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# Female athletes and journalists in television sport news programmes, in comparison to their male counterparts

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** This research article examines the sport news programmes broadcast by the main television networks in Spain, in order to achieve two objectives: first, to analyse the representation and informative treatment of female athletes in comparison to their male counterparts and, second, to evaluate gender equality in sport journalism. **Method:** The study adopts a quantitative approach based on the content analysis technique. **Results and conclusions:** The results show a scarce presence of female athletes in comparison to their male counterparts, as well as the presence of certain journalistic mechanisms that subordinate women’s sport to men’s sport. Moreover, men also predominate in all roles involved in sport journalism. Therefore, the results suggest that television sport news programmes reinforce and perpetuate the idea of sport as a field made by and for men.

## Keywords

Gender inequality; sport news programmes; journalists; female athletes; coverage.

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Translation by **CA Martínez-Arcos**  
(PhD in Communication from the University of London, UK)

## 1. Introduction

The objective of this research study is to compare the representation and information treatment of athletes depending on their sex, as well as the appearance of male and female journalists in the television sport news programmes broadcast by the main Spanish TV networks.

Throughout history, sport has been considered a naturally and typically male practice because it is a field where “the traits traditionally demanded from real men are symbolically expressed” (Vega, 2012, p.2). However, the opposite has occurred in the case of women since hegemonic femininity dictates very different qualities (fragility, sweetness, etc.) and roles (family and reproduction obligations, etc.) that are incompatible with the constructed nature of sport (Lallana, 2012). Therefore, except for some sport modalities, female athletes come in contradiction with their biological condition to achieve greater sport performance.

In this sense, the media reinforce this idea through different mechanisms that render female athletes invisible or represent them under certain conditions that involve their subordination with regards to their male counterparts (Altés, 2004). Therefore, the importance of this research has to do with the privileged role of the media as agents of socialisation and, specifically, as potential generators of change, since they do not only reach a large audience, but also do so on a daily basis.

## 2. State of the art and hypotheses

Some authors have highlighted the tendency to research sport from sciences like physiology and economics, among others. However, despite the popularity of sport, there is no theoretical work on sport from a journalistic perspective (Manfredi, Rojas, Herranz, 2015). Nonetheless, there are studies that underpin this research and are based on theoretical strands and postulates that are explained below.

Thus, the strand of studies that underpin this research are gender and communication studies that, in turn, are part of the cultural studies, which have greatly influenced the former and given them a strong critical sense (Mattelart, 1982). In the same way, this research is based on the postulates of the agenda-setting and framing theories when it comes to study specifically the issues and frames integrated into sport news. To be precise, the agenda is set by emphasising issues related to male sports, by offering more and longer news of this type, and by placing them in the introductory news summary (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). This type of strategies has been identified by various research studies that reveal the under-representation of female athletes and the over-representation of their male counterparts in television sport news programmes (López, 2005; La Torre *et al.*, 2007; Aztiker, 2011; Cooky and Messner, 2015), although there has been a slight improvement in the representation of women in public TV networks in comparison to their private counterparts (Farré, Saperas and Navarro, 1998; Fernández, 2008).

In addition, journalists confer certain frames to sport news, offering a different point of view depending on the sex the protagonist of the news (Igartua and Humanes, 2004). In this sense, some authors have pointed out that news about women’s sports appear only when female athletes represent the nation (Bruce, Hovden and Markula, 2010), when they have won a competition or when the intention is to emphasise an aspect related to the human dimension (ASPIC, 2014). Likewise,

research has also found that the possibilities for female athletes of receiving coverage increase when they practice a sport that is considered to be more “fitting” to their sex (Coronado, 2013; Jones, 2011) and when they appear as sexual objects (Herrero *et al.*, 2010). On the other hand, some research studies have also confirmed the under-representation of female journalists, especially in the categories of special reporters and special correspondents (Farré, Saperas and Navarro, 1998; López, 2005; Fernandez, 2008).

