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# How do Sportswomen Perceive the Way they are Treated in the Media?

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## Abstract

This study sets out to examine how elite sportswomen perceive the way that their professional careers and women's sports in general are portrayed in the media. These athletes want to debunk gender stereotypes and have managed to cross barriers and reach the summit in their respective sports. The study aims to understand and interpret a specific social reality, namely that of elite sportswomen, by identifying the meaning or the significance that they attach to media representation of the sport, expressing how their sports careers and identity as athletes were built and how they have been treated by the press. Nineteen interviews and three focus groups were conducted with elite sportswomen. The results show that elite sportswomen believe they are treated differently to men and that they feel invisible and judged through stereotypes linked to beauty, lack of skill or lack of interest in their competitions. They denounce the fact that even their accomplishments are less visible than their male colleagues' defeats. The conclusions underscore the feeling among sportswomen that there is an urgent need for journalistic practices to change in order for them to cease feeling invisible, ignored, objectified and be able to become role models for young girls.

**Keywords:** media, elite athletes, gender, invisibility and media violence

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## Introduction

This study examines the different factors that contribute to shaping a stereotyped media image of women, as identified by sportswomen themselves. The studies reviewed clearly show how the way women are depicted in the media leads to a new kind of gender violence, namely media violence (Alfaro et al., 2011; Angulo, 2007; Aspic-Comunicación, 2016; Buchón et al., 2017; Irazusta et al., 2010; Robles, 2012; Sainz-de-Baranda, 2013). This is a visual kind of violence which syncretises different ways of depicting woman as an object of desire, omitted, the passive subject of current policies, or with a stereotyped image of women as victims or guardians of the home, thus shaping the image of women today, configuring one that is far removed from what laws on equality seek to promote.

Legislation on media violence is contained in the Argentinean Law 26485, enacted in April 2009 on the prevention, penalisation and eradication of violence against women, which attempts to eliminate discrimination between women and men in all walks of life, particularly asserting women's right to a violence-free life. This law refers to the term 'media violence' and defines it as one of the manifestations of symbolic violence, meaning the publication of stereotyped images through any medium. This law alludes to slander, offensive remarks, discrimination, humiliation or attacks against the dignity of women, "as well as the use of women, female adolescents and girls in pornographic messages and images, legitimising unequal treatment" (Law 26485, 2009, art. 4). Women are objectified "when the female body is viewed as a consumable object denied subjectivity, will and action, and when male sexuality based on domination and symbolic violence is fostered" (Chaher, 2012, p. 1707). Symbolic violence reproduces domination and inequality by naturalising women's subordination in society and is conveyed subtly through the media (Bourdieu, 2000; Gabarra, 2011).

It could be argued that these sexist microaggressions are also seen in university studies (Corsi, 1995; Serra Payeras et al., 2019). The goal of these practices of male domination is to retain mastery over women and to thwart women's increasing empowerment. They are effective and reduce women's autonomy, go unnoticed and confirm the social order (Bosh & Ferrer, 2002; De-Miguel, 2015). This media violence fulfils the purpose of reinforcing and reproducing the system of sexual inequality, subduing women; thus, Osborne (2009, p. 57) states that "inequality entails violence". Furthermore, the threat of violence is conveyed in films and television, as well as in jokes and flirtatious remarks.

The media have become one of the major barriers to real change; they have become the guardians of the patriarchy since "the media currently perpetuate sexual stereotypes" (Varela, 2013, p. 305). They offer elements on which the perception of reality is built; they provide models; they normalise behavioural patterns; and they grant status to people and institutions, thus legitimising the existing social order (Marín & Ganzabal, 2011; Rubio, 2009).

Sportswomen should be the models whom school-girls can look up to through the media. However, the way the media treat women tends to be limited by gender stereotypes and does not always match reality. The media reflect a biased reality; they only report on a very small percentage of female sports, thus serving to legitimise men's status quo (Funkhouser, 1973).

