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## Representation of female athletes in Bengal dailies: Examining a gender gap in sports media coverage

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### Abstract

The global gender gap report has shown a persistent gender gap in female representation in sports media coverage, even among the countries ranked top in the global gender gap report. It is no surprising in Indian dailies, with particular reference to Bengal dailies. Based on a quantitative approach involving content analysis, this article explores the representation level of female athletes in three popular Bengal dailies. This article uses Gerbner and Gross's theory of symbolic annihilation as an analytical tool to examine the gender gap in Bengal dailies. Based on the result, male athletes were found to have received the highest media coverage in all three newspapers compared to female athletes. The sports news coverage for male athletes was found in all newspaper sections, but it was all at the bottom of the sports section page for female athletes. In addition, cricket was found to have received extensive media coverage compared to other sports. Overall, the findings highlighted a gender gap or bias in the representation of female athletes in Bengal dailies, as they have underrepresented female athletes, which seems to be a male preserve.

**Keywords:** Gender Gap, Sports media coverage, Female athletes, Bengal dailies

### Introduction

The global gender gap report has shown gender inequality in sports media coverage and the persistent gender gap in female representation in sports media coverage, even among the countries ranked top in the global gender gap report <sup>[1]</sup>. It is unsurprising in Indian dailies, with special reference to Bengal dailies.

Often sports media reports no denigration or gender marking of the male athletes even if they are not winning the competition they were expected to win. They are not stigmatised as female because of their loss but seem to be treated as normal athletes. Such sports media reports of male-dominant discourse confirm how male athletes are part of the sports media doxa <sup>[1]</sup>. This means that sports media is male-dominated, and there is a trivialisation of female's sports through/in the sports media coverage published in the newspapers.

Past studies have mainly focused on international mega events such as the Olympics and icon-based sports like cricket, tennis etc., for example, in a study on sports news coverage in Bengal dailies, it shows a greater sports news for the female athlete than the male athlete but the study was conducted during the Rio Olympic Games only <sup>[2]</sup>. But in what ways media have covered female sports news during national competitions such as Khelo India youth games seem neglected and unaccounted for. Such a gap in sports media coverage for female athletes during national games offers opportunities for academic inquiry. Therefore, the objectives of this study were to explore the level of representation of female athletes in Bengal dailies, to identify the sport that receives extensive coverage in Bengal dailies, and to highlight differences in the representation of male and female athletes in sports media coverage.

### Research Method

This study adopts a quantitative approach using content analysis of sports news published in the three popular Bengal daily newspapers. The study addresses the following research questions: Does the gender gap exist in sports media coverage of Bengal dailies? And, in what ways are female athletes represented in Bengal dailies?

Content analysis technique was employed to evaluate data, as this technique maintains the objectivity of the analysis<sup>[3]</sup>. In this study, the units of analysis were the number of female and male news stories supported by photographs, female and male news with and without photographs, the location of female athletes' news, and the division of news coverage among different sports disciplines. A percentage analysis technique was used to determine gender differences in sports media coverage.

Using the purposive sampling method, the sample consists of three online Bengal dailies: Anandabazar Patrika, Sangbad Pratidin and the Telegraph. Three Bengal dailies were selected based on their wide circulation. The sampling period was ten days, from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, and was purposefully selected because the Khelo India youth games were being held in India during this time. This purposive sampling allowed for an analysis of coverage of the latest national games in which both male and female athletes had participated.

### Theoretical Background

The introduction of the theoretical background helps to explain why the research problem under study exists. It provides a framework and perspective to look at the problem under investigation. We will present some theoretical perspectives, which will serve as analytical tools to identify gender gap in media coverage of sports persons. Gerbner and Gross (1976) coined the term "symbolic annihilation" to refer to the absence or underrepresentation of a group of individuals in the media, for instance, based on sex, race, or sexual orientation, which furthers social inequality. Symbolic annihilation is usually used to describe females and members of racial and sexual minorities; it highlights how negative media representation may lead to social marginalisation and how symbolic exclusion in the media can eliminate people and groups from the public consciousness (Coleman & Yochim, 2008). Moreover, Gaye Tuchman, extending further the theory of symbolic annihilation, also talks about female depiction by the mass media. He argues that the content of the media distorts female's status in the social world and does not present females who are viable role models<sup>[4]</sup>. Within such a framework, this study also examines whether female athletes are underrepresented or absent in the sports media coverage of Bengal dailies.

