The feminist critique of sport that has been sounded for over three decades concludes that the marginalization and trivialization of female athletes only serves to perpetuate male domination of women. Specifically within the Israeli context, although female athletes are represented in both team and individual sports, and although they have proven themselves in major sporting events, they do not enjoy equal treatment compared with male athletes. This article examines the role of the media in relation to women’s sport and female athletes and offers a more focused discussion of the Israeli case. We argue that the media fulfill important functions regarding women’s image in general, and a particularly crucial role in the context of women in sport. To be sure, the media cannot change the inequality in sport itself, an issue that demands profound and immediate treatment in Israel. However, the media can contribute by sparking a wider initiative toward the promotion of women’s sport and women in sport.

The feminist critique of sport has been sounded for over three decades. Studies published during the 1970s and 1980s explored remarkable gender differences in patterns of athletic socialization and examined whether sport as an institution neutralizes men’s power and privilege over women. They concluded that the marginalization and trivialization of female athletes only serves to perpetuate male domination of women. In the decades that followed, scholars continued to claim that sport, perhaps more than any other institution, perpetuates the myth of male superiority and female inferiority, apparently based on the notion of masculine biological and physiological supremacy. It is clear, however, that over the last decade women have made many advancements in organized competitive and high-performance spectator sports, particularly in the West, and most clearly in the US.¹
What about Israel? In a review entitled “Women’s Sport in Israel,” Roni Darom concludes:

Israeli female athletes are not properly represented in team and individual sports. 42 female athletes from different fields represented Israel in the Olympic Games, in comparison with 174 male athletes. Although they have proven themselves at major sporting events, they do not enjoy equal treatment compared with male athletes. An unsupportive system, lack of appropriate coaches and professionals, lack of financial and social rewards similar to those that are enjoyed by males—all of these factors are highly influential and contribute to the inconsistency from which the careers of top Israeli female athletes suffer.

The study and exploration of the unique aspects of women’s sport are now receiving much more exposure than before, but are still far from being satisfactory. After more than two decades of continuous struggle, tennis player Billie Jean King, the main fighter in America for women’s rights in sport, was able to claim: “You’ve come a long way, baby.” Women’s sport in Israel is still taking the first steps on that long way.

In line with Darom’s conclusions, this article will try to shed some light on the role that the Israeli media (both print and broadcast) play in the relations between women and sport in the last two decades. But first we shall consider the Israeli case within a broader, international context.

Women and Sport

“Solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism based on internationalism, with loyalty as a means, Art as a setting and feminine applause as gratification”—this was the vision for the modern Olympic Games uttered by their founder, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, in the late 1890s. Since then, the world has changed almost beyond recognition. Instead of merely applauding the achievements of others, women now wish to share the spotlight.

In many if not all western countries, men’s participation in sport has traditionally been regarded as a ‘natural’ phenomenon, whereas women’s involvement in this traditionally andocentric arena has often been viewed as anomalous. Women athletes have often encountered forceful opposition and have
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customly had to struggle for recognition and entitlement. In previous centuries, the patriarchal ideology and resultant gender differentiation produced and reproduced in all spheres of society manifested itself, in the realm of organized sport, in vigorous and aggressive practices that worked to reaf-
firm male superiority and masculinity. During the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries, female athletes were excluded or discouraged from participating in a variety of sports, either because teams and programmers did not exist, or because girls were socialized into a “passive, sociable, nurturing and dependent” role that was reinforced by schools, parents, peers and the mass media.

However, alternatives to more traditional notions of the role of women in society have flourished in recent years, emphasizing that females are enhanced as human beings by developing their intellectual and physical abilities. This has encouraged women of all ages actively to pursue their interests in sport, and it has led to the creation of new interests among those who, in the past, would never have thought of playing sport.

Since World War II, for example, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of women participating in the Olympic Games, paralleling the sharp increase in the number of women in the active labor force. The percentage of women athletes increased from about 10% in the 1948 and 1952 Olympics to approximately 33% in 1972. The number of events in which national female delegations participated also increased, from 20% in the 1948 and 1952 Olympics to more than 30% in 1972. During the 1970s, the increase in women’s participation became even more significant, reflecting increased awareness of the positive contribution that sport can make to women’s well-being as well as the development of women’s sports clubs and associations around the world. The International Olympic Committee, in cooperation with the International Sports Federations and the Organizing Committees, expanded the program of events open to women at the Games. In 1991, it was decided that any new sport seeking to be included in the Olympic program had to include women’s events. At the 27th Olympiad in Sydney in 2000, women competed in 25 out of 28 sports and in 132 events, 44% of the total. These figures are set to rise still further in the future.