Based on this literature review, we have formulated the following hypotheses: H1. There is an quantitative underrepresentation of news featuring female athletes in comparison to their male counterparts. H2. Women’s sport news stories are considered to be of minor importance in comparison to news about their male counterparts. H3. Most news show male and female athletes practicing sports that are considered to be “appropriate” to their sex. H4. While male athletes can become the protagonist of news stories under any circumstance, female athletes tend to appear with greater frequency when the objective of the news is to emphasise some aspect of human interest or when women win a tournament of great relevance, specially international competitions in which they represent Spain. H5. Women have lower representation than men as journalists in all professional roles, but women’s presence is even lower in the categories reporters and special correspondents. H6. The representation of female athletes and journalists is slightly more positive in public than in private TV networks.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1. Data collection instruments**

This research study takes a descriptive approach based on the use of data collection tools and content analysis. To this end, a code system was developed to register and evaluate the variables of study: 1) news identification data (date, network, day of the week, type of news depending on sex); 2) importance and location of news (duration, inclusion in introductory summary, order, interviews, use of music, etc.); 3) type of sport covered in the news (sport type and team); 4) Competitive field (national or international; Spain or another country; popular) and motive of the news (human or sporting interest: win, defeat, tie, information).

#### **3.2. Sample**

The unit of analysis was the news and the sampling method was semi-probabilistic, intentional and systematic, based on one constructed week (Krippendorff, 1990) to avoid distortions that may result from the selection of a small informative period (Teramo, 2006). The selected constructed week spans from 11 April to 29 May, 2016. The final sample of news was composed of 145 items. The study included the analysis of the sport news programmes broadcast by one public TV network, *TVE1*, and two private TV networks, *Cuatro* and *La Sexta*, in order to represent the main TV groups. The selected time slot was the night slot, which covers the prime time of Spanish TV.

### 3.3. Procedure

The statistical programme SPSS was used for data encoding and analysis and for reliability tests. In order to ensure the reliability of the process, three coders carried out independent analyses of the same material, which constituted 15% of the total sample [1]. The rest of the sample was analysed only by one researcher. In this sense, Krippendorff's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) reliability coefficient (Neuendorf, 2002) was used to measure the agreement among coders for all the variables, obtaining a high average reliability index of 0.94.

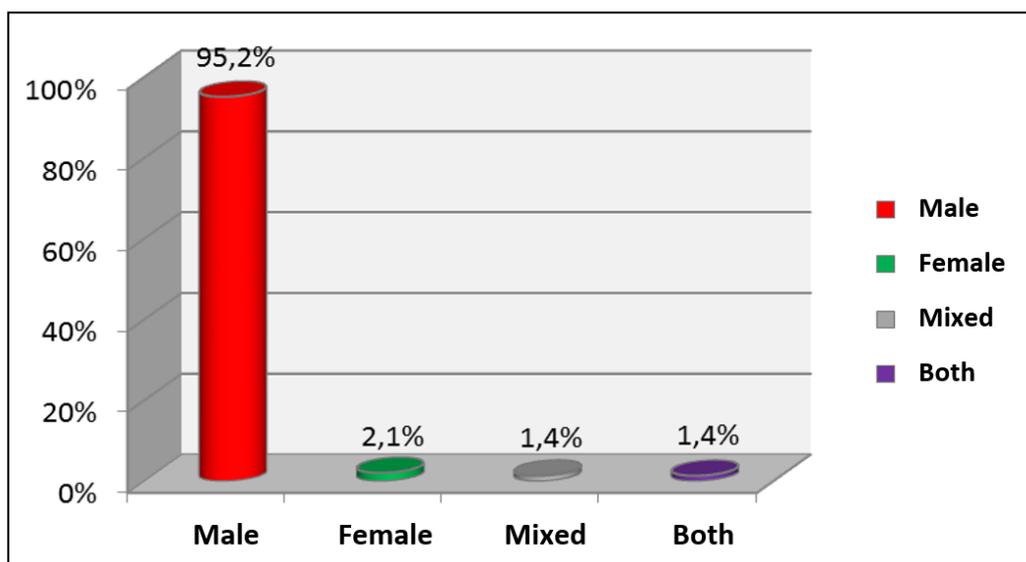
The descriptive analysis of the data involved the creation of contingency tables and graphic representations. In some cases, contingency tables were also created to verify the possible significant associations among variables through the chi-squared test ( $\chi^2$ ). However, the fact that the analysis depended on such disappointing results in terms of the number of news about female athletes limited the possibilities to carry out statistical comparisons between the different groups of the news sample according to the sex variable.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Types of news by protagonist's sex

Frequency distribution was used to calculate the percentage distribution of news types by the protagonist's sex (figure1). The results were as follows: Of the sample of sport news, 95.2% were about male sports, only 2.1% about female sports, 1.4% about mixed-sex sports (both sexes in the same sport competition) and 1.4% about both-sex sports (both sexes in different competitions). In numerical terms, of the sample of news, 138 items featured male athletes and only 3 featured female athletes; 2 were about mixed-sex sports and 2 about both-sex sports (in which the protagonists were also men).

