

Sports Media and Women Athletes: A Study of Representation and Stereotypes

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received: 15th Dec 2025 Accepted: 19th Dec 2025 Published: 20th Dec 2025 Keywords: <i>Women athletes, sports media, media representation, gender stereotypes, women empowerment</i>	Sports media plays a powerful and influential role in shaping public opinion, social values, and cultural attitudes toward sports and athletes. Through newspapers, television, digital platforms, and social media, the media determines which sports gain visibility, which athletes receive recognition, and how sporting success is defined. Historically, the world of sports has been largely dominated by men, and this dominance has been consistently reinforced by media practices that prioritize men's sports while marginalizing women's participation and achievements. In recent decades, women athletes have made remarkable progress and achieved significant success at national and international levels. Despite these accomplishments, their representation in mainstream sports media remains limited, unequal, and often framed within traditional gender stereotypes. Media coverage of women athletes frequently emphasizes physical appearance, femininity, emotions, or personal life rather than athletic ability, strength, and performance. Such portrayals undermine the professional identity of women athletes and contribute to the persistence of gender bias in sports. Media representation is not merely a reflection of reality but an active force that shapes perceptions and opportunities. Biased and inadequate media coverage discourages young girls from participating in sports, affects the self-confidence of women athletes, and limits acceptance of women in leadership roles such as coaching, officiating, and sports administration. Conversely, fair, respectful, and performance-oriented media representation has the potential to challenge stereotypes, inspire participation, and promote gender equality in sports. In the contemporary digital era, social media platforms have provided women athletes with alternative spaces to share their achievements and construct their own narratives. However, mainstream sports media continues to exert significant influence over public discourse and institutional recognition. Therefore, it is essential to critically examine the nature and patterns of media representation of women athletes. The present study aims to analyze these representations and highlight the need for gender-sensitive media practices that support women's empowerment, leadership, and the sustainable development of women's sports.

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1. Introduction

Sports media functions as a powerful social institution that not only reflects but also constructs social realities. Traditionally, sports have been viewed as a male-dominated domain, and this perception has been reinforced by media practices that prioritize men's sports over women's sports. Although women's participation in sports has increased significantly over the past few decades, their visibility and portrayal in media continue to remain limited and biased.

Women athletes are frequently underrepresented or portrayed in ways that emphasize physical appearance, femininity, or personal life rather than athletic skill, strength, and performance. Such portrayals contribute to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes and undermine the recognition of women as competent and serious athletes. This study seeks to critically analyse media representation of women athletes and examine its implications for gender equality and empowerment in sports.

2. Review of Literature

Existing research consistently highlights the unequal representation of women athletes in sports media. Studies have shown that women's sports receive substantially less coverage than men's sports across television, print, and digital platforms. When women athletes are featured, the focus often shifts away from performance and competitive ability.

Scholars have emphasized the sexualisation and objectification of women athletes in media narratives, which reduces their athletic credibility. Some studies note a positive shift during major international sporting events, where coverage becomes more performance-oriented; however, such changes are often temporary and fail to bring lasting transformation in routine sports reporting.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the extent of sports media coverage of women athletes.
2. To analyse the nature of media representation of women athletes.
3. To identify gender stereotypes and biases present in sports media.
4. To study the impact of media representation on women's participation and leadership in sports.
5. To assess the role of media in shaping public perception of women athletes.
6. To understand how media portrayal influences the self-identity and confidence of women athletes.
7. To examine the contribution of sports media toward promoting or hindering gender equality in sports.
8. To explore the role of media in encouraging women's empowerment through sports participation.
9. To highlight the challenges faced by women athletes due to biased media representation.
10. To suggest measures for promoting gender-sensitive and performance-oriented sports media practices.

4. Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research approach based on secondary data collected from research journals, academic books, newspapers, sports magazines, and credible online sports media sources. Content analysis of selected sports news reports and articles, along with a review of scholarly literature on gender, media, and sports, has been used for the analysis. The study is guided by feminist media theory, which helps in understanding gender relations, power structures, and representation practices in sports media.⁵

Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1: Distribution of Sports Media Coverage

Category	Male Athletes (%)	Women Athletes (%)
Television Sports News	85	15
Print Media	78	22
Online Sports Portals	70	30

Table 1 indicates a significant gender gap in sports media coverage, with male athletes receiving dominant attention across all media platforms.

Figure 1: Gender-wise Sports Media Coverage

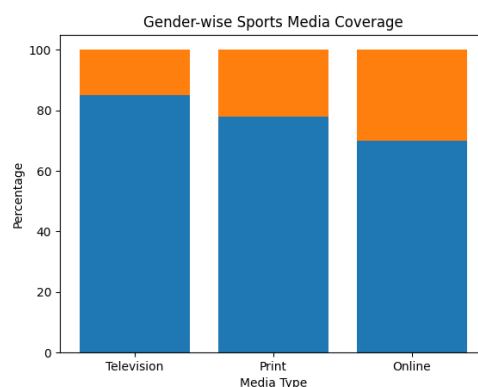


Table 2: Nature of Media Representation of Women Athletes

Representation Focus	Percentage (%)
Athletic Performance	32
Physical Appearance	28
Personal / Family Life	25
Emotional Attributes	15

The data in Table 2 reveals that non-performance-related aspects dominate the media portrayal of women athletes.

6. Impact of Media Representation

Table 3: Impact of Media Representation on Women in Sports

Area	Impact
Sports Participation	Reduced motivation among girls
Self-Identity	Lower self-confidence
Leadership Opportunities	Limited acceptance
Public Perception	Reinforcement of stereotypes

Biased and limited media representation discourages young girls from pursuing sports and affects the self-esteem of women athletes. It also restricts acceptance of women in leadership roles.

7. Discussion

Although digital and social media platforms have provided women athletes with new opportunities to control their narratives, mainstream sports media continues to reflect structural gender bias. Sustainable change requires reforms in editorial policies and gender-sensitive reporting practices.

8. Conclusion

The study concludes that media representation of women athletes plays a critical role in shaping gender norms and opportunities in sports. Fair, consistent, and performance-focused media coverage is essential for promoting gender equality, empowerment, and leadership among women in sports.

9. Recommendations

- Ensure equal and consistent media coverage of women's sports.
- Emphasize athletic performance rather than physical appearance.
- Introduce gender-sensitivity training for sports journalists.
- Promote women's leadership roles within sports media organizations.

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