The increase in women’s participation in sport was also noticeable in leisure sports and in school, college and community sporting activities. Women are also more involved as spectators of sporting events, but their representation is still well below men’s in coaching and management positions.
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Women, Media and Sport in the (Western) World

Feminist writers agree that the media play a central ideological role not only in “reflecting” but also in reinforcing existing ideas about gender. Moreover, since the second wave of feminism, the media have been the target of much feminist criticism for their role in legitimizing and reinforcing capitalist-patriarchal ideology, excluding and marginalizing women’s voices and contributing to gender inequality and discrimination. The media’s portrayals of social life have been named as a central mechanism in fixating the gender-based separation between the public sphere—the “open, rational, political” world of men; and the private sphere—the “closed, emotional, care-giving” world of women.11

Where sport is concerned, national television networks and local stations broadcast thousands of hours of sports coverage each year to millions of viewers around the world. The way in which television covers, or fails to cover, women engaged in athletics affects the way in which female athletes are perceived and also tells us something about the status of women in society. The sports media reflect the social conventions of gender-biased language. In so doing, they reinforce the biased meanings built into language, and thus contribute to the re-construction of social inequities.12

International studies have shown not only that the media are gender biased, but also that (sport) journalism very much represents a man’s world.13 Sport journalism is therefore gendered not only in content, but also in the process whereby ideology impacts on content. Formulating the text (content) is inherent in the very nature of media reporting; moreover, as the mass media have become one of the most powerful institutional forces for shaping values and attitudes in contemporary society, the selection process is critical. Not only the choice to depict an event, but also its interpretation are crucial in the shaping of perceptions, attitudes and values regarding popular culture.14

Existing work on women and sport coverage tends to focus on two main issues: the amount of coverage and the portrayal of women’s sports and female athletes. Many publications argue that the media do not reflect recent advances in women’s sport. Since the media are perceived as helping to create values, women’s under-representation is seen as creating the impression that women athletes are of little importance in the sporting world.15

Even more recent studies, published from the 1990s onwards, reveal that the lion’s share of sports coverage by the media is still devoted to men’s activity.
Data have consistently shown that the various media are reluctant to report on women athletes and the events in which they take part. Coverage of women’s sport routinely occupies no more than 5% of total sport air-time in countries like Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and Britain. Studies also show that women’s team or individual participation in sports generally conceived of as “masculine” is under-represented. However, some quantitative changes in the coverage of women’s sport have been traced in relation to major sporting events, particularly the Olympic Games. For instance, two studies analyzing coverage of the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games found almost equal coverage of men’s and women’s events for parameters like proportions of clock time and numbers of covered medal events. However, many reservations emerged with regard to the focus of women’s sport coverage. Thus, female competitors were much more likely to receive media attention if they competed in “socially acceptable” individual sports such as swimming, diving and gymnastics.

To date, women’s tennis may be the only clear example of a sport to which the media routinely dedicate much airtime. For example, in 1999 the American cable channel HBO devoted an unprecedented 70% of its tennis coverage to women. The intensive coverage of women’s tennis (in Israel as well) is even broader during major events like the Wimbledon tournament. However, this attention may be attributable not only to the intrinsic, sporting interest of women’s tennis, but also—as many have noticed—to the physical appearance of some of the young female players. For instance, on day six in the early stages of the 2003 Wimbledon tournament, an Israeli internet portal noted: “In today’s game Yelena Dokic will encounter Maria Sharapova. A match that should prove excellent, two very graceful young women, and of course—grunts that will thrill your Saturday. Not to be missed” (Walla! June 28, 2003; our emphasis). Indeed, the grunts of these two tennis players during the games drew much media attention.

As the above discussion shows, studies of media sports coverage go beyond quantitative questions to deal with differences in the type of coverage women’s and men’s sports receive. Various studies have focused on different practices by which the media construct female athleticism not only as “other” but also as “lesser than” that of the male. Thus, for instance, one study argued that the skills and strengths of women athletes are often devalued, since the dominant standards of excellence emphasize cultural equivalents of hegemonic masculinity: power, self-control, success, agency and aggression. Furthermore, whereas male athletes are valorized, lionized and put on cultural pedestals,
female athletes are infantilized by sport commentators, who refer to them as “girls” or “young ladies.” Another study found that while male athletes tended to be described in terms of strength and success, female athletes’ physical strength tended to be neutralized by ambivalent language. Thus, if males’ performance is often linked to power metaphors (like war), that of female athletes is often framed in stereotypes emphasizing their aesthetic appeal, rather than their athletic skill, Anna Kournikova, for instance, was referred to as “tennis’s pinup girl.” Most scholars agree that the media tend to focus on female athletes as sexual beings rather than as serious performers.

