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## Gender differences in televised coverage of handball matches

### Razlike med spoloma pri prenašanju rokometnih tekem

#### Abstract

The topic of gender differences and the media coverage in sport has been practically uninvestigated in Slovenia. Hence, the purpose of our study was to investigate the social climate and media attitude towards female athletes on an example of handball coverage. We analysed the coverage of Slovenian male and female handball teams by the national programme, TV Slovenia. The investigation covered sport reports on handball matches in the 2001/2002 season (14 matches) and the 2002/2003 season (22 matches). The aim of the study was to analyse the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the televised coverage of women's and men's handball in Slovenia. We used similar methodological instruments as Duncan, Messner and Williams (1990). Special attention was given to verbal commentary and technical production. Our results show that there are still differences in the attitude of the media as regards gender. It was established that there are on average 0.94 slow-motion shots per each goal scored in women's handball matches, while in men's handball matches there are 1.20 slow-motion shots per each goal scored. We can say that television broadcasts show a greater number of technically more interesting shots in men's handball matches than in women's handball matches; there are more slow-motion shots; more angles of view are shown using a greater number of cameras. As we expected, the media images of women and men in team sports on the national TV tend to conform to the prevailing gender stereotypes.

*Key words:* media coverage, handball, quality, quantity, gender

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#### Izvleček

Področje obravnavanja razlik med spoloma v športnih medijih je v Sloveniji praktično neraziskano. Zato smo se odločili raziskati družbeno klimo in odnos medijev do športnic na primeru spremljanja rokometnih tekem. Analizirali smo komentiranje moških in ženskih rokometnih tekem na slovenski nacionalni televiziji (TV Slovenija). Analiza je zajemala 14 rokometnih tekem v sezoni 2001/2002 in 22 rokometnih tekem v sezoni 2002/2003. Namen raziskave je bil ugotoviti kvalitativne in kvantitativne razlike televizijskega poročanja v ženskem in moškem rokometu. Uporabili smo podoben metodološki inštrument kot Duncan, Messner in Williams (1990). Pri tem smo posebno pozornost namenili novinarskemu komentiranju in tehnični produkciji TV prenosov. Rezultati naše raziskave kažejo, da so še vedno razlike v odnosu medijev do spola. Ugotovili smo, da je pri ženskih rokometnih tekmah trajanje počasnih posnetkov povprečno 0.94 na dosežen gol, pri moških pa 1.20 počasnega posnetka za vsak dosežen gol. Lahko rečemo, da je bilo pri prenosu moške rokometne tekme skoraj v vseh primerih več počasnih posnetkov. Za celoten prenos tekmovalja pa lahko trdimo, da televizijski prenos prikazujejo pri moški rokometni tekmi več strokovno zanimivejših posnetkov kot pri ženski rokometni tekmi. Kamere prikazujejo pri prenosu moških tekem več zornih kotov, uporabljenih je tudi večje število kamer. Glede na rezultate lahko potrdimo, da je podoba ženskega športa v medijih na slovenski nacionalni TV še vedno pod vplivom prevladujočih spolnih stereotipov.

*Ključne besede:* komentiranje, rokomet, količina, kvaliteta, spol

## Introduction

Today, the mass media have a paramount role in sports. No sport can thrive without broad exposure on television. The rating of a sport or contest does not depend only on how interesting the sport itself is, but also on how the event is presented and commented by the media. As numerous authors have argued, the media do not simply report news; they actively construct it by framing it, that is, by offering a context for viewing or understanding an event (Wenner, 1998). The results of the said researches also show that women have a similar position in all world media: on average, they represent less than a half of the reporting staff and are much less present and dealt with in the news than men.

The research carried out in Slovenia, which dealt with the TV programme on the National Television Network, showed that women appear extremely seldom (13% women and 87% men) as sources for reports and that in terms of appearance on TV in the strict meaning of the word, men lead even more pronouncedly (4% women and 96% men). Such seldom appearance of women in information broadcasts creates an impression of their irrelevance and marginalises the participation of women in social life (Verša, 1996).

Images of women and men in sports media have received considerable attention in the last decade. Most of the findings suggest that marginalisation of female athletes is the primary means by which patriarchy is reproduced in media coverage of sport. Media reproduce dominant ideologies and cultural ideas about gender and gender relations. Women's sports receive less coverage on television than men's sports (Creedon 1994; Hargraves 1994; Hartman-Tews, & Rulofs, 2002). While an increasing number of women are involved in a variety of sports, they remain underrepresented in terms of media attention. The amount of space in national daily newspapers or televisions dedicated to women's sports is extremely low (Maguire, Jarvie, Mansfield, & Bradley, 2002). Females are grossly underrepresented in all team sports, even in those they do, in fact, dominate (Duncan & Hasbrook 2002).

