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Gender disparities in Albanian sports media: Analysis, challenges, and emerging transformations

 Elona Mehmeti^{1*},  Holtion Orhani²

^{1,2}*Department of Projects and Technology, Institute of Research of Sport, Sport University of Tirana, Tirana, Albania.*

Corresponding author: Elona Mehmeti (Email: mehmetielona@gmail.com)

Abstract

This study investigates the role of sports media in shaping public perceptions of gender representation in Albanian sports coverage. It aims to highlight the persistent disparity in the portrayal of male and female athletes and to propose strategies for promoting more equitable media narratives. Employing a qualitative research design, the study draws on a decade of relevant literature and incorporates a case study of Albanian football referee “Emanuela Rusta”. The analysis includes a review of national media coverage as well as successful international initiatives aimed at reducing gender bias in sports media. The findings reveal a pronounced gender bias in Albanian sports media. Male athletes are typically portrayed using language that emphasizes strength, competitiveness, and professionalism, while female athletes are more often described in terms of their appearance, emotions, or personal lives. The case study of “Emanuela Rusta” illustrates how female figures in sports receive disproportionate attention on non-sport-related aspects of their identity. Such framing contributes to the marginalization of women in sports discourse and limits their visibility as professional role models. The study concludes that entrenched gender stereotypes in sports media perpetuate unequal representation and hinder the progress of women in sports. It calls for comprehensive media reform and the adoption of inclusive storytelling practices to challenge these norms. The research offers practical recommendations for sports media professionals, policymakers, and advocacy groups. By adopting international best practices and promoting inclusive narratives, media outlets can play a transformative role in advancing gender equality in sports and encouraging greater female participation at all levels of athletic involvement.

Keywords: Gender representation, Gender stereotyping, Media bias, Sports media.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, sports media plays a significant role in shaping public attitudes toward gender in sport, influencing societal perceptions of both male and female athletes. While efforts toward gender equality have made progress globally, disparities in media coverage persist particularly in Albania, where sports reporting remains heavily skewed in favor of male athletes. This imbalance mirrors global trends where male athletes receive disproportionately more coverage in both volume and depth while female athletes are often marginalized or overlooked entirely.

When women's sports are covered, the focus frequently shifts from athletic performance to non-sport-related attributes such as physical appearance, personal life, or emotional expression. A notable example is Albanian referee "Emanuela Rusta", whose professional accomplishments are often overshadowed by media narratives unrelated to her refereeing career. Moreover, gender stereotypes are perpetuated in commentary, portraying male athletes as powerful and resilient, while female athletes are described as graceful or emotional by reinforcing traditional gender norms.

This paper builds upon a decade of literature on gender representation in sports media, with a particular focus on Europe and Albania [1-5]. It draws on the most recent data from the ALL IN+ report (2024) [4] offering a comparative analysis of gender equality progress since the original ALL IN review published in 2019 [4, 5]. Despite some improvement, the findings reveal only a modest 3% increase in gender-balanced representation, underscoring the deep-rooted structural challenges that persist.

These disparities are further evidenced by international research. A 2017 study by the European Institute for Gender Equality found that over 90% of sports news was authored by male journalists, with more than 85% of coverage focused on male athletes. UNESCO data reinforces this trend [2] indicating that women's sports receive only 4% of global sports media coverage. Even within this limited exposure, the narratives tend to emphasize personal characteristics over athletic accomplishments. Additionally, only 12% of sports media professionals worldwide are women by highlighting an imbalance that contributes to the continued marginalization of female athletes.

The implications of these gender imbalances extend beyond media representation. In Albania, the limited visibility of female athletes restricts the presence of role models for young girls, discouraging participation in competitive sports. Biased media narratives also affect sponsorship opportunities, resource distribution, and public interest by widening the professional and financial gap between male and female athletes. As a powerful influence on public perception, the media plays a critical role in either reinforcing or challenging these disparities.

This research work investigates the underlying causes of gender disparity in Albanian sports media and explores the broader consequences for gender equality in sport. It also highlights international best practices and showcases emerging examples of more balanced media coverage. By encouraging inclusive reporting and reshaping public narratives, Albanian media can help cultivate a more equitable and supportive sports culture for athletes of all genders.