One of the above-mentioned studies of the 1996 Olympic Games found that the presence of gender stereotyping in NBC’s reportage was not as overwhelming as had been expected; nonetheless, “as traditional gender stereotyping suggests, the descriptors applied to women athletes contained more commentary about physical appearance than the descriptors applied to men athletes.”

One could also find—mainly in pre-produced profile reports—what can only be labeled as “unfortunate stereotyping.” However, NBC’s host and on-site reporters were careful to attribute women’s success or failure to the same characteristics as men’s success or failure. Another study of the same games found that for female athletes playing “female appropriate” sports, print media accounts tended to focus more on their performance than on personality or appearance. Other findings by the same scholars, however, indicated that the “beauty” and “grace” of the female gymnasts were still the main points of emphasis, despite their having taken US gold in the event. In a study of British popular press representation of women in football-related stories during the 1996 European Championship, the author argued that the message still being conveyed was that sport is an essentially male activity, in which women are afforded only subordinate and/or highly sexualized roles.

Media coverage of tennis in recent years is highly representative in this context. For example, during the 2003 Wimbledon tournament, Maria Sharapova drew much of the media’s attention for her physical appearance. Her above-mentioned day six match against Yelena Dokic was called the “Battle of the Babes” by the British Daily Mirror. Following the dramatic decline in the performance of Anna Kournikova, who failed even to qualify, the media was “eager” to crown an appropriate substitute. In fact, Sharapova won the 2004 Wimbledon Championship and later the U.S. Open, but she was also listed by People magazine in April 2005 as one of the world’s 50 most beautiful celebrities. In 2006, Maxim magazine named her the hottest athlete in the world—an
award she has won for four consecutive years—while the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue* featured her in a six-page bikini photoshoot spread.

However, the current discussion of women’s image is more complex than this. In addition to the wide variety of female images currently being presented by the media, tennis also offers an image of powerful sportswomen, manifested by stars like Venus and Serena Williams. Moreover, most of the studies that have been done in this field originate in the US. It goes without saying that their findings are not necessarily equally applicable to other countries, even western ones. There is a clear need to add to the relevant research being conducted elsewhere and to extend it to further countries, including Israel.

As suggested by Lemish, the Israeli context presents unique challenges to understanding the role of women. The traditional national emphasis on family and childbearing perpetuates the view of woman’s place as being in the private sphere and puts her in conflict with activities outside this realm. The centrality of the army, the ongoing struggle for defense, and the system of values associated with them—such as war, conquest, repression, exploitation and violence—have come to dominate the public sphere and serve to marginalize women.

According to Lemish, a realistic assessment of the picture of the world presented by the media still leaves women on the margins of social, economic, cultural and political processes, as has been documented in Israel and in many other studies worldwide. An examination of the Israeli media reveals fundamentally patriarchal representations, including relegation of women to the private sphere and to the physical functions of sex and reproduction; and the location of women in the world of emotions, where rational thought is lacking and behavior uncultivated. The perception of women’s social marginality is advanced in all of the media; To the extent that women are shown at all, they are limited primarily to traditional private-sphere roles, or, in the public sphere, to such traditional caring roles as volunteering in service activities, education, health and welfare. Women’s personality traits are depicted as different in nature from those of men; they are less logical, ambitious, active, independent, heroic and dominating, and more romantic, sensitive, dependent and vulnerable. This is particularly evident when it comes to news coverage
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in times of heightened conflict, when women, as both reporters and actors, nearly disappear and are represented, if at all, as victims.

In this vein, the media portrayals of women in sport presented here serve as an additional social mechanism for normalizing inequality in the public eye. On June 23, 2003, the local Israeli newspaper Tel Aviv rated “the 100 most influential people in sport.” Not only does this list reveal much about women’s overall place in the Israeli world of sport, but the very decision to publish it emphasizes the media aspect of this issue. A total of nine women appear on the list, only five of whom do not share their place with at least one man. The highest-rated woman, ranked 20th, was Limor Livnat, the Minister of Education, Culture and Sport at the time. The list included two other non-athlete women: the sport-agent and lawyer Keren Steinfeld (rated 73rd, along with sport-agents Dan Hay, Ronen Katzav and Oved Strauss); and the sport physician Dr. Michal Goldvirt (rated 92nd, along with Dr. Mark Rosnovsky). The newspaper reported of Dr Goldvirt: “She is the physician for Maccabi Netanya [soccer team], the first member of the fair sex [our emphasis] to spray beneath bone-shields.” The list also includes the “life and soul” of the Ramat Hasharon women’s basketball team, coach Orna Ostfeld (rated 30th), and Miri Nevo, a host of the Sport News magazine on television’s Channel 5 (rated 9th along with co-host Eli Ildis).37

The highest-rated female athlete on the list was Israeli tennis player Anna Smashnova Pistolesi, who was born in Belarus and immigrated to Israel at the age of 14. Rated 20th in the world, she is described as:

*The best female tennis player Israel has ever had* [our emphasis here and below]. Israeli tennis fans are filled with pride each time they watch her on live Eurosport broadcasts, competing equally with the best tennis players in the world.