**Figure 1. Distribution of news by protagonist's sex**

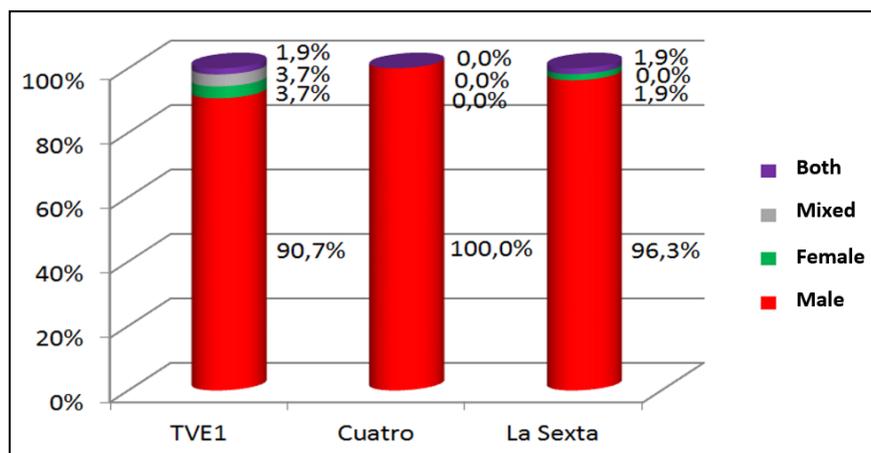


Source: Authors' own creation

#### 4.2. Types of news by protagonist's sex and TV network

The results about the percentage distribution of news depending on the sex of the news protagonist and the TV network were as follows (graph 2): In the case of *TVE1*, 90.7% of the sport news had a male protagonist and only 3.7% had a female protagonist; 3.7% had mixed-sex sports as protagonists and 1.9% had both sexes as protagonists. In *Cuatro*, 100% of the sport news were about male sports. In *La Sexta*, 96.3% of the sport news were about male athletes and only 1.9% about their female counterparts; 0% about mixed-sex sports and 1.9% about both-sex sports.

Figure 2. Distribution of news by protagonist's sex and TV network

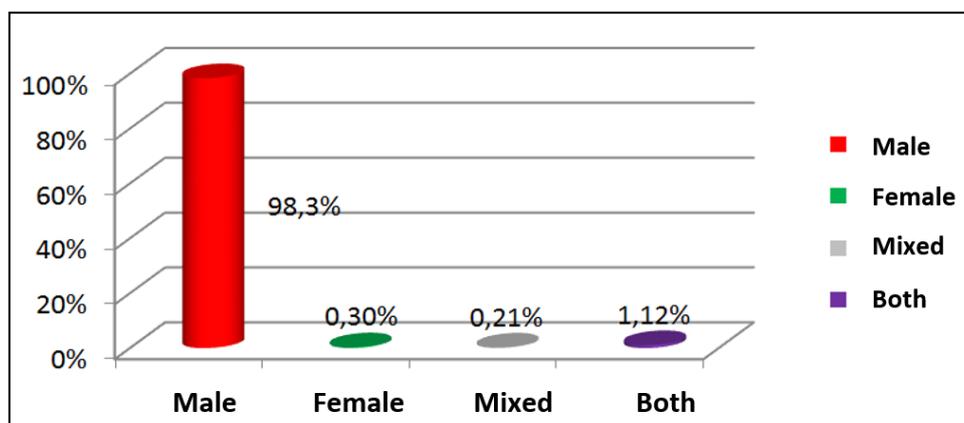


Source: Authors' own creation

#### 4.3. Duration of news by protagonist's sex

In terms of the percentage distribution of the news time by the sex of the news' protagonist (figure 3), 98.3% of the news time was devoted to male sports, only 0.30% to female sports, 0.21% to mixed-sex sports and 1.12% to both-sex sports.