2. Gender Representation in Sports Media: A Global Perspective

The portrayal of male and female athletes in the media has long been a subject of academic scrutiny, revealing persistent gender asymmetries despite ongoing efforts to promote equality. Cross-national research consistently highlights a stark imbalance in both the quantity and nature of coverage, with male athletes overwhelmingly dominating sports media.

Empirical evidence underscores the scale of this disparity. A 2017 study by the European Institute for Gender Equality [1] found that over 85% of sports coverage focused on men's events, while women's sports were relegated to secondary pages and non-primetime broadcasts. Similarly, UNESCO [2] reported that only 4% of global sports media content features female athletes. Kane [3] further notes that even when women's sports are covered, the reporting tends to be brief and lacks depth compared to coverage of men's events. A survey analyzing newspapers from over 20 countries confirmed this trend, with just 11% of all sports coverage dedicated to women's sports.

The Towards Gender Balance in Sport project (March 2018 – October 2019) [4] reinforced these findings, identifying substantial gaps in both the visibility and portrayal of female athletes. Although precise statistics were limited, the study emphasized the urgent need for targeted interventions to improve representation in sports journalism and broadcasting.

Building on this, the ongoing "All In Plus": Promoting Greater Gender Equality in Sport project (March 2023 – February 2025) [5] provides updated insights into the current state of gender equality in sports media. Key findings include:

- Fewer than 35% of sports organizations have implemented measures to encourage gender-balanced media coverage.
- Austria (65%) and Spain (59%) stand out as leading examples of progress in this area.
- Less than 30% of organizations have established formal guidelines for gender-sensitive media representation.

Comparative data from 2019 and 2024 show increased efforts to raise the visibility of female athletes in European sports media. For example, the percentage of organizations addressing gender-based violence through formal policies rose from 25% in 2019 to 39% in 2023 and indicating growing awareness of the need to protect and empower women in sport.

However, the fact that only a third of sports bodies have actively promoted gender-balanced coverage underscores the limited progress made. The absence of widespread gender-sensitive media policies highlights that many organizations still fail to prioritize the equitable portrayal of female athletes.

Furthermore, while some progress has been achieved between 2019 and 2024, significant disparities remain. Continued and coordinated efforts are essential to ensure equitable media representation for sportswomen as a critical step toward broader gender equality in the world of sport.

2.1. Representative of Female Athletes in the International Competitions

A study by Hardin and Poniatowski [6] examined television coverage of men’s and women’s hockey during the 2010 Winter Olympics. The findings revealed that while female athletes were frequently portrayed as positive role models, their achievements were often framed in relation to men’s sports as if men's competitions served as the standard for comparison. This framing reinforces the perception that men’s sports are inherently more significant, perpetuating traditional gender hierarchies in sports journalism.

Although the Olympics provide a rare platform for increased visibility of female athletes, deep-rooted biases in media coverage remain. These include underrepresentation, stereotypical portrayals, and a disproportionate emphasis on traditionally "feminine" sports. Such patterns continue to obstruct genuine progress toward gender equality in sports media.

Figure 1 illustrates a notable and steady increase in women's participation in the Olympic Games over the past five decades. In 1972, women made up only 14% of Olympic athletes, whereas by 2024, they represent 50% of a milestone in the pursuit of gender parity in global sport.

This progress is partly due to efforts by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to promote more equitable media representation, see Figure 2. In June 2024, the IOC released updated Portrayal Guidelines [7] aimed at ensuring gender-balanced, accurate, and respectful coverage of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. These guidelines specifically address problematic practices such as emphasizing the private lives or physical appearances of female athletes over their sporting achievements. By offering practical tips and checklists, the IOC supports media outlets in delivering more balanced and inclusive coverage across all platforms. This initiative serves as a strong example of how an organization can take meaningful steps toward improving gender representation in sports media and reshaping public perceptions.

