



## WOMEN'S SPORTS REPORTING IN SRI LANKAN MASS MEDIA: AN AUDIENCE SURVEY

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**Abstract:** This study has been undertaken to investigate the audience's perception regarding the reporting on sportswomen and women's sports in Sri Lankan mass media. An open-ended questionnaire was distributed among 25 undergraduates who are members of the Faculty Sports Club of the Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. Collected data were analyzed through descriptive analysis based on framing theory, and the findings revealed that Sri Lankan state-owned and private channels (television, radio, and newspaper) do not give adequate coverage for women's sports news or sportswomen. Compared to radio and newspapers, Sri Lankan television channels allocate more space to women's sports and sportswomen. One of the state-owned television channels, 'Channel EYE', was identified as the main television channel providing more sports reporting than other channels. The achievements of women athletes are telecasted more on state channels like Channel EYE, SLRC, and ITN than on private channels. In comparison to private channels, state-owned radio channels produce more programmes regarding women's sports and Sri Lankan newspapers publish women's sports news, nevertheless women's glamour and beauty get more attention than their bravery in the content of the news stories and this re-enforces the dominant belief on gender in the Sri Lankan society.

**Index Terms:** Sportswomen, Women's sports, Reporting, Mass media

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Sport has long been viewed as a public 'good' – a cultural space for the creation and enactment of the 'good, healthy citizen'. Yet this public 'good' has also been gendered as masculine: competitive, public, hierarchical, and 'tough', with women's participation being historically marginal to men's. This has meant that women have been marginalized from sports; where women struggle for fair and equal access, promotion, participation, and pay (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2014). Over time, with the rise of feminism and a greater emphasis on equality between men and women in law, women have begun to enter into the area of sports in greater numbers and an increasing range of sports. Yet this increase in women's participation has not automatically generated an equitable environment (Clasen, 2001).

Sport and the media have had a long and complex relationship. In sports, it could be said that the media plays an even bigger role as it directly influences decision-making processes about how sports are organized, and presented, when it is played, who is made visible/invisible, and the sort of commentary surrounding the event (Jarvie & Thornton, 2012). Women professionals and athletes continue to be under-represented in media and are often stereotypically portrayed when they are included. Sports media provide considerably less and different types of coverage to female athletes and women's sports than to male athletes and men's sports. Although there has been a steady increase in the number of women professionals over the years, most mainstream media coverage continues to rely on men as experts in the fields of business, politics, sports, and economics (Kian, E.M., 2007). While improvements in quantity and tone are evident in some media outlets, in other areas of sports media there has been little or no change in either the diversity, quality, or quantity of coverage of women's sport. According to Jarvie & Thornton (2012), when reporting about sportswomen, they are associated with appearance rather than performance. Furthermore, the mainstream media's reporting of sportswomen's losses are not necessarily productive at all. (Pavlidis et al., 2020). Parallel to this scenario, women in the news are more likely to be featured in stories about accidents, natural disasters, or domestic violence than in stories about their professional abilities or expertise.

Therefore, it can be observed that these portrayals of the media may shape the readers' attitude toward women as they are unimportant for public events and activities and underserving of leadership roles.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many scientific research studies have been conducted in the past on the portrayal of women athletes and women's sports in media. As cited by Farhat R. (2019) the way women are being projected in the print and electronic media is a reflection on the whole society. Phillips (1997) stated that "regardless of what is happening, it is the media's interpretation of that event that shapes our attitudes, values, and perceptions about the world and our culture". In this sense, the media has significant symbolic power that influences public perceptions of women's sports. Paul et al., (2003) stated that as the media preserve, transmit, and create important cultural information, they powerfully shape how and what we know about sports in general and women's sports in particular.

Many studies explain in common that sports helped to create and now help to uphold a masculine hegemonic order in society, where men occupy power and positions more than women. Inadequate women's coverage seems to be a worldwide phenomenon. In 2006 the Association of Women Journalists study on news coverage of women and women's issues in 70 countries reported that only 18 percent of stories quote women and that the number of women-related stories came to barely 10 percent of total news coverage. 79 percent of experts quoted in the news media around the world are men while a mere 21 percent are women.

Goslin and Kluka (2007) examined 2806 articles comprising five national South African newspapers for three calendar months in 2006. The findings indicate significant under-reporting and under-representation in five of the variables set for media coverage of female sports. Traditional male sports (rugby, soccer, cricket, and boxing) were reported on extensively, while females were only mentioned briefly in tennis and track and field articles.