Figure 3. Distribution of news by duration and protagonist's sex



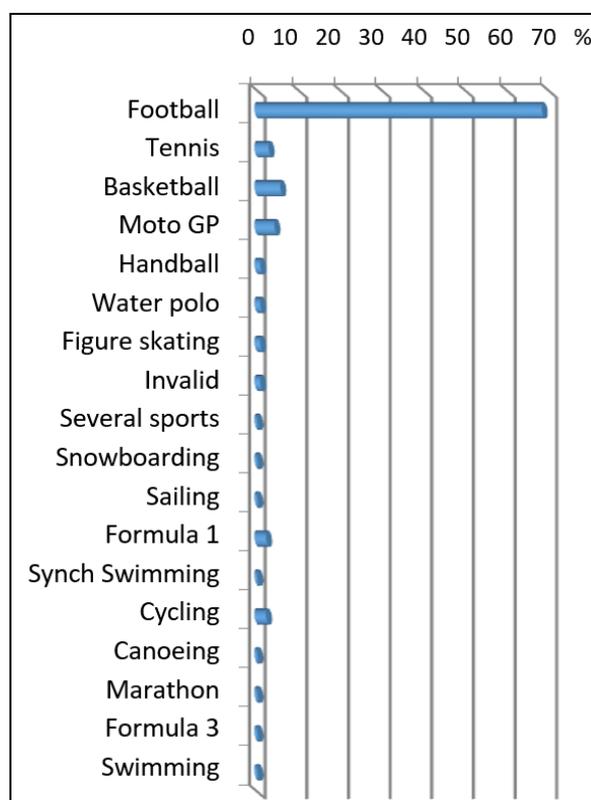
Source: Authors' own creation

In the same way, the news time was divided in quartiles, in which the first quartile referred to clips of less than 25 seconds, the second to clips of 25-58 seconds, the third to clips of 59-125.50 seconds and the fourth to clips longer than 125.51 seconds. Therefore, the duration variable went from having a numerical value to an ordinal value, in order to be able to measure the correlation between variables across a contingency table. The application of the chi-squared test ( $\chi^2$ ) to determine the level of significance (p) indicated that, while there is no significant association, there is a trend-based association since the p-value is greater than 0.05 and less or equal to 0.10 [ $\chi^2$  (9, N=145) = 16.56, p=.056]. This fact is evident when we confirmed that the duration of all the female and mixed-sex sport news clips lasted less than 25 seconds and were within the first quartile, while the male sport news were evenly distributed along all quartiles. Both-sex sport news clips were within the second and last quartiles.

#### 4.4. Diversity of sports in sport news programmes

The sports that appeared from highest to lowest frequency in the news programmes were (figure 4): football with 69%, followed, far behind, by basketball with 6.2%, Moto GP with 4.8%, Tennis with 3.4%, Cycling and Formula1 with 2.8%; handball, water polo and figure skating, each with 1.4%; and, in last place, with 0.7%, snowboarding, sailing, canoeing, swimming, Formula 3 and marathon.