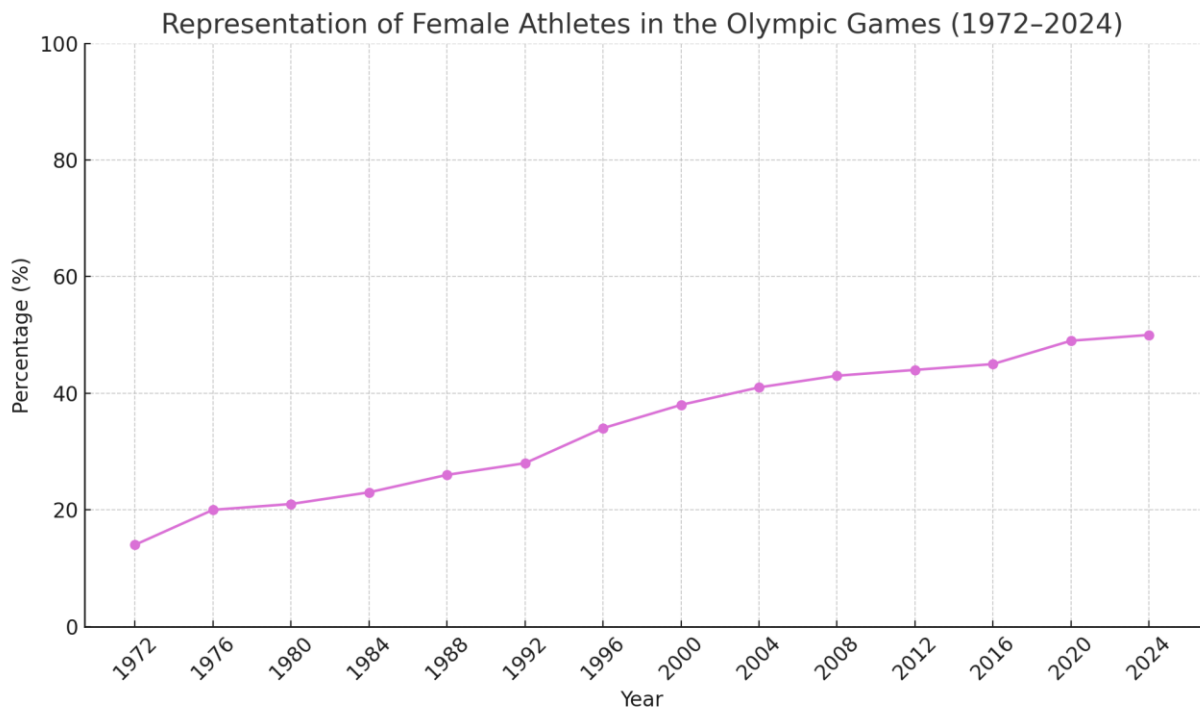


Figure 1. Representation of Female Athletes in the Olympic Games (1972-2024).

Despite some progress since 2019, evidence clearly shows that gender inequality in sports media coverage persists. Male athletes continue to receive significantly greater exposure than their female counterparts, both in terms of quantity and quality. This disparity limits the visibility of female athletes and creates substantial barriers to their recognition and advancement in the sports industry. Such biased representation is not limited to local contexts where it reflects a widespread, institutionalized practice at the international level.