The lack of a female presence makes women invisible; absence leads to oblivion and ignorance; what is not seen cannot be appreciated; what does not appear in the press does not actually happen, it does not exist (López, 2005). Sports news revolves around men and forgets women (Alfaro et al., 2011), relegating them to the category of second-class citizens. The massive dissemination of non-egalitarian images influences women's and men's expectations, helping to maintain gender inequalities and build girls' identities. The European Journalism Code of Ethics, in force for the last 25 years, says that:

The media can lower the gap that exists in sports by offering news on women on a par with their worth and merit. Giving them more visibility will give girls, female adolescents and women of any age the chance to have sports role models in whom they can see themselves reflected. (Núñez, 1993, p. 1)

The media present female athletes with more physical appeal than athletic accomplishments (Fink & Kensicki, 2002); they are portrayed as sexual objects and as mothers or wives. Rarely in the images and texts are they portrayed as active, positive actors; they appear more as passive agents in the shadow of men, or as victims of misfortune (Marín & Ganzabal, 2011).

The digital world has emerged as an alternative. The presence of women online has increased enormously in recent years (Robles, 2012). There is greater equality in the electronic media, which have been crucial in sharing sports practised by women. Thanks to the social media, the dissemination of female sports has increased, and the number of specific websites continues to grow. It is important to reflect a positive, diversified image of athletes

in the media, devoid of gender stereotypes and portraying them as models of personal, professional and social success, because that will be the mirror in which school-girls see themselves reflected (Angulo, 2007; Vega & Ábalos, 2016). This study seeks to give sportswomen a voice and to inquire into the image that they perceive in the media, more specifically:

- To analyse the way they are treated in the press: whether they perceive sexism or gender stereotypes.
- To understand the power of media information, whether it has conditioned their lives as elite sportswomen.

## Methodology

This study was approached from a qualitative perspective, in which the researcher immerses themselves in the context and seeks to go beyond merely understanding the facts. Only by understanding the processes and the meanings can action be taken that helps to understand the changes called for in each social context. Responses were sought in praxis so that the sportswomen could express themselves freely with intentional, methodical actions (Barbour, 2013; Flick, 2014). Similarly, we sought to promote processes of reflection around sexism and symbolic violence to gain awareness of sportswomen's perceptions of the media.

## Participants and information-collection instruments

Nineteen in-depth interviews with elite sportswomen and three focus groups were held. The athletes interviewed included 7 from Álava, 7 from Guipúzcoa, 4 from Biscay and 1 from Navarre. In terms of sports, 3 were footballers, 3 were pelota players, 2 handball players and one representative from karate, wrestling, curling, track and field, handball, tug-of-war, cycling, triathlon, surfing, car racing, skiing and rowing. They were very successful athletes who participated in elite international competitions in their respective sports and most of them had even competed in the Olympics. Sixteen people in three groups of Basque pelota, rowing and football, respectively, participated in the focus groups. A total of 33 athletes shared their voice in this study. The purpose of the in-depth interviews was to gain meticulously compared information (Kvale, 2012), in an attempt to understand their perceptions from their own perspective. The focus groups explored any issues that had not emerged in the interviews or checked disparate perceptions of a given fact in order to ascertain

how they justified this disagreement (triangulation), thus generating interaction among the participants (Barbour, 2013). The nature of the research was explained to all the participants, who were asked to sign an informed consent form proposed by the university's Ethics Committee.

## Information analysis procedure

The information collected was analysed using the NVivo11plus text processing programme. An inductive-deductive system of categories or an analytical tool (see Table 1) was created, supported by previous theories located in the literature review and by the information that emerged in the testimonials collected. The information collected was coded and categorised, and hierarchical relationships were established among the different categories. The information was categorised by different researchers, and the matches between both analyses were compared. NVivo allows the number of voices grouped in each category to be tallied to ascertain percentages of occurrence. However, these data have no value without the interpretation of the meanings assigned to each topic. The codes that appear in the parentheses of the voices mean: the first six-digit number *igitnumber* is the date in which it was performed, followed by an indication as to whether the quote is from an interview (I) or focus group (FG), and the number after these letters corresponds to each one of the sportswomen, and were randomly assigned to protect their privacy. After the summaries of each category had been obtained (outlined in Table 1), the categorised information was interrelated and the instruments, informants and observers were triangulated.

## Results

On the issue of how they are treated in the press, the athletes interviewed had opposing stances. While 6.11% said they were treated similar to men, 93.89% thought that women are rendered invisible or only partially visible (see Table 1).

### They believed they were treated the same

Some participants were happy with the way the media treat sportswomen (6.11%), and three of the interviewees had the sensation that the press treated them the same as men. Generally speaking, and although they had been featured in many news items, they did not express an interest in the sports press.