**Figure 4. Distribution of news by sports**



Source: Authors' own creation

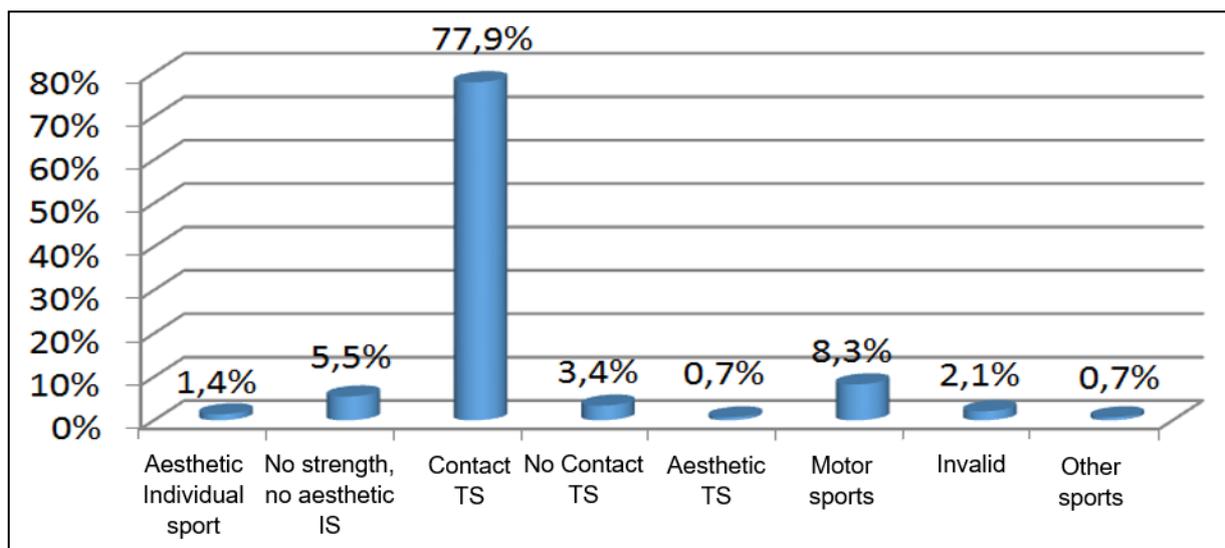
The contingency table indicated that there were significant differences between the type of sport and the sex of the athletes presented in the news, based on the statistical test  $\chi^2$  [ $\chi^2$  (51, N=145) = 373.53, p=.000]

#### 4.5. Sport categories in sport news programmes

With regards to the categories of sports presented in the news (Figure 5), 77.9% were contact team sports (Contact TS), followed far behind by motor sports (MS), with 8.3%; individual sports that do not require strength or aesthetic qualities (no strength-aesthetics IS) with 5.5%; non-contact team sports (No-contact TS) with 3.4%; aesthetic individual sports (Aesthetic IS) with 1.4%; aesthetic team sports (Aesthetic TS); and others sports, with 0.7%. The category “invalid” refers to news that do not refer to any specific sports (2.1%).

The contingency table indicated that there were significant correlations between sport categories and the sex of athletes [ $\chi^2$  (21, N=145) = 199.11, p=.000]

Figure 5. Distribution of news by sport category



Source: Authors' own creation

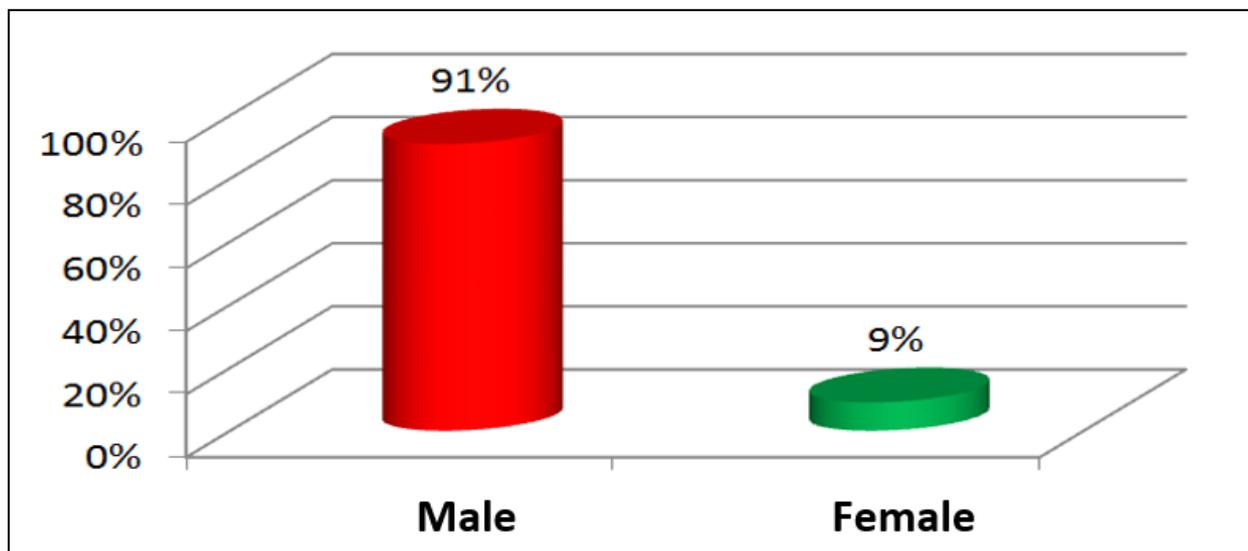
#### 4.6. Gender equality in sport journalism