On reflection, this statement appears a bit cynical; Pistolesi hardly speaks Hebrew, had by then left her home in Herzliya to be with her Italian boyfriend in Milan,38 and encountered Israel mainly on CNN—but what really counted was that she was seeded 20th in the world, and that broadcasters kept mentioning that she was from Israel. Handicapped swimmer Keren Leibovitch was 31st on the list:

*The dominant athlete in Israeli handicapped sport*, who managed this year to repeat her achievements at the Sydney Olympic Games, winning *three*
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gold medals in the world swimming championship while breaking three world records. To think that only half a year ago she had to stop her training and was considering retirement.

Ice skater Galit Chait is rated 81st, along with her partner, Sergei Sakhnovski. The newspaper reports:

Last year they won the bronze medal at the Toronto world championships, and this year they will continue their respectable representation of Israel in the most prestigious skating arenas in the world.

Of swimmer Vered Borochovsky (87th), the newspaper declares:

[She is] the most prominent figure in her field in Israel, vigorously preparing herself for the Athens Olympic Games. She will probably not come home with a medal, but a respectable performance will also be considered a fine achievement.

Only four female athletes, then, are on the list, and relatively low down on it at that; and if the list also includes many men who are not athletes, twenty-five nevertheless are sportsmen, mainly soccer players. Some issues stand out in this regard. First, in line with the aforementioned findings, all the women on the list represent individual or partnered sports — tennis, swimming and ice-skating — that are conventionally perceived as “female appropriate.” Even more prominently, it emerges that for a woman to make the list, she must have major international achievements to her name, such as winning a medal or breaking a world record, or at least be “the best in her field in Israel.” This is not the case with the male athletes, particularly the soccer players, who made their way onto the list with less impressive achievements and/or only modest acclaim. Inspecting this list of those considered to be influential sports personalities thus sharpens our recognition of the marginality of women in the reality of Israeli sport. It also attests to the way in which the media, in this case a local newspaper, perpetuate this situation symbolically, even if this was not the conscious intention of the list editors.

Although the list constitutes only a part of one sports item, it reflects the place of women in the sports coverage of the Israeli media. Similarly, Wein-garten’s examination of sports coverage in the three major Israeli newspapers
over a random week in 1997 showed that the coverage of all women’s sports accounted for 1% or less of total sports coverage in each newspaper. In addition, various studies submitted as seminar papers over the last decade found the percentage of routine women-related sports coverage never to exceed 5% of daily total sports coverage by the press. Sometimes, indeed, a comprehensive academic study of this field appears almost unnecessary; one need merely peruse the pages of the sports sections and supplements to get the general picture. Thus, for example, the 6-page sport section of the Ha’ir weekly published on October 26, 2006, failed to mention a single female athlete or women’s sporting event, even though the national women’s basketball team was active at the time.

Individual or partnered women’s sports are covered by the media from time to time. In June 2003, for instance, newspapers published a few reports on Israeli competitive sailors Linur Kliger and Anat Fabrikant upon the retirement of the latter—stressing the human rather than the sporting aspect. As part of its follow-up coverage of the Israeli sportsmen who would compete in the 2004 Athens Olympics, Yedioth Ahronoth (June 29, 2003) published a 1/3-page report on gymnastics, dedicated mostly to women. Throughout the entire year, the various media paid considerable attention to a female swimmer, Vered Borochovsky, and even more to Keren Leibovitch.

Where international sport successes and national pride are involved, the Israeli media care little whether the athlete is female or male, which sport they are competing in, or even if they are “really” Israelis, as long as they are still competing (and to some extent even when they are not). Consider the cases of ex-Israeli Daniela Krukower, 2004 World Champion female judoka, now competing under the Argentinean flag, or of Shay Doron, the Israel-born Maryland (WNBA) player. The media pay much attention to these sportsmen and women and even relate to international competitions in terms of their success or failure. This is the context in which we should view the female athlete who has most consistently attracted media attention, Anna Pistolesi (at the time of writing, back to her former name of Smashnova), currently ranked 63rd in the world. When Pistolesi competed in the 2003 Wimbledon tournament, Yedioth Ahronoth (June 24, 2003) subtitled its review of the first round: “Lleyton Hewitt, who lost to the giant Croatian, Ivo Karlovic (2.08 meters), is the second Wimbledon champion in history to have been knocked out in the first round. As Anna too found out.” The subheading in the daily paper Ha’aretz, referring to the same two losses, added more details: “Anna Pistolesi
was also beaten (4–6, 4–6) by the American Samantha Reeves.” Despite the subheading, most of the report was dedicated to men’s tennis.