**Table 1***Categorical system of how sportswomen perceive the way they are treated in the media*

| Dimension                                         | Category            | Subcategory        | Resources<br>or no. of interviews | No. of<br>references | %     |       |
|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------|-------|-------|
| Media<br>treatment<br>perceived by<br>sportswomen | Same treatment      |                    | 3                                 | 8                    | 6.11  |       |
|                                                   |                     |                    | 21                                | 123                  | 93.89 |       |
|                                                   | Different treatment | Invisibilization   | 10                                | 16                   | 12.22 |       |
|                                                   |                     | Partial visibility | 19                                | 40                   | 30.53 |       |
|                                                   |                     |                    | By accomplishments                | 12                   | 19    | 14.50 |
|                                                   |                     |                    | By medium                         | 8                    | 10    | 7.63  |
|                                                   |                     |                    | As promotion                      | 4                    | 8     | 6.11  |
|                                                   |                     |                    | Different expectations            | 2                    | 3     | 2.29  |
|                                                   |                     |                    | Disinterest/disinformation        | 4                    | 7     | 5.34  |
|                                                   |                     |                    | Objectification                   | 14                   | 28    | 21.47 |
|                                                   |                     |                    | Stereotypes (beauty, etc.)        | 8                    | 24    | 18.32 |
|                                                   |                     |                    | Empowerment                       | 4                    | 8     | 6.11  |
| Total                                             |                     |                    | 22                                | 131                  | 100   |       |

*Note.* The resource table states how many documents contained some kind of testimonial related to each category (19 of the interviews and 3 of the FGs).

Just like a guy. I have not seen any significant differences that grabbed my attention, which doesn't mean they didn't exist. I seldom look at the news or read sports. (160324\_I5)

I think the treatment is fine, particularly in recent years. (160405\_I9)

However, these opinions were far from the general consensus, many women athletes talked about discrimination by differential treatment, since the press is believed to render women invisible and treat them differently from men. As shown in the categories (Table 1) based on the studies by López (2005), the sportswomen perceived that they were rendered invisible and that when the press did make them visible, it did so either only partly or else objectified them. They were judged on the basis of gender stereotypes. A total of 131 references (or different entries for the same issue) were collected.

### Sportswomen perceived a different treatment

A total of 93.89% of the women interviewed identified sexism in the sports press, although some of the athletes (30.53%) in this group also thought that progress had been made compared to previous years.

#### Perception of invisibility

The perceived media invisibility (12.22%) was voiced by the sportswomen. They believed that they were not treated properly because they were all but absent from sports programming.

How do I think sportswomen are treated in the media? They're just not there, zero visibility (160429\_FG2).

Yes, there's a difference, but for that very reason, because we don't appear, so that is the difference: they don't give us visibility, which means we don't matter to them (160324\_I12).

Some sportswomen mentioned a study by the Directorate of Youth and Sports of the Basque government (Aspic-Comunicación, 2016) which found, in 2013, that only 6.4% of sports news items reported exclusively on women, a figure which had dropped to 5.9% in 2015.

Plus, only yesterday we were saying how we had to give talks saying that fewer than 6% of the sports news items are about female sports (160325\_I1).

The athletes opined that no importance was attached to what they did, or in other words the sports press did not value their work.

I think when they actually write about us we are treated normally, but... it's not impartial, it's not equal, they always detract from what we do. (160406\_E15)

Many elite sportswomen did not appear even when they managed to earn a place on the Olympic team. They said that the sports news was full of male football league matches from lower divisions.

I thought it was horrible that a woman has qualified for the Olympics and it's not in the news, I think that's terrible. Sometimes it is reported, but I found

out about Tania Calvo<sup>1</sup> because I went to the Elite Training Centre and found out about it there. But that's one news item that I should have heard about somewhere, isn't it? (160324\_I5)

They perceived that the information was fragmented, and only a small biased part was shown that did not reflect the real results of sporting events or else focused on negative aspects.

There had been a race before this one, and I was already winning, so I only needed to make the finish line to win the race, but my car stalled and I didn't reach the finish line so I didn't win. The person doing the summaries who sent them to Teledeporte [a television sports programme] hardly mentioned me and only said that my time in the previous round had been better. (160925\_I18)

They said that the sports press spread the prejudice whereby any sport practised by men had a larger audience than those practised by women and that that is one of the arguments they used to justify the invisibility of women.