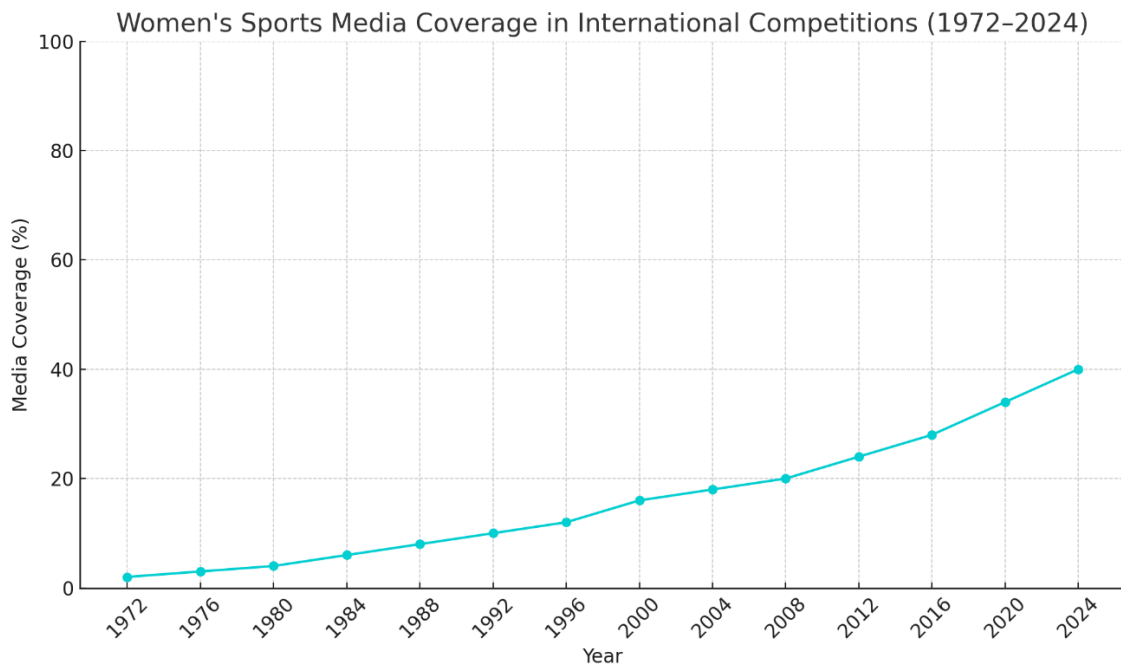


Figure 2.
Woman's Sports Media Coverage in International Competitions (1972-2024).

Even when women's sports are covered, the framing often differs dramatically from that of men's sports. Research consistently finds that male athletes are portrayed as strong, resilient, and strategically intelligent, whereas female athletes are more frequently depicted through narratives emphasizing their physical appearance, personal lives, or emotional qualities. This gendered language reinforces traditional stereotypes, implying that male athleticism is more authentic and worthy of celebration, while women's accomplishments are secondary to their intrinsic characteristics.

The consequences of such disparities extend far beyond media narratives. They influence audience engagement, sponsorship opportunities, and overall participation in sport. For instance, a qualitative content analysis of 131 Nike advertisements over the past decade [8] exposes a significant gap between the brand's socially progressive image and its actual portrayal of gender. The study reveals that Nike advertisements often reinforce hegemonic masculinity by portraying sport predominantly as a male domain. Female and non-mainstream participants are largely underrepresented, and when diversity is included, it often adheres to conventional standards rather than embracing true inclusivity. This lack of authentic representation can demotivate marginalized groups and limit their participation in sports, thereby reducing the broader social and health benefits of athletic involvement.

Moreover, the limited media visibility of women's sports directly affects financial support and viewership. Female athletes and teams struggle to attract sponsorships and investments, perpetuating a cycle of underfunding and low exposure. The absence of visible female role models in sports media can also discourage young girls from pursuing athletic careers, reinforcing gender disparities in sports participation from an early age.

Addressing these issues demands a coordinated effort by media organizations, policymakers, and sports institutions to challenge entrenched narratives and promote fair representation. By cultivating a media landscape that values women's sports equally, societies can take a critical step toward achieving greater gender equity in the world of sport.

3. The Case of Albania

3.1. Albanian Media Sports Landscape

The sports media landscape in Albania has undergone significant transformation over the past two decades, reflecting the nation's growing interest in sports—particularly football. Traditional print media, once the dominant force, has gradually ceded ground to electronic platforms and television channels that cater to an increasingly tech-savvy population. While major dailies such as *Panorama Sport* and *Sport Ekspres* still provide extensive coverage, online news portals and social media platforms have revolutionized how sports content is consumed. Radio stations like *Top Channel*, *SuperSport Albania*, and *RTSH Sport* remain influential, offering live commentary, news updates, and in-depth interviews, and thus playing a key role in shaping televised sports coverage.

In parallel, the rise of independent commentators, bloggers, and digital content creators on platforms such as YouTube, podcasts, and social media has diversified the voices contributing to public sports discourse. However, alongside these advancements, the sector faces persistent challenges. Issues such as journalistic bias, often influenced by club loyalties, and a lack of objectivity continue to affect the credibility of sports reporting. Financial limitations, particularly among smaller media outlets, restrict the ability to produce in-depth investigative journalism or offer comprehensive coverage of sports beyond top-tier football leagues and national teams.

