improve media coverage. However it will only be effective if NSOs are serious about backing their women's competitions with resources and commitment. The committee saw varying degrees of commitment amongst these groups and calls on them to ensure they are providing appropriate backing for women's leagues.

6.66 News and sport media organisations also need to employ female professionals and make commitments to reporting newsworthy women's sport. Given the extraordinarily low levels of reporting by some media outlets, this is likely to involve them reconsidering their idea of what constitutes 'newsworthy'. This need for change within media organisations was widely recognised, not only by women's sport individuals and organisations, but mainstream sporting groups such as the Professional Golfers Association.⁸⁶

Concluding remarks

6.67 The committee is disappointed at the continuing poor coverage of women's sport by all media. It believes that if the recommendations in this report are implemented by the government, sport and recreation organisations, and media outlets they will make a significant contribution to improving the media profile of women's sports. However, it also acknowledges that improvements in media coverage of women's sport have been slow in the past. If the situation has not improved by 2010 in response to this report, it suggests that the Senate refer the issue back to the committee for further review. To track progress, the committee suggests that the ASC undertake an annual survey of coverage of women's sports.

85 Ms Mitchell, Women in Sport Media Group, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 2 August 2006, p. 51.

86 Professional Golfers Association, *Submission 52*, section 4.3.

Recommendation 18

6.68 The committee recommends that the government fund the Australian Sports Commission to replicate in 2008–09 the surveys and analysis performed in the 1996 report *An Illusory Image*.

Senator Andrew Bartlett
Chair