They think that putting a man on the cover sells more than a woman. Things shouldn't be like that, but for that reason alone we get less space. (160404\_I8)

They stated that this invisibility deprived them of appreciation of their work and effort, as well as their expectations of success and media exposure for their careers. This invisibility prevented them from being role models for future generations.

There are people who have seen us play and they know that we are good, people who, if they want, can do other things. I'm not saying we all have to be professionals, because fronton is tapering off everywhere, but the media should pay more attention, give us exposure, let us be genuine role models. (160429\_FG2)

Some of them mentioned that sportswomen's invisibility was not always intentional, hence it is a reality that they observed from different perspectives.

### ***They perceive partial visibility***

A total of 30.53% of the statements made in the interviews mentioned minor improvements compared to the situation in previous years, although they believed that exposure was scant and insufficient. According to the interviewees, women had to fight twice as hard to get coverage, and when they did make it, it was by dint

of their own merits and victories at the highest level. Yet they had to make do with being second fiddle. They said that some journalists are reluctant to publish some news.

There are lots of great sportswomen! The girls that appear in the press have to be utter machines. They have to perform at 200%. (160429\_FG2)

They said that competitiveness is no longer an exclusively male attribute, since numerous women have overcome this stereotype by taking up elite sports. The statistics from the last Olympics corroborate the parity in the presence of women.

You need only open the newspaper to see that Real Madrid lost, and then on page 40 there's maybe something about women, and there has been more stuff recently because we are also asking them to put everything in. But maybe three years ago *Marca* published absolutely nothing about girls in any sport unless they won something big. I think that it's happening now, slowly but surely. They're starting to report some stuff, although there's no equality or anything resembling it, but hey!, at least they're reporting it! (160324\_I12)

Far from being thankful for the space given to them, empowered women were aware of their right to occupy that space and felt that their accomplishments justified it.

The media don't treat us equally. They were pressurised by our success on television and in the newspapers and have covered us because they had no choice. We women are going to continue to keep on achieving things so they'll be obliged to give us coverage. (160425\_I14)

They said that they had to make do with getting the odd niche in programmes with smaller audiences, but never in the major sportscasts.

If you win the championship you get some minor coverage, but not on the *Telediario* [main TV news programme] and not even in second- or third-tier programmes. I've never appeared on ETB and I don't know how many times I've been world champion. Process that! (160304\_I4)

While their exposure was low in quantitative terms, they also perceived qualitative differences. Men's careers and victories are celebrated and you get recaps of their sporting life, but there seemed to be less interest in reporting on sportswomen's careers.

1. A gold medallist in indoor cycling in London 2012. They are talking about the time she qualified to go to the 2016 Rio Olympics..



It's different. Usually if you begin to read and there is a male skier who has won something, you get his name and whatever, and the his full name, his record. However, if a girl who is the best in the world wins, that's it, no awards, where she's from, not even her full name. I mean, it's just totally different. (160409\_FG1)

They even complained that defeats in men's competitions got more coverage than female victories.

For years we've been hearing about the national team losing, but in the Olympics an important female fixture to make the semi-finals gets screened later (recorded) at 3 o'clock in the morning, even though TVE has 3 channels, and all because a men's team, which had already been knocked out, was playing. (160425\_I14)

Some world-class sportswomen realised that their success stories were taking a back seat to footballers' new looks.

We came back from Brazil with a bronze medal and were the 8<sup>th</sup> news item after Cristiano Ronaldo's new hairdo. (160404\_I8)

As Mireia Belmonte once said: "Fernando Torres's new hair-cut is more important than my gold medal, my world record in the world championship." Seeing these things really guts you. (160404\_I16)

Men's injuries also took priority over news on women's victories in the same sport.

They attach more importance to the fact that Irujo broke his finger than any of us women winning the world championship. (160429\_FG2)

They said that you have to go to the social media and the Internet to get the sports rankings and the accomplishments of most female sports.

I would never know if a female triathlete has won something. I have to look at Twitter or the CSD to find out. I have friends on the national hockey team, and I see their wins, which aren't reported on the TV, but they are on the Internet. (160501\_I17)

In recent years, women have carved a place for themselves on the pages of the sports press, where news had previously been exclusively male-dominated. Some of the sportswomen mentioned this, which they interpret is as recognition of their work. This visibility is different according to the medium.