Kian (2007) conducted a study titled "Framing Differences in Gender-Related Sports Coverage by Internet Sites and Newspapers". Results showed that newspaper articles were more likely to minimize the athleticism of female athletes and focus on their personal lives, thus reinforcing and strengthening hegemonic masculinity far more than the newer medium of online journalism, which produced mixed results. Chopra A (2008) in her study on the portrayal of women in print media stated that information in the print reinforces the stereotype and traditional roles of women in society.

In an article published by the International Review for the Sociology of Sport studied the representation of England's Women's performance at the 2009 Cricket World Cup and the researchers concluded that trends have changed in terms of what is reported but not in terms of how much is reported. A report by the Australian Sports Commission showed women's sport receives only 1.2% of all air time devoted to sports; in newspapers, the coverage was 4.5%. When sportswomen do receive coverage, more mention is often made of their personal life than their athletic ability. The emphasis on femininity and fashion ensures that what women wear and look like when they play sports is deemed to be of more importance than what they achieve.

Sivapriya.S. (2015), in her research on Sports Journalism: Sports Reporting of Women Athletes in 'Virakesari' Newspaper concluded that 'Virakesari, the Sri Lankan Tamil newspaper is giving a low coverage of women's sports and this reflects the dominant belief about gender in society that females are unimportant in public events.

### a. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Accordingly, past studies reveal the common statement that women's sports are extraordinarily underreported in the mainstream media. However, most of these studies are based on the examination of the contents of media reporting and there is a gap in the research that there was no research on the perception of the audience regarding the reporting of women's sports and sportswomen in Sri Lankan mass media. Hence, this study attempts to bridge this specific knowledge gap through an audience survey.

### b. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do Sri Lankan mass media report sportswomen and why?
2. How mass media reporting of sportswomen reflects the dominant beliefs about gender in Sri Lankan society?

## 3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study enriches the knowledge about the performance of Sri Lankan mass media and their reporting on women's sports. The findings of this study also provide an overview of the recommendations to be implemented or the changes to be made in the Sri Lankan media arena concerning portrayals of sportswomen and women's sports. Creating healthy media behaviour about sportswomen and women's sports enable empowering girls and women to come forward in sports activities and enhance their knowledge, skills, and attitudes while leading to a healthy lifestyle with respect and acceptance.

## 4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Framing Theory

The researchers applied framing theory for this study as framing theory is a communication theory that explains how media content is presented to influence the audience's perception of a topic. Media uses framing to select certain aspects of reality and make them

more noticeable. This can be done through written, spoken, visual, or graphical messages. Framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience (called “the frame”) influences the choices people make about how to process that information.

The most common use of frames is in terms of the frame the news or media places on the information they convey. They are thought to influence the perception of the news by the audience, in this way, it could be construed as a form of second-level agenda-setting – they not only tell the audience what to think about (agenda-setting theory) but also how to think about that issue (second level agenda setting, framing theory) (wordpress.com, n.a).

When it comes to the particular study, when applying the framing theory, it can be identified the way media have portrayed women’s sports and sportswomen in their agenda (television, radio, and newspapers) and how the placement of news and portrayal of women’s sports have been influenced the perception of audience towards the women’s sports and sportswomen.

## 5. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using a mixed approach to achieve the objectives of the study. The survey method was used to collect the primary data; therefore, an unstructured open-ended questionnaire was deployed–25 university students from the Trincomalee Campus of Eastern University, Sri Lanka were selected as the sample to collect data through distributing questionnaires. Those five male and twenty female students who are the members of the Sports Club of the Faculty of Communication and Business Studies were selected purposefully as the sample considering their interest, and prior knowledge regarding sports and sports-related media coverage. Their ages range from 21 to 27 years. The collected data through open-ended questionnaires was analyzed using descriptive analysis.

## 6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study explores the audience's perception regarding the reporting of women’s sports in Sri Lankan mass media. The collected data from the 25 respondents from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive analysis based on the framing theory. Findings of the study exhibit several significant aspects on audiences’ perception on media portrayal of sportswomen in Sri Lanka.

The respondents conveyed their various opinions regarding sports. One such opinion which indicates respondents’ broader understanding on sports is,

*“It is the way through which humans can enhance their energy, and enthusiasm and can relax their mind. Sports are physical contests pursued for the goals and challenges that the contestants entail. It is a form of physical activity and games and is essential for mental and physical fitness. Organized games or contests that help to reach fitness goals. A way of expressing talents and abilities. Physical activity that involves skill and energy. An important activity for all to develop their skill and energy. Improves physical ability skills and collaboration. On the whole, sports are an essential one for all humans.”*

Another respondent also conveyed his/her opinion regarding men’s sports and women’s sports, which gives almost a brief yet accurate interpretation of these two sports arenas.