Yet more glaring is the case of the media coverage of Yael Arad’s silver medal in judo at the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games—the first-ever Israeli Olympic medal. In an earlier study of British and Israeli media coverage of the Barcelona games, Bernstein\(^\text{41}\) found that Arad received the largest share of the Israeli press’s total coverage of the games: 13% in \textit{Yedioth Ahronoth} and 7% in \textit{Hadashot}, beating out Oren Smadja, the male judoka who won bronze within forty-eight hours of Arad’s silver, with 9% and 5%, respectively. The study showed that in each country, newspapers tended to focus on the athletes representing that country\(^\text{42}\)—a tendency that becomes more pronounced when the local athletes are successful and win medals. Since Arad’s was the first Israeli medal ever, the headlines were extremely enthusiastic. \textit{Yedioth Ahronoth}’s banner headline, “After 2,000 Years” (July 31, 1992), was printed in blue and white—the colors of the Israeli flag. Arad’s photo appeared twice on \textit{Yedioth}’s front page (once together with a photo of Smadja), while the news of her medal—accompanied by a photo—was the only occasion during the entire Olympics that \textit{Hadashot} referred to them on its front page.

Analysis of the front-page coverage bears out the media’s presentation of Arad and Smadja as national heroes, and their achievements as national accomplishments. Thus, the headline “Yael Arad Wins Silver Medal at Barcelona” was subheaded: “First Olympic Medal for Israel” (\textit{Yedioth Ahronoth}, July 31, 1992). Another headline manifested the aspect of national pride in the words of the Prime Minister: “Rabin: Israel Thanks You, Yael.” National pride trumped any other criterion of newsworthiness, allowing “even” a woman—and even in a relatively minor sport like judo, which had been paid little media attention up to that point—to enjoy extensive coverage for having helped to foster it. This interest in judo continued to some extent after the 1992 Games and was significantly enhanced with the successes of the male judoka Arik Zeevi at the international level from the late 1990s.

The Arad case indicates the level of achievement that women have to reach in order to gain wide media coverage. In interviews we have conducted over the years, editors in the different media maintained that if there were more successful female athletes, they would be covered as extensively as Arad was. However, what counts as “success” for female athletes is judged by higher criteria than those applied to males. Thus, Arad’s very success, her extensive media coverage and the high position she currently occupies in the world of
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Israeli sport may ultimately have a double-edged effect on other female athletes. For example, journalist Adi Rubinstein, acknowledging in an article on Walla! (June 26, 2003) that he had “never been a girl,” went on to say:

The female “politicians” of sport enjoy shedding tears while complaining that female athletes are discriminated against because they are women. Well, no offence, but it’s nonsense. If a female athlete really wants to, she will make it.

In support of his claim, Rubinstein referred to a panel on women in sport in which he had taken part:

One could find there many successful women both past and present who are connected to sport and sport politics. They talked about discrimination and about how deprived they are just because they are women. But when Yael Arad took her place and started talking, she just didn’t give the women participating in the conference what they wanted to hear. She claimed that she has never encountered deprivation, and admitted that she has always received what she asked for, especially after being marked as a leading athlete. “It’s only a question of character,” concluded Arad, and left the podium promptly to rush to another business meeting, arrayed in her expensive suit.

Moreover, Rubinstein claimed:

Yael Arad’s story differs from other stories of excellent female athletes in one thing only: She brought back a medal. Any other excellent female athlete would have received equal conditions. Some of them enjoy these conditions all their way to the Olympics. Some give up earlier. All this talk about female athletes being forced to make a double effort, and similar rubbish, is just not true. You can either sit and cry that you are not getting enough money to reach the Olympics, or just work hard and dream that one day you will hear “Hatikva” [the Israeli national anthem] being played.

Thus, one success by a woman athlete, especially one who has backed the argument that “success is guaranteed to those who work hard enough,” can be used as a fig leaf by certain journalists in defending themselves against the
legitimate claims of the “crybaby female politicians.” As we will learn from the facts, Rubinstein’s claim is far from adequately representing reality.