What are we to the media? Nothing, nothing at all. Some of them are trying. On Info7irratia, Mikel Ibarguren is there, he does a one-hour programme

every Monday on female sports alone. That's cool, and at least he provides some exposure for what we do, he does stuff. But who listens to Info7irratia? Very few people. (160304\_I4)

They mentioned that some media are more likely than others to try to change this widespread situation:

We have ETB, and they eventually get round to showing a bit of female sports. (160429\_FG2)

I'm close to *Diario de Noticias de Álava* and they've made a huge effort to afford more visibility to female sports, and they make a big effort to ensure that both men's and female sports are covered in the sports section. (160405\_I9)

The peak audience slots in the traditional channels seem to be reserved for men's sporting events; the sportswomen said that they had to settle for watching their own matches after the fact and at less popular times. Their competitions were not broadcast in their entirety, and even cartoons were taking time away from sportswomen.

This is happening with Bera-Bera and it was Euskal Telebista, which instead of televising the match at 3:30, when it began, coverage started at 3:55 because Vicki the Viking was on. That's just an example, but come on, I mean... don't put Vicki the Viking on that day because you have a European competition with the only Basque women's handball team. (160404\_I8)

They believe that greater visibility would act like a loudspeaker to promote their sports careers. They said that the men's football league matches had a very efficient advertising system so you didn't have to be over-interested in football to find fixture times. Conversely, they found that women's competitions rarely appeared in the media, making them harder to promote and more difficult for the public to recognise them. The sportswomen complained that advertising was intended solely for men's matches.

No one has a clue, because our matches aren't publicised. You begin to watch sports, I get to pelota and only Olaizola and Irujo are playing; there's no one else. Not even the tiniest clip. Zero. Of if there is, then it'll be male amateur handball players. Let's have the girls' teams in there too, we play all year round! (160319\_I2)

They said that in the past the general public was not familiar with sportswomen and nobody thought there could be top-level women's teams. Nowadays, people know about them because the press has played a key role in disseminating these activities, and this has been

crucial in encouraging girls to take up physical activity and increasing people's interest in female competitions.

I've run up the same training time, I've sweated in the same jerseys, I've given it my all, just like any guy. But what has changed? I think that female sports, at least handball, has hooked people when it's been televised. I think that the media helps in this regard. (160404\_I18)

The public's ignorance of female sport and competitions prevented them from watching matches or keeping up with competitions. Society did not have the same expectations of success for women and men. They complained that some sectors of the sports press celebrated the victories of new up-and-coming male athletes more than those of consolidated sportswomen.

They don't get any recognition, there is no impact. For instance, the gymnast Carolina Rodríguez de León is a really good friend of mine. She just came in sixth in the World Championship. Sixth in a World Championship! It wasn't even reported. If it had been a guy they'd be saying, "The future is here!". (160331\_I13)

Up-and-coming male athletes were treated better than consolidated sportswomen; they were given more visibility in the media, especially the printed press.

### **They noticed a lack of interest in the press, leading to disinformation**

They perceived a lack of interest in the press, referring to a virtually total absence of journalists at their matches and how their competitions are barely covered, plus match reports penned by people who hadn't even been there.

There is nobody in charge of writing our matches up. Oftentimes it's done by the secretary, who was probably watching jai alai, but definitely not our match. (160319\_I2)

They write it up without even having been there, and you say, "But what they're saying isn't even true!". (160319\_I2)

They complained that some journalists go to the archives to retrieve sports reports from the past instead of actually going to the matches to get first-hand knowledge.

Sometimes we have read articles published by Gara about the Basque Country tug-of-war championship, I think they come out on Tuesdays or Thursdays, I don't exactly remember: anyway, you read it and think, "My God! This is from last year!". Having

said that, when they do actually write something they do it well (160323\_I19).

Finally, some of them had had to work as impromptu journalists in view of the scant interest sparked by their sports.

### **Objectification**

Both sexes were the object of comments of all kinds, although the sportswomen perceived nuances in these comments that went beyond the realms of sport. The women interviewed stated that sexism was such an entrenched part of sports that it even reached sports regulations. Women's uniforms in some sports were controversial.

In beach volleyball, the bikini bottoms worn by the female national team are tiny, and yet many men are shocked to see girls playing in a hijab. Why do they have to wear these bottoms, I mean, can't they play in shorts? (160409\_FG1).