*“Men’s sports are hard and energetic which influences their good personality. Men have many sports activities and their involvement in sports is high. Men's sports are often associated with aggression and strength and usually outdoor sports that has strict rules. Women’s sports are soft influence their healthy lifestyle and are less energetic than men's. Women have fewer sports activities and their involvement in sports is low. Women's sports are often associated with grace, skills, strategies, and agility (Netball). Women like indoor sports and their sports need improvements.”*

Based on the responses received, it was identified that the majority of the respondents (72%) perceive differences between women’s sports activities and men’s sports activities due to the following reasons. Men’s sports often need more physical strength due to the biological differences and men’s sports gets more financial assistance and sponsorships unlike women. Men athletes are often highlighted in media than women. Women's participation in school-level sports is lesser than men's. Further, the findings highlight that men are more aggressive and competitive while women are more focused on teamwork and collaboration. It was interesting to know the perception of respondents on people’s support of men's and women’s sports events. As per the answers given, men receive more support from the ordinary public than women. According to the majority of the respondents, men’s engagement in sports is higher than that of women.

When the respondents were inquired about the reporting of women’s sports and sportswomen by Sri Lankan mass media, Television, Radio, and Newspapers respectively, they replied with diverse answers.

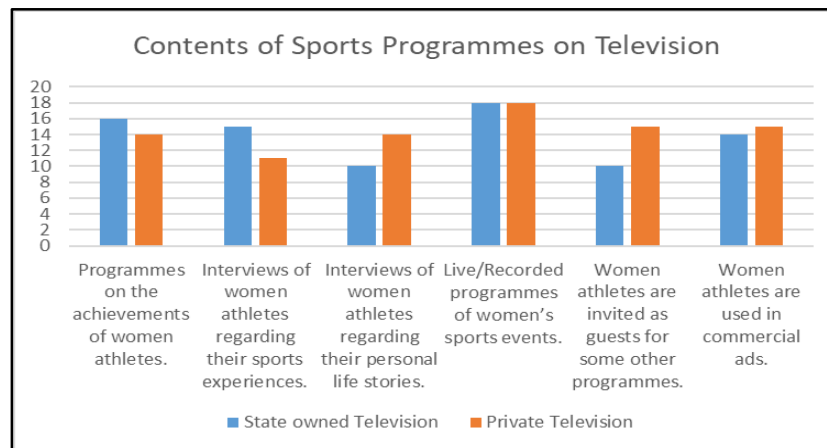
### 6.1 Reporting of women’s sports and sportswomen by Sri Lankan Television channels

According to the respondents, 52% said that both the state-owned and private Television channels in Sri Lanka do not provide adequate time for women’s sports programmes. 52% of the respondents stated that state-owned television channels like Channel EYE, Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC), and Independent Television Network (ITN) report women’s sports mostly as an entertainment program. In comparison, 56% of the respondents stated that private television channels like Hiru TV, Sirasa TV, and Derana TV report women’s sports as one of the major news bulletins during their newscasts. The respondents also stated that the state-owned television ‘Channel EYE’ is the main television channel that provides them sports reporting more than all the other channels. However, this channel telecasts men’s sports more than women’s sports.

When inquired about the types of women's sports that get coverage in Sri Lankan television channels the respondents stated that Netball (42%), Tennis (26%), Cricket (18%), and Athletic events (14%) are telecasted in television channels. However, comparatively more sports events are telecasted for men and that includes, Cricket (28%), Football (26%), Athletic events (18%), Rugby (10%), Wrestling (8%), Tennis (4%), Chess (3%), Volleyball (2%) and Elle (1%). The respondents also stated that,

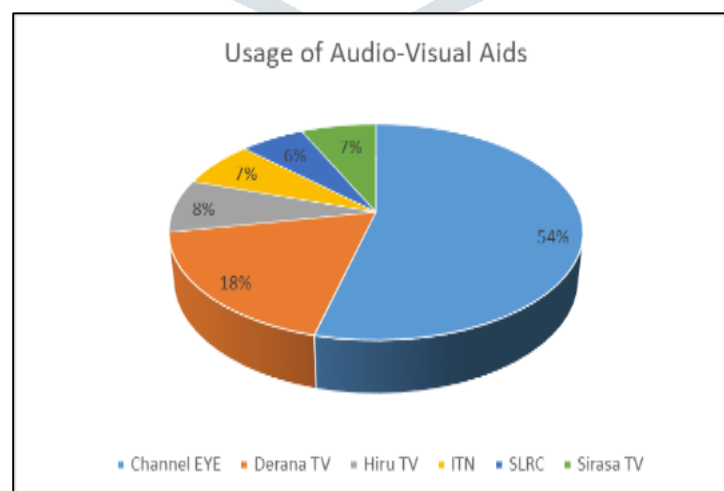
*“Sri Lankan Women's Cricket team won the 2024 Women's Twenty20 Asia Cup. Ms.Susanthika Jayasinghe and Ms.Damayanthi Darsha participated in the World Olympics and secured medals, but they rarely get media coverage. Even we started to watch women's cricket only in recent times but they have been playing it for a long time”*