In addition, the present study also uses the theory of representation in media studies, which explains how a particular person or group of people are presented to the audience. This theory argues that the representation of a group or people may seem natural but it is constructed by the media. Media producers can reinforce existing representation or can change it by going opposite of the flow<sup>[3]</sup>. It goes the same for the representation of

female athletes and, specifically for this research, the representation of national and regional female athletes in media coverage. This study, therefore, seeks to investigate whether the media reinforces traditional gender logic in sports coverage as it already exists in sports, which is male-dominated.

### Result of the study

The results of the present study have been shown in the following tables and paragraphs:

**Table 1:** Total number of sports news stories

Newspaper	Total sports news stories
Anandabazar Patrika	187
Sangbad Pratidin,	109
The Telegraph	223

The Telegraph, an English newspaper, found to have published the greatest number of sports news with 223 sports news stories as it is shown in the above table-1. Two other Bengali dailies, namely Anandabazar Patrika and Sangbad Pratidin have 187 and 109 sports news published in their dailies.

**Table 2:** Differences between male and female sports media coverage

Newspaper	Men	Female	Total
Anandabazar Patrika	176	11	187
Sangbad Pratidin,	102	7	109
The Telegraph	208	15	223
Total	486	33	519
%	93.6%	6.4%	1038

The result in table 2 shows that the difference between male and female athletes in sports news coverage in three dailies of Bengal is huge, as the above table shows that 93.6% of sports news is for male athletes and 6.4% is for female athletes. This indicates that all three Bengal dailies prefer male athletes' news coverage more than female athletes.

**Table 3:** Sports news with/without photograph

Newspaper	With photographs	Without photographs	Total
Anandabazar Patrika	74	113	187
Sangbad Pratidin,	97	12	109
The Telegraph	103	120	223
Total	274	245	519
%	52.8%	47.2%	1038

Table 3 shows that the three Bengal dailies have covered 52.8% of sports news with photographs and 47.2% without photographs. This suggests that the three Bengal dailies prefer sports news to be with photographs then without it.

**Table 4:** Differences within male and female sports news with/without photograph

Newspaper	Male		Female		Total
	With photographs	Without photographs	With photographs	Without photographs	
Anandabazar Patrika	70	106	4	7	187
Sangbad Pratidin,	93	9	4	3	109
The Telegraph	97	111	6	9	223
Total	260	226	14	19	519
%	50.1%	43.5%	2.7%	3.7%	1038

Within male athletes' sports news coverage, table 4 shows that 50.1% are with photographs and 43.5% are without photographs. However, within female athletes' sports news, only 2.7% with photographs and 3.7% are without photographs. This indicated that three dailies mostly prefer

to publish male athletes' news with photographs than without it. However, in the case of female athletes, the three dailies prefer to publish female athletes' news mostly without photographs than with it.

**Table 5:** Male and female comparison of sports news- with and without picture

Newspaper	With photographs			Without photographs		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Anandabazar Patrika	70	4	74	106	7	113
Sangbad Pratidin,	93	4	97	9	3	12
The Telegraph	97	6	103	111	9	120
Total	260	14	274	226	19	245
%	94.8%	5.2%		92.2%	7.8%	490

The male and female comparison on sports news with and without photographs as shown in the table-5 indicated that the male athletes have received more coverage (94.8%) than female athlete (5.2%) in terms of sports news with photographs. Similarly, in terms of sports news without

photographs male athletes have received more coverage (92.2%) than female athlete (7.8%). This suggests that sports news coverage of three Bengal dailies is male dominated.