Overall, Bernstein’s study showed that in Israel (as in Britain), male participants in the 1992 games received three times as much coverage as female participants. Since only about a third of the Olympic athletes were women, an overwhelming media bias could not be demonstrated, though the same data manifest the inequality of opportunities in sport itself. However, coverage of the Olympic Games, a unique event, does not reflect routine media coverage of female athletes and sport.

As far as team sports are concerned, men’s soccer is by far Israel’s most popular and most extensively covered sport. Women’s soccer, on the other hand, is in a state of near collapse, a situation clearly not aided by the media’s lack of regard, which distances both sponsors and potential audiences. The women’s league started in 1999 has suffered from the outset from a lack of financing, to the extent that it was nearly shut down in the 2005/6 season. Decisions of the Committee for the Advancement of the Status of Women and the Committee for Education and Culture, published on April 14, 2003, may help rescue women’s football from its present deep crisis. Among other things, they demanded that the Israel Broadcasting Authority recognize women’s soccer league games as original local productions and broadcast them. Should these decisions indeed be followed by actions and even legislation, Israeli women’s soccer might have a chance of becoming a success story, as in other countries such as Norway, Germany, Spain, Australia and Japan. Media coverage would certainly help influence this process. In his above-quoted article, Adi Rubinstein also wrote:

There are sports like women’s soccer that are on their way to collapsing, but the reason is not lack of budget, but rather lack of interest. If the talented Sylvie Jian [a top Israeli female soccer player] could have attracted 3,000 spectators to Bloomfield stadium each Saturday, Teomim [a board member of the Hapoel Tel-Aviv football club] wouldn’t have dared to retire the team. But what can one do when it interests no one?

Unfortunately, this claim about lack of spectator interest is factually true, as evidenced by the empty stands at women’s soccer games. However, the establishment of a financial, social, cultural and communicational infrastructure might help this sport recruit fans.
Volleyball, another little-covered sport in Israel, is also considered “feminine,” as MK Ilan Shalgi, chairperson of the Committee for Education and Culture, noted at the aforementioned conference:

Women’s soccer clearly suffers from discrimination, and this has to be rectified through a change in the attitude toward soccer at schools. No more “boys play soccer and girls play volleyball,” but “sometimes one way and sometimes the other way around.”

If men’s volleyball suffers from a lack of media coverage, this is even more pronounced for women’s volleyball. A report by Rami Hipsh (Ha’aretz, June 15, 2003) dealing with Tali Shaposhnikov, a member of Israel’s national volleyball team who also plays for foreign teams, is entitled “What’s the Name of the Best Female Volleyball Player in the Country?” Hipsh notes: “For eight years Shaposhnikov has been playing overseas, but since women’s volleyball is negligible in terms of public awareness, very few have heard about her professional career.” Obviously, the media constitute a crucial factor in the effort to gain public awareness. Ha’aretz made a modest contribution by publishing this report, but much more is needed to generate a serious group of fans who will know who Tali Shaposhnikov is.

The one women’s team sport that has managed to gain substantial recognition in Israel is also the country’s only women’s professional sport: basketball. The professional league gained momentum during the second half of the 1990s, assisted by the transmission, since 1997, of some league matches by Channel 5, the sports cable TV channel. Women’s basketball advanced throughout the 1990s, peaking when the Ramat Hasharon team reached the finals of the European Roncetti Cup in 1999. Although it did not win the title, this women-owned, women-run and women-coached team put women’s basketball firmly on the map in Israel, not least following unprecedented media coverage of the final stages of the tournament. None of this happened overnight. For several years, the Ramat Hasharon team and the people around it have been leading a high-profile feminist struggle for women’s basketball and women’s sport in general, and they continue to do so today. However, it took an international success—during a particularly slow year in the men’s events—to gain wide, high-profile media coverage for women’s basketball.
It is worth mentioning in this context the June 2004 verdict of the Supreme Court concerning the petition filed by the Women’s Basketball Association and the Ramat Hasharon Women’s Basketball Team, with regard to funding for women’s sports. Quoting Virginia Woolf in his precedent-setting verdict in favor of the petitioners, Justice Eliezer Rivlin pointed to the general bias, in Israel, where it comes to women in sport. As a corrective, the court ruled that local councils must allocate 50% more funding for female teams and women’s sports than for male teams.