The respondents pointed out that women's sports personalities are shown as sexual objects and their beauty and glamour get more attention on the screen than their bravery and achievements. Further, the respondents mentioned that women athletes are shown as soft and sensitive characters and when they are shown during programmes like wrestling, women are shown as problem-makers.



**Chart 1: Contents of Sports Programmes on Television**

In the questionnaire, when inquired about the contents of women's sports programmes on state and private television channels in Sri Lanka, 72% of the respondents replied that both channels telecast live or recorded programmes of women's sports events during their sports programme while 64% of respondents said that the programmes on the achievements of women athletes are telecasted more in state channels like Channel EYE, SLRC and ITN than in private channels. State television channels telecast the interviews of women athletes regarding their sports experiences more than the private channels. Private television channels like Hiru TV, Sirasa TV and Derana TV telecast interviews of women athletes regarding their personal stories more than the state channels. Respondents further elaborated that private channels also invite women athletes as guests for some other programmes other than sports programmes. Significantly, many respondents mentioned about using women athletes in commercial advertisements in both state and private channels. As per the respondents, both state and private television channels telecast women's sports programmes, however, many such programmes are mostly presented by male presenters. The respondents also replied that female presenters present women's sports news more in private television channels than in state television channels. When inquired about the presentation of women's sports in television, the majority of the respondents (67%) said that state television channels telecast women's sports with audio and visual coverage more than the private television channels (statistically, Channel EYE 54%, Derana TV 18%, Hiru TV 8%, Sirasa TV 7%, ITN 7%, SLRC 6%).



**Chart 2: Usage of Audio-Visual Aids**

## 6.2 Reporting of women's sports and sportswomen by Sri Lankan Radio channels

When inquired about women's sports reporting in Sri Lankan Radio channels, 64% of the respondents stated that women's sports do not get adequate time on the radio. State-owned radio channels (SLBC) and Private radio channels (Hiru FM, Sirasa FM, Shakthi FM, Sooriyan FM) allocate more air time for men's sports than women's. 72% of the respondents stated that both state-



owned and private radio channels broadcast women's sports as an entertainment programme. In comparison, 28% of the respondents noted that both state and private radio channels include women's sports news as one of the major news bulletins. Unlike television, radio channels do not provide full coverage of any sports, instead, they add the information as an announcement during their major programmes. All the private radio channels air hourly news bulletins and sports news are reported in it. As such all types of men's and women's sports news are aired during the hourly news bulletins.

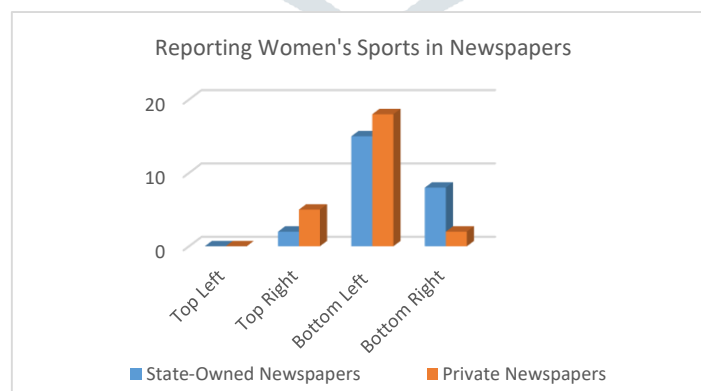
**Chart 3: Content of Women's Sports Programme in Radio**

As per the respondents, state (92%) and private (80%) radio channels in Sri Lanka broadcast interviews of women athletes regarding their sports experiences more than other content. As next, both the state and private radio channels use women athletes in their commercial advertisements and also invite women athletes as guests for their other programmes. However, in comparison to private channels, state-owned radio channels produce more programmes regarding women's sports and also both state and private radio channels have very few programmes of live or recorded women's sports events and the achievements of women athletes. As per the respondents, male announcers are used even for women's sports reporting in both state and private radio channels. Female announcers are used only during the morning news bulletins. On the whole Sri Lankan radio channels including the state and private do not give much focus to women's sports reporting.