**Table 6:** Locations of sports news on the whole newspaper

Newspaper	Front page	Middle page	Last page	Total
Anandabazar Patrika	1	5	181	187
Sangbad Pratidin,	0	16	93	109
The Telegraph	0	1	222	223
Total	01	22	496	519
%	0.2%	4.2%	95.6%	1,038

The above table shows that Anandabazar Patrika publishes their sports news mainly on the last page, with 90% of male athletes' coverage. Similarly, Sangbad Pratidin and Telegraph have followed the same pattern with 77% and

93% coverage on the last page compared to the front and the middle pages. The above data provides an insight that all three dailies of Bengal prefer sports news coverage to be on the last page of their newspapers.

**Table 7:** Location of Male/Female sports news on the whole newspaper & sports section

Newspaper	Front page		Middle page		Last page (sports section)		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Anandabazar Patrika	1	0	5	0	170	11	187
Sangbad Pratidin,	0	0	16	0	85	8	109
The Telegraph	0	0	0	1	208	14	223
Total	1	0	21	1	463	33	519
%	0.19%	0%	4.1%	0.19%	89.2%	6.4%	1,038

As shown in the above table-7, the result indicated that sports news for male athletes found to have located in the front (0.19%), middle (4.1%) and last pages(89.2%), however there is no sports news of female athletes on the front page (0%), it is just (0.19%) in the middle page and all are located in the last page (6.4%). the appearance of male athletes' news were found in all the section of the newspaper that is in the front, middle and the last page of

newspapers, however there is no sports news of female athletes on the front page, all are concentrated in the last page of the whole newspaper. Neither of the three newspapers published any news of female sports on the front page. Moreover, within sports section, male athletes receives the highest coverage (89.2%) then female athletes (6.4%).

**Table 8:** Location of female athletes' news on sports section

Newspaper	Top of the page	Middle of the page	Bottom of the page
Anandabazar Patrika	6	1	4
Sangbad Pratidin,	0	0	7
The Telegraph	5	7	3
Total	11	8	14
%	33%	24%	43%

In the above table-8 about the location of female athletes' news within sports news page, the table shows that (33%) is on the top, (24%) in middle and (43%) at the bottom.

The data suggests that all the three newspapers found to have published most of the female sports news at the bottom of the page of their newspapers.

**Table 9:** Sports-wise news coverage

Newspaper	Type of sports																		Total
	Football	Horse Race	Cricket	Hockey	Table Tennis	Car Racing	Winter Sport	Body building	Athletics	Water polo	Kabaddi	Tennis	Wrestling	Volleyball	Badminton	Chess	Golf	Boxing	
Anandabazar Patrika	53	0	109	6	1	0	2	1	3	1	1	8	2	0	0	0	0	0	187
Sangbad Pratidin,	30	0	72	0	3	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	109
The Telegraph	62	10	92	2	3	5	13	0	2	0	1	20	0	2	2	1	4	4	223
Total	144	10	273	8	7	6	17	1	5	1	3	28	2	2	2	1	4	4	519
%	27.7	2	52.6	1.5	1.3	1.1	3.3	0.2	0.96	0.2	0.57	5.3	0.38	0.38	0.38	0.2	0.77	0.77	

With regard to sports-wise coverage of news in the newspapers of the three Bengal dailies, the above table-9 highlighted that Cricket (52.6%) was found to receive the highest coverage, followed by football (27.7%) compared to other sports. On the other hand, Chess (0.2%) and Kabaddi (0.57%) received the lowest coverage in all three newspapers of Bengal.

### Discussions of the findings

While addressing the research questions within the theoretical framework of symbolic annihilation and the representation theory in media studies, this study, using content analysis, highlighted the following key findings.

In this study, the Telegraph, an English newspaper, was found to have published the greatest number of sports news compared to two other Bengali newspapers, namely Anandabazar Patrika and Sangbad Pratidin. Comparing the male and female sports news with photographs and without photographs, the result showed that the three Bengal dailies prefer male athletes more than female athletes. This suggests that sports news coverage of three Bengal dailies is male-dominated, and they seem to consider news from men's sports as more important and attractive. In addition, the result showed that the three Bengal dailies prefer sports news with photographs to news without them.