They thought that instead of dignifying sportswomen's work, some journalists objectified them, using their bodies to lure readers, while the media echo of their victories paled into insignificance.

Sometimes they do give girls coverage, but using their body more than their actual victories (160331\_I13).

They said that some media even omitted the actual sports information to focus exclusively on the female athlete's physique.

It's worrying that the best-selling sports newspaper is one of the most sensationalistic. And then there's the TV, the gender perspective is the first thing they need to work on, and I hope to make some noise in this regard. I don't care if they use Garbiñe Muguruza's legs, just like Nadal has used his body. The sad thing is that they only talk about Garbiñe once and even then it is only about her legs (160425\_I14).

They believed that this objectification of women turns them into invisible beings, that journalists are blind to their sports accomplishments. Instead of seeing sports careers, hard work and success, they see only female bodies.

Our image is stereotyped and highly sexualised; we're objects. If you run a Google Images search with "women's football" they all appear posing, half of them in thongs and the other half half-naked. Ultimately, it seems that if you're a woman, if you're an athlete, you need something else for people to actually see you. (160409\_FG1)



This was the reality faced by some sportswomen, encountering genuine difficulties to find a place in the media while coping with objectification at the same time.

### Beauty stereotypes

They perceived that the press treated men and women unequally and focused on stereotypes that placed beauty before athletic accomplishments, pigeonholed women in traditional roles and maintained beauty demands that were not asked of men.

Instead of attaching importance to your sports career, they highlight beauty or something else. If you have kids they might focus on how well-organised you are, not that you are a good mother, and what's more they never ask men about these things. (160409\_FG1)

Moreover, some interviewees said that some comments were very inappropriate.

In tennis, specifically, I've heard comments about skirts more than once, so where is that coming from? What do I care about the skirt or anything like it?! (160324\_I5)

Yeah, Ferrer is all hairy and nobody says a word, do they? (160324\_I5)

The photographs of sportswomen competing were important because they disseminated how they do sports, their work and their accomplishments, but they were not always appropriate.

When Mireia Belmonte won, instead of talking about her career and what a great swimmer she is, they latched onto her fingernails, and there are tons of news items like that. (160409\_FG1)

Most sportswomen felt heavily discriminated against because when men were discussed the focus was on their accomplishments, yet women were treated in a stereotyped fashion, closely associated with beauty and work traditionally assigned to women.

### Sportswomen's anger

It should come as no surprise that many of the athletes were deeply angry and disappointed with the media and even refused to give interviews. They believed that they occupied a minimal place in the media, whereas men's sports, especially football, virtually monopolised the media in terms of space and time. They had to settle for tiny niches where their accomplishments were mentioned in passing, bereft of any detail.

But the newspaper dedicates two or three pages to the Alavés match and then publishes a news snippet in the top right hand corner, about five centimetres square about a sportswoman who won some Spanish championship. Come on! Alavés is in the Second B class. It really infuriates me. When I pick up the newspaper, I don't even read the sports section, I just skip it. (160406\_I15)

They said that they had good reason to be angry in view of the meagre coverage of their careers in the media. Complaints were also levelled at the federations, since the sportswomen felt they had no institutional support, although things did change if they won Olympic medals.

I used to be totally unknown, and was actually fifth in Beijing in 2008, which is an Olympic Diploma. And I moved up a level in London where I was placed third, and all of a sudden I'm like a God! And I said, "No way can I be a nobody when I'm ranked fifth and amazing when I come in third. The media build us up or knock us down. You can't do that to us!" So whenever someone comes in fifth, I say, "Jeez, they are so cruel!" (160319\_I6)

The sportswomen said that being forgotten is preferable to what some new sportswomen have to put up with, exposed to an extremely demanding press that exhibits a total lack of consideration in its comments about new athletes.

There was another time when I was playing in a major "kutxa" tournament in Guipúzcoa against another girl who was basically debuting at this level and was a bundle of nerves and just went off her game. She was almost destroyed by the comments they wrote; I mean she had only just begun and almost gave it all up. This makes me angry; we get virtually no exposure, but when we do it's all bad. Sometimes no publicity would be better! (160319\_I2)

They referred to different ways of being made to feel invisible, some more subtle than others. The press seemed to be familiar with all of them, and in this attempt to disparage sportswomen they would broadcast lower-level women's competitions to try to somehow justify the lack of support for female sports.