With regards to the news presenters, 91% were men and the remaining 9% were women (figure 6). In terms of the sex of the reporters that appeared in the news, excluding the “invalid” category (which refers to news without a reporter), 53.4% of the news had male reporters, 33% female reporters and 13.6% had both male and female reporters (figure 7). Finally, regarding the sex of the

voice-over included in the sport news, 79.95% of the news had a male voice-over, only 13.28% had a female voice-over, and 6.76% had both male and female voice-overs (figure 8).

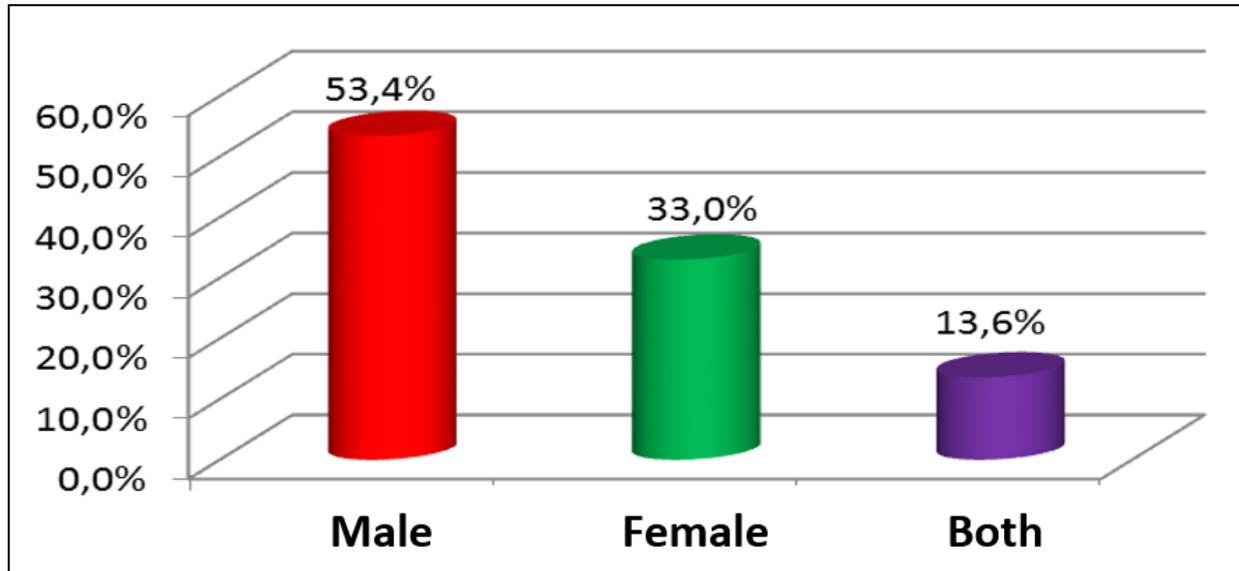
In the same way, taking into account the TV networks, there are trend differences in the case of the presenters on the basis of sex [ $\chi^2$  (2, N=145) = 5.006, p=.082]. Specifically, in *TVE1*, 88.9% of the presenters were men and only 11.1% were women; in *Cuatro*, 100% of the presenters were men; and in *La Sexta* 87% of the presenters were men and only 13% were women.