Sport in the twentieth century has given men an arena in which to create and reinforce an ideology of male superiority. The 1990 AAF television study (Duncan, Messner, & Cooky, 2000) demonstrated "symbolic annihilation" of female athletes in the dearth of women's sport coverage: in six weeks of television sport news, men's sports received 92 percent of the airtime, women's sports 5 percent, and gender neutral topics 3 percent. The follow-up study in 1994 revealed no significant changes, with men again receiving far greater coverage (93.8 %) despite the fact that this more recent sample included three different networks.

All the described differences between the presentation of female athletes and male athletes in the media were particularly noticeable in the world before the year 1990. Later researches state that the differences are becoming less noticeable today. However, it is still true that male athletes are given greater and better attention than female athletes (Hartman-Tews, Rulofs, 2002; Maguire, Jarvie, Mansfield, & Bradley, 2002).

Despite the recent rise in the number of women participating in sport, there has been little improvement in the quality and amount of coverage of women in sports media. The results of a recent research (Doupona Topič, 2002) show that coverage of women's sports in Slovenian newspapers accounted for 25% of all articles. The number of women athletes presented in newspapers is even lower (20%). The percentages of women's sports in sports articles are still

far from the percentages of women's sport competitions and events. The study showed that men's and women's sports are presented in different ways. Language is used in different ways to differentiate between men's and women's sport.

In Slovenia, (women's and men's) handball is one of the most popular, well-patronised and media-covered sports disciplines. Slovenia is renowned for the successes of its Men's National Team (silver medal at the European Championship in 2004) and for the achievements of handball teams at various European and other competitions. Perhaps we should, at this point, mention some of them: the women's handball team Krim Eta Neutro Roberts won the European Teams' Champion Title in the 2001 and 2003 seasons, the team Robit Olimpija won the EHF Cup in 1997, the team Celje Pivovarna Laško has managed to qualify five times for the Men's Champions League Semi-finals, and the teams such as Mobitel Prule 67, Gorenje Velenje, Prevent have gained an estimable position in the European handball.

The Slovenian National Television Network (RTV Slovenia) broadcasts practically all matches played by the Slovenian clubs on the international level. Despite the fact that the number of women's and men's matches that are broadcast in Slovenia is almost the same, it seems, however, that women's handball matches are shown in a way that differs significantly from that of men's matches. Hence, the purpose of our study is to research the social climate and media attitude towards female handball players.

## Method

### Participants

We analysed media coverage of Slovenian men's and women's handball teams (both compete in the Champions League) on the TV Slovenia programme. The investigation covered sports reports on international handball matches in the 2001/2002 and 2002/2003 seasons. Our sample included only those matches in which Slovenian teams competed and which were broadcast by the Slovenian television network. Totally, 14 matches in the 2001/2002 season and 22 matches in the 2002/2003 season were analysed. We hoped to include in our sample more women's team competitions, however, television networks do not broadcast them, except the occasional International Handball Champions League.

All matches were commentated by the same reporter, which fact rules out different commentating approaches as a result of different reporters commentating the matches. It is necessary to pay attention to the power the reporter has in his hands, since one person alone can shape the media image of handball in Slovenia and thus also has the possibility of manipulating the viewers by forming certain social stereotypes.

### Instruments and procedure

The goal of the study was to analyse quantitative and qualitative aspects of televised coverage of women's and men's handball in Slovenia. We used similar methodological instruments as Duncan, Messner and Williams (1990). Special attention was given to the verbal commentary and technical production. We expected the same tendency of the results as in some previous researches (Duncan, Messner, & Williams, 1990; Duncan, Messner, & Cooky, 2000), namely that the quality of presentation of women's sport in the media differs from that of men's sport.

Furthermore, we expected the media images of women and men in team sport to conform to the prevailing gender stereotypes.

In dealing with the role of the media in shaping the attitude towards gender and sport, attention was focused on two aspects, namely, the quantity of reporting and the presentation of Slovenian women's sports and female athletes in the media. The treatment of women and their achievements in sports differs considerably from that of men. Many researches have confirmed that there are significantly fewer reports on female athletes and women's sport events in all mass media.

The works by foreign authors were taken as the theoretical basis of our research, due to the fact that Slovenian researchers have not yet tackled this subject (Duncan, Messner, & Williams, 1990; Duncan, Messner, & Cooky, 2000; Hartman-Tews & Rulofs, 2002; Kinkema & Harris, 1998). On the basis of their findings, the following variables were selected:

1. Comparison between women's and men's handball matches in terms of technical production:

- showing of players on the bench
- showing of coaches of both teams
- showing of cheerers and spectators
- showing of the scoreboard
- showing of the statistics
- the number of slow-motion shots
- the number of cameras or the number of angles of view used

2. Comparison between the sports reporter's commentary of women's and men's handball matches:

- commentating at the begin of the match
- calling of male players and female players
- commentating on a successfully concluded action
- commentating on an unsuccessful action
- commentating on the time and number of goals
- commentating on the spectators and cheerers
- commentating on the statistics
- commentating during time-outs
- commentating at the end of the match.