Female sports are already somewhat marginalised, and if on top of that the matches they show are low-level, it's adding insult to injury. Imagine if that happened with rhythmic gymnastics, if there was a group of guys who were really awful and we all laughed at them. (160429\_FG2)

Many of the sportswomen interviewed mentioned the need for quotas to at least force the public media to broadcast a certain percentage of female sports on the news. Some went even further and said that it should be regulated by law.

Televisión Española receives public money, so maybe there needs to be a minimum quota. I'm not saying it has to be 50-50, but maybe there should be a minimum, like 20% or 30% of the sports they report on have to be female sports. The media should talk about the athletes who are successful. In Spain, there are extremely successful female sportswomen. Televisión Española depends heavily on the Spanish government, ETB depends on the Basque government. It always depends on who the sports director is, and I think this should be regulated by law. (160325\_I11)

Some sportswomen felt unprotected by their own federations, which did not even attend their important matches. This accumulation of situations caused them to feel indignant, and they began to call for a more equitable sports press, even mentioning the need for laws in this regard.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Media violence begins with invisibility. The media, as a powerful communication tool, transmit ideology, hence 93.89% of the sportswomen feel that they are not represented in the media, since they state that their accomplishments are not reported, and that at times negative or superfluous aspects that have nothing to do with their accomplishments are overstated. Similar statements have been reported in Alfaro et al. (2011), Irazusta et al. (2010) and Serra Payeras, et al. (2019). Therefore, and related to the first objective, they perceive that the press is clearly sexist and riddled with prejudices and gender stereotypes. Perhaps the 6.11% of women who are satisfied with the way the press treats them pertain to the statistics from the research by the Aspic-Comunicación (2016) consultancy firm, according to which women appear in 5.9% of broadcasts, although this could also be due to their lack of awareness or the fact that they engage in sports which in media terms are so minority that any coverage is perceived as an accomplishment. It is essential to eliminate sexist stereotypes, since sports are based on an unequal relationship of power between men and women, and maintaining current practices merely perpetuates the imbalance between them (Varela, 2013). Sportswomen believe that they have to contend with sexist microaggressions, since the non-sports aspects of men run up more media space than women's accomplishments (Bosch & Ferrer, 2002; Corsi, 1995; De-Miguel, 2015).

The majority of the interviewees perceive invisibility and find different reasons for it, since the expectations of success for women and men are different. They believe that this sexism in the press conditions their promotion as athletes, since up-and-coming male athletes are promoted more than professional sportswomen with accomplishments.

The interviewees state their opposition to certain prejudices bandied by the press, which say that female sports generate lower expectations. This has conditioned their sports lives, because they say that they could generate just as many or greater expectations if they were better known. Given this phenomenon, Bourdieu (2000) states that this tends to be yet another one of the manifestations of naturalisation, an aspect also discussed by Sainz-de-Baranda (2013) and Vega and Ábalos (2016).

Thus, with regard to the extent to which it affects their lives and choices (second objective), they believe that the invisibility of women's sports careers prevents them from being role models for school girls who have no mirror in which to regard themselves. They have insufficient exposure, and they are indignant that their accomplishments are less valued, which keeps women in a situation of inferiority, as denounced by Osborne (2009). This situation is further aggravated by the fact that they feel that their sports careers are not given the importance they deserve, their competitions are neither promoted nor valued, and this is important since, as Rubio (2009) asserts, the media normalise the behavioural patterns, models and norms that maintain the social order. This has even led some of them to go so far as to give up sport altogether.

As a general conclusion, we can assert that the sportswomen interviewed perceive that the press in general does not report female sports properly, and studies like the one by Guerrero and Núñez (2002) indicate that only a minority of the news media reports on women with any degree of dignity, since the vast majority of sports news items featuring women are markedly sexist. However, on the other hand, they feel objectified, since the press values their bodies more than their accomplishments, and this turns into anger when they perceive the extent of the scorn, when they are given less coverage than men in lower-ranking levels of sport, when they receive no support from their federations and because they think the press *makes* and *unmakes* them, makes them present or absent, the target of media violence (Buchón et al., 2017; Chaheer, 2012; Gabarra, 2011; Sainz-de-Baranda, 2013). For myriad reasons, they suggest setting quotas as a solution to this social problem which afflicts not only women, but society at large as well.

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