**Figure 6. Distribution of sport news by presenters' sex**



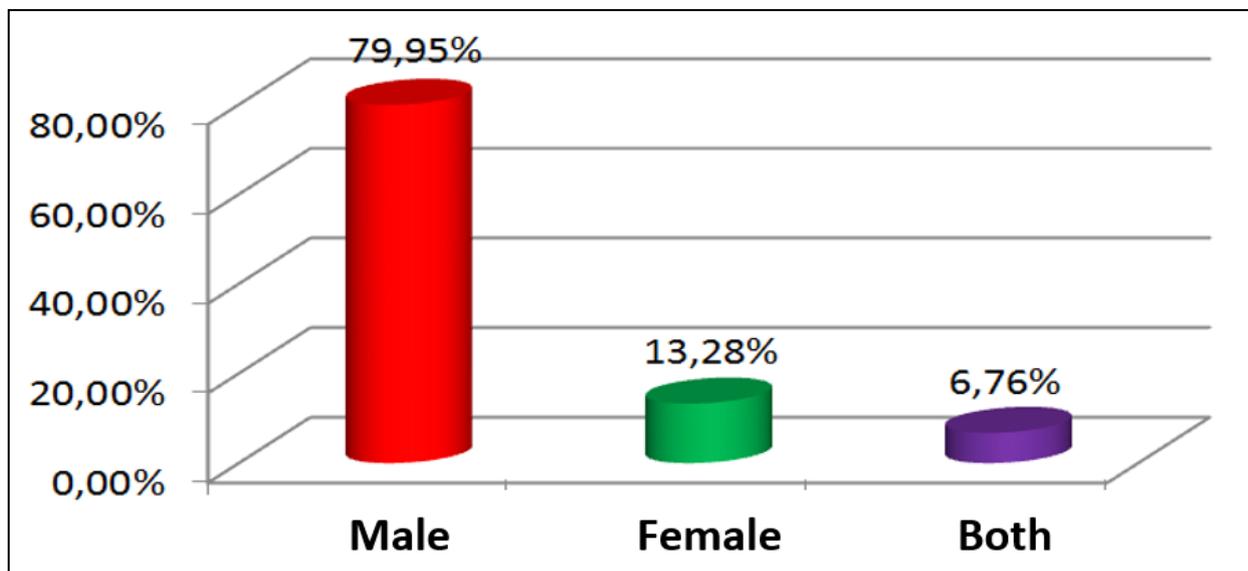
Source: Authors' own creation

Figure 7. Distribution of sport news by reporters' sex



Source: Authors' own creation

Figure 8. Distribution of sport news by the sex of the voice-over



Source: Authors' own creation

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

According to the agenda-setting theory, and based on the fact that in the constructed week of analysis 95.5% of the sport news were about male sports and only 2.1% were about female sports, we can

confirm the first hypothesis (H1) and support previous research findings that highlight the invisibility of women sport news. Specifically, Bach *et al.* (2000) refer to sport news as “an area of alarm” because it is the space that offers the lowest media coverage to female athletes in all platforms (press, television, etc.). Therefore, these percentages reflect a systematic absence of women’s sports and an overrepresentation of male sports, which transmits the message that the male athlete is the “only newsworthy athlete in news media” (Ibáñez, 2001, p. 111). In this way, sport news sets an agenda that indicates that male sports are relevant and, therefore, are the topics that people must talk about (Sábada, 2008).

In the same way, the duration of sport news clearly indicates the lower importance granted to female sports in comparison to male sports, given that 98.3% of the news time is dedicated to male sports and only 0.30% to female sports. There are also other aspects that indicate that some types of news have priority over other news but, due to the small number of female sports news found in the sample obtained in the constructed week, it has not been possible to make statistical comparisons between male and female athletes in all the sport categories. However, it is relevant to note how such elements become evident in the three news items that featured women, since they could reflect the trends of sport news programmes. Thus, we observed that the three news about female sports are placed in the last quarter of the news programme and that none of them appears in the introductory summary, that none of them includes live connections and that none of them includes music nor the spoken commentary of female athletes. In addition, it is important to note that two of the three news were offered by the same news programme (*TVE1*), that they are presented in the same section, which gives the impression that they are a single news item. Based on these results, it should be noted that women’s sports are subordinated to male sports in television sport news programmes. In other words, female athletes are only the protagonists of news when the programme has some spare time or when their achievements are equal or greater than the results of male athletes (Ibáñez, 2001). Thus, taking into account the limitations posed by the scarcity of female sport news in the sample, the second hypothesis (H2) could be confirmed a priori.

