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COMMENTARY

Invisible Women

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Abstract

In this opinion piece, Shirley Randell reflects on her personal experiences of the invisibility of women – older women and women in sport. She gives examples of how media reporting and agenda setting can minimise the involvement and achievements of women, rendering them invisible or absent.

Keywords

Women Alternative facts, Sport, Older women

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST Professor Randell is a member of the editorial board of the journal. She has had no part in the review of this submission.. **FUNDING** The piece was produced without external funding.

Introduction

I am becoming more conscious every year of the invisibility of women in a range of spheres, not because women are absent but because their participation is not reported equally with that of men or not reported at all. This paper outlines some of my experiences of issues relating to older women and to women in sport.

Older Women

Let me begin with the invisibility of older women. The Australian Centre for Leadership for Women has published a 2017 report titled *Unique Leadership of Minority Women*¹. The report highlights discrimination being experienced by older women and was strongly supported by the National Older Women's Network Australia (OWNA), which speaks out about the 'endemic, consistent and appalling discrimination' against mature aged women. They point particularly to workplace discrimination where educated and capable women who have held senior positions throughout their working careers and could bring considerable experience to leadership roles are continuously overlooked due to their age. Aloma Fennell, National President, OWNA states that 'Older women are simply not on the radar of our society and try as we do in all of our advocacy work we get little attention'. She comments that not one of 40 organisations attending two 2017 National Women's Alliances conferences apart from her own mentioned older women². When I listened to politicians speaking to the recent National Alliance for Economic Security for Women meetings, not one of them, including the Minister for Women, mentioned older women. Even the gender aware and gender equality advocate Women's Agenda published photographs of a panel of judges for assessing the nominations for its 2017 Leadership Awards and can barely claim to include older women³. We have to continuously fight to be visible, represented and heard.

Women in sport

Let me now come to a younger generation. Given my interest in my children's participation in rowing I have been aware of the invisibility of women in sport for decades and this has been reinforced by my recent appointment as Ambassador for the Women's International Cricket League⁴ and FairBreak⁵. In the 1980s I attended award days when four of my children were winning Australian national rowing events and my sons brought home large permanent trophies much bigger than the size of their sisters' cups. The men's rowing achievements were recognised in the media far more frequently than women's. It has taken many years for local, national and international sports associations, whose managing boards and committees have been predominantly composed of men, to recognise equally the talents of women. It is only in 2017 that my daughter is paid equally with the male Australian rowing senior coaches. Australian women's cricket, soccer, netball and rugby 7s teams are achieving world success ahead of men's national teams but even now are hardly visible in the

¹ Australian Centre for Leadership for Women, *Unique Leadership of Minority Women*, ACLW, 2017

² Fennell, Aloma, email correspondence, 12 June 2017 .

³ Women's Agenda, <http://womensleadershipawards.com.au/>

⁴ <http://www.wicl.org/>

⁵ <https://fairbreak.net/>

sports pages of Australian newspapers, radio and television sports news. For example, the Australian women's soccer team is ranked eighth in the world, while the men's team is ranked 50th. The Australian Women's Cricket Team is currently ranked number one in the world across all three forms of the game and our female cricketers are among the very best sportspeople Australia has ever produced. They have won six of the ten World Cup titles and more than 87 per cent of the matches contested. Until very recently these teams were almost completely invisible in the daily sports coverage that concentrated solely on men's games.

Sporting events masking erosion of women's rights

Australia's, and the world's, fascination with sporting events can sometimes overshadow examples of discrimination against women in the places those events are held. My son coached an Australian male rowing team at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil. News media made me aware of the security issues. My concern about safety was reinforced when two young men with knives held up my son and a fellow coach on the street on the second day of his visit to Rio de Janeiro. I had read about the risks of street violence, the Zika epidemic, and contaminated water in Brazil. This was what we knew of Brazil. It was only later that I came to know about the ongoing but invisible struggle of Brazilian women against the risk of losing their political and economic rights in the face of conservative forces in the country. The world had focussed on what was happening in sport in Brazil, while women were focussed on the silencing of their voices in government and public life, the rollback in human rights, and an administration neglecting the disproportionate effects of the Zika virus on women. Brazil's strong woman president, Dilma Rousseff and her women ministers, who had been leading the movement for gender equality and cooperation among Global South countries, had been stripped of office, and totally replaced by men. According to KK Verdade, Executive Director of ELAS Social Investment Fund⁶, "Women are the face of the resistance right now. When I see these diverse women [young women, black women, women in politics] leading powerful demonstrations in the streets, mobilizing everybody else, and saying 'We can do it! We can do it!'—I really doubt the power of this conservative wave and don't think we can have a backlash in terms of women's and human rights! Because these women are so strong."⁷ Verdade called on women around the world to make visible the deteriorating situation in Brazil for women, and their goal for the 2018 elections to have a feminist, progressive political agenda with women in leadership: "In order to get there, we all need to support the women's movement".

Conclusion

In a world where 'alternative facts' sometimes seem to overshadow well researched reporting, it is increasingly important that women, especially older women, claim and reclaim visibility, recognition and a voice, and continue to advocate for broad-based support for the rights of women.

⁶ <http://www.fundosocialelas.org>

⁷ Global Fund For Women: https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/summer-olympics-2016-brazil-womens-rights/?utm_source=enews-8-18&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=enews