Moreover, while digitalization has expanded access to information, it has also facilitated the spread of misinformation and sensationalism, at times overshadowing meaningful and ethical sports journalism. Despite these challenges, increased

professionalism and investment in media infrastructure offer a promising path forward. With sustained development, Albania’s sports media industry is well-positioned to deliver more diverse, balanced, and reliable coverage that meets the evolving expectations of its growing audience.

3.2. Albanian Sport Media Gender Biases

Gender norms in Albanian sports media have historically marginalized female professionals, subjecting them to discrimination and stereotyping. A notable example is Emanuela Rusta, Albania's first female international football referee, who has faced considerable bias throughout her career. Despite her impressive accomplishments including officiating top-tier men’s league matches and international women’s games media coverage has often focused on her appearance rather than her professional merit. Headlines such as “*The sexy referee who turns up the heat*” exemplify the objectification that undermines her credibility and contributions to the sport. Frustrated by the constant emphasis on her physical appearance, Rusta remarked, “*They should pay more attention to my professionalism than to something else*”. The persistent sexist remarks ultimately led her to shut down her Instagram account in an effort to escape online harassment.

Rusta’s experiences highlight the broader systemic issues faced by women in Albanian sports media, where entrenched gender stereotypes and biased representations remain widespread. Evidence suggests that female athletes and professionals receive disproportionately limited media coverage, which often prioritizes physical appearance over skill, experience, or achievement. This type of representation not only devalues the role of women in sports but also perpetuates a culture that discourages female participation. According to a 2024 report by UN Women [9] such media portrayals reinforce harmful gender stereotypes and hinder progress toward achieving gender parity in sports.

In response, it is essential for sports media to adopt more equitable and respectful reporting practices ones that emphasize competence, accomplishments, and professionalism over reductive and gendered narratives.

3.3. Review of the ALL IN+ Report and its Comparison with 2019 Findings

The “All In” and “All In Plus” reports highlight the representation of women in sports media as a key area of concern. Below is a focused comparison of how media representation is addressed in both reports.

The “All In” (2018–2019) report identified pronounced gender disparities in sports media coverage, with women’s sports receiving significantly less attention than men’s. When female athletes were featured, the focus was often on their appearance, personal lives, or emotional expressions rather than their athletic performance. This approach reinforced stereotypical narratives and contributed to the marginalization of women in sports media. Additionally, the report revealed that very few sports associations had formal policies in place to promote gender-sensitive media coverage. These findings underscore the urgent need for more balanced and equitable reporting practices—ones that prioritize athletes’ skills and accomplishments over outdated and reductive gender stereotypes.

The “All In Plus” (2023-2025) report revealed both progress and ongoing challenges in the media representation of women's sport. Some visible progress compared to previous years has been seen, with 35% of sport organizations currently attempting to achieve gender-balanced media coverage. Gains have been patchy geographically, however, with Austria (65%) and Spain (59%) leading the way in embracing gender-sensitive media policy, while others lag behind. Despite these advances, fewer than 30% of sporting bodies have set standards to ensure fair representation of women players, leaving the field open to discrimination and inconsistency. Media coverage of women's sport remains star-driven, as indicated by the decline in ratings for women's basketball following the departure of Caitlin Clark. Also, women players still face major commercial imbalances, with minimal economic benefits in contrast to their male counterparts. In addition, media portrayal has a tendency to perpetuate harmful stereotypes, and gender-atypical players are most vulnerable to online abuse and negative stereotyping. While there has been some improvement, the report stresses that there must be more systematic policy and continued commitment to equitable and respectful media portrayal of women in sport.

While there has been progress in addressing gender disparities in sports media, the “All in Plus” report shows that systemic issues persist. Women’s sports still struggle for equal airtime, fair representation, and financial support. Despite positive trends, more coordinated efforts are needed to ensure sustained and meaningful change in how female athletes are portrayed in the media.

Table 1.
Comparisons between “All In” vs. “All In Plus”.