Another indication of the high quality of the women’s basketball league is that:

While men’s basketball feeds the journalists with an abundance of issues for in-depth investigations . . . of the lasting failure of Israeli players to penetrate the NBA, the women already have their representative in the best league in the world, Limor Mizrahi. . . . The signing is evidence of the qualitative level of the top Israeli female player. (Aviv Lavie, Ha’aretz, June 29, 2003)

Following the media frenzy around Ramat Hasharon’s achievements in the Roncetti Cup, Bernstein examined the routine coverage of women’s basketball by the Israeli press and television during the 2001/2 season. Her findings showed that only nineteen (13.1%) of the basketball items published by Yedioth Ahronoth over a five-week period dealt with the women’s league, and in only eight cases did women’s basketball merit anything more than a brief mention—leaving very little material to analyze regarding the portrayal of female athletes. Ha’aretz, whose readership is much smaller, covered the women’s league more extensively.

Things are better on television, mainly because of the commitment of the Sports Channel to women’s basketball. In an interview we conducted with Amir Hochfeld, then Channel 5’s executive basketball producer, he explained that the importance and media value of women’s basketball derive mainly, in his words, from its “amazing league.” Hochfeld contended that “a sports channel cannot be a totally masculine channel,” and added:

[Channel 5 is] not a voluntary organization. We don’t do things just because we believe they are socially important. We cover women’s basketball
because we think it’s interesting and believe that if we persist in our coverage, it will become even more interesting.

In fact, the sports channel did take upon itself an educational/social task in this respect, although we may also note that it does not pay for broadcasting rights and slots women’s basketball matches for off-hour afternoon viewing.

A close analysis of the broadcasts of women’s and men’s basketball leagues in the 2001/2 season found fairly balanced coverage, both visually and verbally (though a few differences that do emerge contribute to making the on-screen end result appear visually richer and more dynamic in the men’s matches [you bring no evidence for this statement]). In most cases, the commentary on women’s games does not reflect a blatant bias or a highly stereotyped view of female athletes, especially compared with the findings of parallel studies conducted in countries such as the U.S. Looking at the channel’s choice of commentators and reporters, this conclusion is not surprising. The two commentators for the women’s matches are Moran Barak, a woman, and Aviv Lavie, a male journalist well known for his liberal, activist views. In most women’s matches, both line reporters are usually women. At least one line reporter for the men’s matches is also a woman; overall, and not only in its basketball broadcasts, Channel 5 has led a mini-revolution in the television coverage of sports by including women in a variety of positions both on and off-screen, raising the hope for a more extensive and balanced coverage of women’s sports.

A crucial thing to be learned from this Israeli example is that a television channel can raise awareness of a women’s sport if, like Channel 5, it seriously commits itself to promoting that sport; but that there is no way it can single-handedly change the surrounding reality, including deeply embedded inequalities and attitudes. Thus, although over a quarter of Israel’s registered basketball players are girls and women, funds directed to women’s basketball are scanty. As shown by its 2002 report, the Basketball Association’s annual budget allocates over NIS 500,000 ($110,000) to each men’s premier league team, while women’s league teams each receive only NIS 80,000 ($17,000). Only four of the thirty-three members of the association’s management are women, an issue currently under juridical consideration. All in all, a thematic cable channel cannot change the world for women’s—or men’s—basketball in Israel. Sadly, it can be argued that Yedioth Ahronoth’s minimal newspaper coverage reflects the overall attitude towards women’s basketball and women’s sport in Israel.
To conclude, it can be argued that the media fulfill important functions regarding women’s image in general, and a crucial role in the context of women in sport. As we claim, the media furnish a prime site for studying the position of women in Israeli society. Our society presents itself in this arena, which defines our identity for us, establishes the parameters of consensus and relegates what is perceived as unconventional to the margins. Media content is edited and “re-presented” by producers, editors, program directors, technicians, programmers, camera persons, writers, commentators, sponsors and internet site providers. These people provide information, interpretation and entertainment based on their interests and goals. How the media cover or fail to cover women engaged in athletics affects how they are perceived and also tells us something about the status of women in society. The sports media reflect the social conventions of gender-biased language. In so doing, they reinforce the biased meanings built into language, and thus contribute to the re-construction of social inequities.

The media, on their own, cannot change the inequality present in sport itself, an issue that demands profound and immediate treatment in Israel as in many other places around the world. However, they can contribute to stimulating a wider initiative toward the promotion of women’s sport and women in sport.

Notes:

1. For further reading about gender and sport see Sheila Scraton and Anne Flintoff, *Gender and Sport: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002)
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23. Some of the quotations in this article were translated from Hebrew by the authors. While these translations are not always verbatim, we have tried to maintain the spirit of the original.


27. Sabo and Jansen, “Images of Men in Sport Media” (above, note 25); for further discussion see Alina Bernstein, “‘There Is Basketball in Israel, Women’s Basketball’: Media Coverage of Women’s Basketball in Israel,” in Linda K. Fuller (ed.), *Sexual Sports Rhetoric Gender and Globalization: Historical Perspectives and Media Representations* [something seems to be wrong with this title] (NY: Palgrave/Macmillan,
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forthcoming in 2008); Duncan and Messner, “Media Image of Sport and Gender” (above, note 15).