Regarding sports news with/without photographs in the context of male athletes, the result indicated that three dailies mostly prefer to publish male athletes' news with photographs rather than without it. However, in the case of female athletes, the three dailies prefer to publish female athletes' news mostly without photographs than with it. This also suggests the taken-for-granted views of news media on the aspects of female's sports news coverage in Bengal dailies.

With regard to page preference for sports news coverage, the result shown in the table-6 indicated that all three Bengal dailies mostly prefer sports news to be on the last page of their newspapers. This provides an insight that the mainstream news media prefer other issues to be published in the front pages than the sport's stories. However, few stories of male athletes, as shown in the table-7, were occasionally found in all the section of the newspaper that is in the front, middle and the last page of newspapers, however there is no sports news of female athletes on the front page, all were concentrated on the last page of the whole newspaper. Neither of the three newspapers published any news of female sports on the front page. Moreover, within sports news section, male athletes receive the highest coverage (89.2%) then female athletes (6.4%). The findings also identified that all the three newspapers published female sports news at the bottom of the sports news section. This least amount or the absence of female athletes' stories in Bengal dailies substantiates the existence of sexed based

symbolic annihilation. In other words, the underrepresentation of female athletes and sports in Bengal dailies seemed to be rooted in culturally embedded gender ideology, which needs further research to explore and explain the underlying social structures influencing the stakeholders of sports media. These findings, in a way, suggest that the media have a role in the trivialisation of female's sports by valorising men's sports. In this study female athletes were found underrepresented in the sports media coverage, which appeared inclined with the argument put forth by Sarikakis (2013) wherein the author argues that the media construct meanings and narratives of the local and the global world through content and production processes. It is dominated by consumer-oriented discourse and by the cultural meanings the people hold about not only what is considered to be issues of common concern in society but also about who is considered legitimate – even worthy – to speak about them<sup>[5]</sup>.

Similar findings were also observed by Kabir *et al.* in their study on the female T20 World Cup, who found female cricket teams getting little coverage on sports pages. They advocated that females suffer from inequalities in almost every aspect of society. In the sports sector, no different picture is observed<sup>[3]</sup>.

Regarding sports-wise news coverage in the three Bengal dailies, as shown in Table 9, Cricket (52.6%) was found to have received the highest news coverage, followed by football (27.7%) compared to other sports. On the other hand, Chess (0.2%) and Kabaddi (0.57%) receive the lowest news coverage in the three selected newspapers of Bengal. This suggests that the Bengal dailies prefer popular sports like cricket over other symbolically important sports such as hockey, female's sports, para-athletes, and even traditional Indian games like kabaddi. Similarly, in another study of Bengal dailies, media coverage focused mainly on international cricket and football competitions. For example, a study by Roy *et al.* (2018) found that the sports media representation mainly focused on popular international sports like cricket and football and mostly represented popular sports Icons<sup>[6]</sup>.

### Conclusion

The findings of this study highlighted that male athletes received the highest media coverage in all three newspapers than female athletes. The stories of male athletes were found in all the newspaper sections; however, no sports news of female athletes was found on the front page, and all were on the newspaper's last page. Even within the sports section, male athletes received the highest coverage than female athletes; such a meagre amount or the absence of female athletes' stories in Bengal dailies substantiates the existence of sex-based symbolic annihilation. Overall, the findings highlighted a gender gap or bias in the representation of

female athletes in Bengal dailies, as they have underrepresented female athletes, which seems to be a male-preserve.

Moreover, the findings highlighted that cricket received the highest news coverage, followed by football. On the other hand, Chess and Kabaddi receive the lowest coverage. This further suggests media preference for popular sports like cricket over other symbolically important sports like hockey, women's sports, para-athletes, and traditional Indian games.

Although the findings highlighted a gender gap or bias in the representation of female athletes in Bengal dailies, which seemed to be a male preserve, it may not be generalised to a larger extent because the units of analysis were based on content analysis of regional daily newspapers and were conducted within a small sampling period.

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