On the other hand, the results reflect a series of strategies used by journalism to give a certain frame to news depending on the sex of the protagonist (Sábada, 2008). In this sense, it is worth noting how male football is the sport that captures most of the attention of sport journalism, with 69%, so “football occupies much of the time and space to the detriment of the rest of sports” (Angulo, 2007, p.3). This situation harms other male minority sports that appear in the last place, and particularly harms women’s sports, which are discriminated against twice as much. It seems that the protagonist role of men in football suggest that, by inertia, women are also absent in other sports (Angulo, 2007). Thus, women are not represented in any of the sports that appear with greater frequency in sport news programmes, but only in those that are covered minimally (swimming, snowboarding, water polo). In this same line, examining some sport categories according to sex (Coronado, 2013; Jones, 2011), the fact that men’s football is the most-covered sport results in the greater representation of male athletes in contact team sports, which are considered as more “appropriate” for men and are the most-predominant category, with 77.9%. For their part, female athletes appear in two news about individual sports that do not require strength nor aesthetic qualities (swimming and snowboarding), and in one news about a contact team sport (water polo). Thus, with the exception of this last news, women appear with greater frequency in sports that are considered part of the female universe. This

could confirm the third hypothesis (H3), although, in the case of female athletes we would need a larger sample to be able to produce conclusive results.

Similarly, the low number of sport news featuring women neither allowed for statistical comparisons with their male counterparts with respect to the field of competition and the objective of the news referred to in the fourth hypothesis (H4). However, it is important to note what happens with the only three female sport news since all of them precisely respond to very specific reasons which have to do with success, nationalism, and the emphasis on the human dimension, which become requirements for coverage in this research. Specifically, two of the three female sport news respond to success in a tournament of great national importance (success in the Spanish Water Polo League) and success in an international competition (medal-winning in the European Swimming Championships). In contrast, in the case of male sports neither victory or nationalism are requirements for coverage since male athletes appear even when they have been defeated and the importance is of an international level (Bruce, Hovden and Markula, 2010). In this same line, it is important to note that the third female sport news responds to the death of the athlete Estelle Balet, the two-time snowboarding world champion. This event reveals that news female sport must offer “something more” than strictly sport activities to be included in a news programme (ASPIC, 2014). In view of these results, we can say that there is a tendency to confirm the fourth hypothesis (H4) since the news about women’s sports have to meet a series of requirements to receive coverage, which does not happen in the case of the male sports.

With regards to the sex of the information professionals who participate in sport news programmes, the results show that men dominate in all the journalistic roles (presenter, reporter and voice-over). However, this situation improves when it comes to special correspondents and worsens when it comes to presenters, which are results that contrast with the findings of previous research (López, 2005 and Fernández, 2008). Therefore, the fifth hypothesis (H5) is confirmed partially because, although women have lower participation as information professional in all roles, such situation is slightly more favourable in the category of reporters.

Finally, with regards to the three TV networks, the sixth hypothesis (H6) is confirmed since *TVE1* offers a slightly greater representation of female athletes and journalists, followed by *La Sexta*, while *Cuatro* occupies the last place because it does not include any female athlete or journalist.

As a way of conclusion to the research presented in this article, we can point out that female athletes are virtually invisible for television sport news programmes, as they appear only when they achieve national but mostly international success and prestige, because when it comes to carrying the national symbols, sex does not seem to be so relevant; or when the objective of the news is to highlight a human aspect rather than a sport quality, which suggests that “the achievements of female athletes do not seem to have enough importance in themselves to be covered by the news media” (ASPIC, 2014, p.37). Thus, unlike men’s sports, particularly sport teams and dominantly football, which are permanently included in the journalistic agenda, women’s sports are not covered in a regular basis. This lack of continuity in media coverage leads people to consider that female athletes do not exist, and prevents the audience with interest in female sports news to follow up their achievements. In addition to the scarce three news featuring women athletes, the framing of these news conveys the idea that the sport abilities of women athletes are of less value in comparison to their male counterparts (Bruce, Hovden and Markula, 2010),

Likewise, the fact that men also dominate in all professional roles in sport news programmes puts in evidence that gender inequality exist not only in sport journalism but also in all spheres of sport. In other words, “it is more than evident that the field of sport is dominated by men, at all levels; generically, sport is *a men’s thing*” (Pedraza, 2012, p.49).”

Faced with this situation, it is necessary to create healthy models through consolidated female sports and athletes with which the female audience can identify. This is the only way the media will contribute to gender equality in sport. Otherwise, the media will continue reinforcing and perpetuating the naturalised idea that men are superior than women in the field of sport.

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## 6. Note

[1] For reliability tests, it is common to analyse between 10% and 20% of all the units of analysis (Igartua, 2006)

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