

Prof.: Young girls lose from lack of female athletes on TV news reports

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A Purdue University professor encourages parents, teachers and coaches to engage young girls in athletics because it's not likely they are going to find inspiration on the nightly news.

"If girls aren't seeing other girls or women playing sports, then it reduces their ability to imagine themselves as athletes, and that might affect their participation in sports," says Cheryl Cooky (pronounced Cookie), an assistant professor of health and [kinesiology](#) and women's studies who studies the sociology of sport. "We know there are a lot of positive outcomes for girls who participate in athletics. It boosts their self-esteem and confidence, and they do better in school, are less likely to become pregnant as teenagers and are less likely to drink or abuse drugs."

Cooky teamed with Michael A. Messner, professor of sociology and gender studies at the University of Southern California, to study how men's and women's sports are covered by television news. The report, "Gender in Televised Sports: News and Highlights Shows, 1989-2009," was released by the University of Southern California earlier this week and is available at www.usc.edu/dept/cfr/html/home.htm . The researchers found that news coverage devoted to sports focused on women only 1.6 percent of the time in 2009, and this is down from 6.3 percent in 2004. Men's sports constituted more than 96 percent of the sports news coverage in 2009, and the remaining 2.1 percent was gender neutral.

"We need to be aware of this decline and find other ways to expose

young [female athletes](#) to positive role models," Cooky says. "The good news is that we continue to see a decline in disrespectful or insulting treatment of women as compared to previous years. However, we are not sure if that decline is because there is less coverage of women's sports or an improvement in coverage. We would like to see more respectful reporting, such as ESPN SportsCenter's features of female athletes during Women's History Month, more frequently."

Another trend in coverage is the focus on controversial issues in women's sports, such as when athletes get into fights on the court or the field.

"These events receive a lot of attention because they really challenge the way we think about [girls](#) and women in our society," Cooky says. "Yes, when men fight it makes the highlight reel too, but our concern is that women's coverage is mostly limited to this type of coverage. Rarely do we see [news](#) highlights of women actually playing [sports](#). At the same time, the other common way women are portrayed is in the role of girlfriend, wife or mother. Instead we'd rather see coverage of that female athlete competing on the volleyball or tennis court."

Provided by Purdue University

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