Aspect	All In (2018-2019)	All In Plus (2023-2025)
Media Attention	Minimal, highly gendered	Increased but still uneven
Stereotypes	Strong focus on personal life & looks	Some progress, but persists
Policy Adoption	Very few organizations had guidelines	35% have taken steps, <30% have formal policies
Progress Areas	Identified the issue	Some regional progress (Austria, Spain), but slow overall
Challenges	Need for better representation	Star-driven viewership, online abuse, financial disparities

4. The Role of Media Organizations

Media sources play a vital role in shaping public perceptions of women's sports. Adopting best practices for balanced sports reporting is essential for promoting gender equality. These practices include providing equal coverage of men's and women's sporting events, focusing on athletic performance rather than personal lives or physical appearance, and employing gender-neutral language in media narratives. Establishing official editorial guidelines for fair representation can help eliminate bias and foster a more inclusive media culture.

Equally important is the advancement of gender balance within sports media itself. Increasing the presence of women sportswriters, commentators, and analysts contributes to more nuanced, accurate, and representative reporting. Media outlets can support this shift by actively recruiting, developing, and promoting women in key sports journalism roles [10-16]. By prioritizing gender diversity in their staffing and committing to equitable reporting practices, media organizations can play a pivotal role in reshaping how female athletes are portrayed and perceived.

Several impactful visibility and awareness campaigns across Europe have demonstrated success in increasing the media presence of women in sports. Notable examples include:

- This Girl Can (United Kingdom) [17]: Launched by Sport England in 2015, this campaign encouraged women of all ages, shapes, and abilities to engage in physical activity. Using a mix of TV advertisements, social media outreach, and community initiatives, the campaign challenged prevailing stereotypes and inspired over 1.6 million women to begin exercising.
- Visibility of Female Athletes in E-Media (Croatia) [18]: Initiated in 2018 by the Croatian Agency for Electronic Media in partnership with the Croatian Olympic Committee and the Office for Gender Equality, this project aimed to increase women's sports coverage across digital platforms. It included video clips and radio jingles broadcast on multiple channels, resulting in unprecedented exposure for female athletes in Croatia.
- Women's Sport Trust Campaigns (United Kingdom) [19]: Active since 2012, the Women's Sport Trust has launched several influential initiatives such as "Visibility Reporting," which tracks and publicizes broadcast data on women's sports, and "Unlocked," a leadership program that empowers female athletes to become prominent voices in sports and beyond.
- Orange the World (Germany) [20]: Focused on combating gender-based violence, this campaign-supported by athletes like Giulia Gwinn-also addresses systemic issues in women's football, such as inadequate funding and discrimination. It advocates for structural reforms to enhance gender equality in sports.
- Club YLA Initiatives (Belgium) [21]: As the women's team of Club Brugge, Club YLA has pioneered a unique branding approach that highlights diversity, inclusion, and female entrepreneurship. By organizing conferences and collaborating with women-led brands, the team promotes innovation in women's football and inspires other clubs to follow suit.

These campaigns have played a crucial role in challenging stereotypes, elevating the visibility of women's sports, and celebrating the achievements of female athletes across Europe.

5. Conclusion

This research work underscores the persistent gender disparities in sports media coverage in Albania, particularly the underrepresentation and stereotypical portrayal of female athletes. Despite global progress in promoting gender equality, Albanian sports media continue to prioritize male athletes both in the volume of coverage and in the nature of the narratives presented. The findings highlight the urgent need for more inclusive media practices that celebrate the achievements of female athletes on equal terms with their male counterparts.

Addressing these inequalities requires a comprehensive strategy that includes public awareness campaigns, policy-level interventions, and active involvement from sports organizations and media outlets. By promoting broader and fairer representation, Albanian sports media can play a vital role in advancing gender equality in both sports and society at large. In addition, the growing influence of digital and social media provides an opportunity to counterbalance traditional media biases. Online platforms offer space for grassroots movements, athlete-driven storytelling, and alternative narratives that can elevate women's sports and challenge dominant representations. Leveraging these platforms strategically can increase the visibility of female athletes and foster greater public engagement.

Future research should further investigate the influence of sports media representation on youth perceptions, particularly how it impacts the career aspirations and self-image of young girls. Moreover, comparative studies across Balkan or Southeastern European countries could provide valuable insights into regional patterns, successes, and areas for collaboration.

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