### 6.3 Reporting of women's sports and sportswomen by Sri Lankan Newspapers

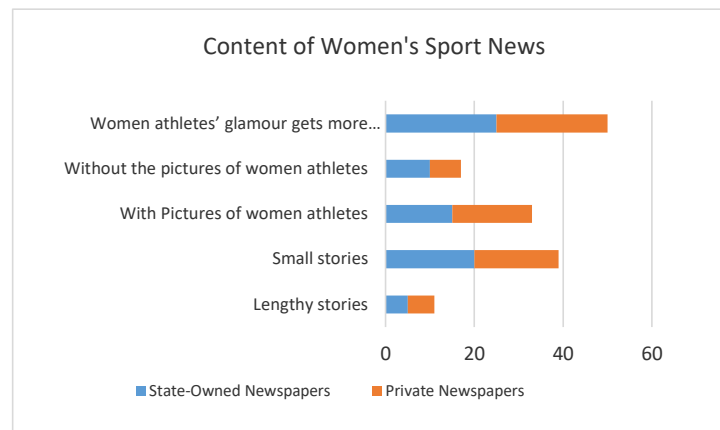
The respondents were also questioned about the women's sports reporting in Sri Lankan newspapers and they replied diversely. As per 64% of the respondents, Sri Lankan state-owned newspapers and private newspapers do not give adequate coverage for women's sports and sportswomen news. When questioned about the news coverage, 80% of the respondents stated that weekend publication has more news on women's sports than weekday publications. *Lankadeepa*, *Mawbima*, *Divaina*, Daily News, Daily Mirror, *Virakesari* and *Thinakural* are the newspapers that provide coverage on women's sports. However, as per the respondents (72%), women's sports news is published in the inside pages more than the front page. Private newspapers such as *Lankadeepa*, *Mawbima*, Daily News, and *Thinakural* publish sports news on the front page only if there is a bigger victory. The respondents also noted that "women's sports will be published in the front page only if they achieve bigger than men" and this elucidates that newspapers give priorities for men's sports more than women's sports.

72% of the respondents stated that women's sports are published in Sri Lankan newspapers as feature articles and not as hot and timely news.



**Chart 4: Reporting Women's Sports in Newspapers**

As per the respondents, women's sports do not get prominence in the Sri Lankan newspapers because they are published in the bottom part of the news page and the top part of the news page is filled with men's sports news. As stated by the respondents, women's sports news is mostly published in the bottom left (66%), bottom right (20%), and top right (14%) pages and none of the respondents selected the top left page. Also, the respondents were inquired about the content of women's sports news stories.



**Chart 5: Content of Women's Sports News**

The findings demonstrate that the Sri Lankan newspapers publish women's sports news, nevertheless women's glamour and beauty gets more attention than their bravery in the content of the news stories. Majority of the news stories on women's sports are small in size and also published with the pictures of women athletes. The findings also indicate that newspapers too give more priority for men's cricket and football than the other sports activities since the other news stories are published as small stories in the bottom part.

As per the respondents, Sri Lankan mass media report women's sports less because they give more attention to men's sports reporting (52%), women's sports do not get much financial assistance (28%), women's participation for sports is less (12%), women play only soft games and audience like hard games (4%) and male's bravery gets more newsworthiness (4%). The respondents also notified that, Sri Lanka is a country which follows patriarchal system as such whether it is sports or any other activity, men will get the prominence than women and that is the reason why Sri Lankan mass media give less importance for women's sports and sportswomen and more importance for men's sports and sportsmen. This re-enforce the dominant belief on gender that women are soft, sensitive and glamorous objects whose sexuality gets more consideration than bravery. Most of time television sports reporting appears as a commercial and there is a need for more balanced equitable coverage of both men and women's sports. Cricket gets more focus leaving other sports like volleyball, rugby and athletes as minor. Most of time they air ads and few minutes are allocated for sports reporting.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The overall findings of the study demonstrate that women's sports are reported inadequately in the Sri Lankan mass media because of the patriarchal system and the gender inequalities. Sports women get less attention in television, radio and newspaper and when it is reported women's sexuality and beauty are prioritized by the media than their sports achievements. Among the three mass media, Sri Lankan television channels report women's sports more than radio and newspapers. The findings also conclude that, though Sri Lankan sports women are shining in the fields like cricket and football still these sports are labeled as men's sports and the media should change the way it reports women's sports.

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