29. Ibid., p. 165.


33. For an overview see Duncan and Messner, “Media Image of Sport and Gender,” (above, note 15).

34. This article relates to both print and broadcast media. Israel’s major daily Hebrew newspapers are the liberal, left-wing morning paper Ha’aretz, with a highbrow profile and a relatively small readership; and the two major mass-circulation dailies, Yedioth Aharonoth, which claims a circulation of about 650,000 on weekends and 300,000–330,000 on weekdays, and Ma’ariv, with about half the circulation of Yedioth. The trademarks of both afternoon papers are short items, popular language, lively editing and numerous photographs; they subscribe to a tabloid format, but they are not ‘tabloids’ in the British or German sense of the term. All three newspapers have daily sports sections.

The following television channels are relevant to this article. The Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA), a public service broadcaster, was Israel’s first television channel; it still owns the broadcast rights to major sporting events such as the Olympic Games, but during the 1990s it lost the rights to many events. In an overall fading viewership, among the channel’s most-watched evenings are those in which it broadcasts Maccabi Tel-Aviv’s basketball games in the European League. Channel 2, which was Israel’s first commercial channel, does not invest heavily in sport, but it did and does fight for the rights to the Israeli Football Premiership League and the national football team’s international matches. Channel 5 is a thematic cable and satellite sports channel. It currently owns the rights (in some cases jointly with other bodies including Channel 1 and Channel 2) to the Israeli Football Premier League, various European football leagues, the Israeli Basketball Leagues (both women’s and men’s), the NBA, the WNBA, the Athletics Golden League and more. Its productions also include a daily sports news bulletin, studio-based programs and occasional documentary films.

Several international sports channels are transmitted in Israel (in English) by cable and/or satellite, including Eurosport, EuroSportNews, ESPN, Extreme and Fox Sport.
35. Lemish, “Normalizing Inequality” (above, note 11).
37. See above, note 34.
38. Whom she later married and divorced, after which she reverted to her former name of Smashnova.
40. By students in the authors’ seminar on “Media and Sport” at the Department of Film and Television, Tel Aviv University, and Zinman College, Wingate Institute.
42. According to the study, the fifteen athletes most covered by the Israeli press included six other Israelis, including one female athlete, swimmer Timea Toth.
43. Data provided by the International Olympic Committee show that of the 9,367 athletes who took part in the Olympic Games, 6,659 (71%) were men and 2,708 (29%) were women.
44. In 2004, the Israel Gambling Authority, the main provider of public money for sports, allocated NIS 100 million for men’s soccer teams and only NIS 470,000 for women’s soccer teams. The Supreme Court ordered that this imbalance be corrected in the 2005 budget. See Tamir Sorek, “Threatened Masculinities and Women’s Exclusion in Israeli Soccer,” Scholar & Feminist Online, 4/3 (2006), http://www.barnard.columbia.edu/sfonline/sport/index.htm.
45. These decisions aimed to ensure that all budgets designated for women’s soccer be properly earmarked and routed to their destination; and that the Minister of Education, Culture and Sport ensure establishment of an appropriate infrastructure in schools. In addition, they expressed support for a proposed law initiated by MK Zehava Galon and the Israel Women’s Network demanding appropriate representation of women in sports institutions in Israel, as well as calling for supervision to ascertain implementation, at the general assembly meeting to be held the following September, of assurances by the chairperson of the Israel Football Association that women would be represented on the management team.
46. For a history of women’s basketball in Israel see Darom, “Women’s Sport in Israel” (above, note 3).
47. Bernstein, “There is Basketball in Israel” (above, note 27).
48. Interviewed on July 16, 2002; by the time of writing Hochfeld had left this channel.
49. See, e.g., James R. Hallmark and Richard, N Armstrong, “Gender Equity in
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50. Notwithstanding the support it received from Channel 5, the relationship between women’s basketball and Israeli television has produced several disappointments. For example, in 2003 the Ramat Hasharon team was promised that its matches in the EuroCup would be broadcast by the IBA, leading them to cease negotiations with other channels, and they were even granted special permission from FIBA to play in the afternoon to suit the channel’s programming requirements. However, the channel decided four days before the first match not to broadcast the games, leading to a dispute that was never fully resolved, although home matches were broadcast as of the second stage of the EuroCup. In the 2003/04 season, Channel 5 started broadcasting the matches only from the sixth round.

51. Lemish, “Normalizing Inequality” (above, note 11).