## Results and discussion

An individual who watches an athletic event constructs and derives various meanings from the activity. These meanings result from the process of interaction between the meanings that are built into the game itself (rules, structure, history) and the values, ideologies and presuppositions that the viewer brings to the activity of watching. But viewing an athletic contest on television is not the same as watching a contest "live". Televised sport is an event which is mediated by the "framing" of the contest by commentators and technical people (Duncan, Messner, Williams, & Jensen, 1994)

### *Technical production*

The researches (Duncan, Messner, Williams, 1990; Kinkema & Harris, 1998) show that in men's matches, the technical production is of better quality, such as for instance: better camera angle, better picture and sound, and more slow-motion shots. In men's matches, after each time-out, the statistics of the match and slow-motion shots of a given playing situation were shown, and after each score or goal, the result and time were shown. In women, shots of this kind were much more seldom.

Our research established that in women's handball matches there are on average 0.94 slow-motion shots per goal scored, while in men's matches there are 1.20 slow-motion shots per goal scored. Female handball players scored a penalty shot on average 12 times per match, while slow-motion shots were broadcast only 10 times, which is 0.83 slow-motion shots per goal scored from a penalty throw. The goal scored was never shown two times or from two different angles of view. However, the situation was different with male handball players. Male handball players on average scored a penalty shot 3 times per match only and in all cases at least one slow-motion shot was broadcast. Often, the goal scored was broadcast in slow motion two times and each time from a different angle of view, which is totally 1.70 slow-motion shots per goal scored from a penalty throw. The above statistics reveals that during the viewing of handball matches television viewers saw many more slow-motion shots when goals were scored by men than by women.

During women's handball matches, slow-motion shots were mainly shown from the side and from distance so that the scorer was difficult to recognise, and in some shots she was even partly covered by other players. During men's matches, more angles of view (behind the goal, from the ceiling, behind the player) were used, and hence also more cameras, to show slow motion, while for each goal scored the best angle of view was selected. Slow-motion shots of the goals scored by male handball players are longer; they comprise two or at least one previous passing of the ball, and the shooter is shown in slow motion in such a way he is in the focal point of the slow-motion shot. In men's handball matches, interesting goals are shown 2 or even 3 times. Several repetitions of different slow-motion shots of the goal scored are only seldom in the case of female handball players.

In the televised coverage of handball matches, slow motion was also used for other elements of the handball game, such as violations in defence and in attack, missed goals or unsuccessful defence actions of the goalkeeper, counterattacks, and injuries.

In women's handball matches, 17% of violations during attack and defence were shown in slow motion. In women's matches, 42% of violations for the most severe penalty were shown, while in men's matches, 28% of violations were shown in slow motion, which is twice as much as in women's matches. In the case of female handball players, some slow-motion shots show their ineffectiveness in breaking through the defence; they show falls after an unsuccessful break-through in attack; some are taken from distance and are thus slightly blurred. In the case of male handball players, however, slow-motion shots are shown in such a way that the strength of the defence, the tension on the faces and strong grips of the hands are seen. Slow-motion shots after successful defence of a male or female goalkeeper were shown 3 times more often in men's than in women's handball matches (in women's matches 4 times and in men's matches 12 times

per match). Slow-motion shots mainly differed in terms of quantity and not so much in terms of quality. In showing counterattacks in slow motion, no significant discrepancies between male and female handball players were established.

In addition to the game and slow-motion shots (goals scored, violations etc.) television broadcasts of the matches also show a player after an injury, the players on the bench, the coaches of both teams, the cheerers, the spectators in the stands, the scoreboard, and the statistics.

As regards showing of injured players there are differences between women's and men's matches. In the case of female handball players, these shots are longer; the camera is focused on the female handball player almost all the time she is lying on the floor; many times the shots show the face of a female player on which it can be seen that she is in great pain; it shows the faces of the concerned co-players. In the case of male handball players, when an injury occurs, the broadcast shows a male player lying on the floor as well as several slow-motion shots showing how the injury occurred; it also shows the coach deciding on who will replace the injured player. In this segment of televised coverage of women's and men's handball matches, considerable differences can be noticed. In women's matches, the weak side of women (i.e. pain) is emphasised more, while in men's matches, the causes are better presented, i.e. how the injury could happen at all.

The differences also exist in showing male and female players on the bench. If a male player was excluded for two minutes, due to a violation, and had to sit on the bench, the shot showed him more often than a female competitor. When one of the good players sat on the bench, he was shown worried and nervous (looking in the direction of the scoreboard) each time there was a critical moment in the game.

In all matches, the scoreboard showing the hour, score and half-time is shown at certain intervals. Based on the analysis of the coverage it was found that the scoreboard is more often shown in men's handball matches. In women's handball matches, the scoreboard was shown 59 times on average, and in men's matches 82 times on average.

The shots also showed great enthusiasm among the spectators. The camera stopped on some of the spectators, on the entire stand and on certain groups of cheerers. In women's matches, the camera on average stopped 3 times on the whole stand and 3 times on the groups of cheerers. In men's matches, the camera stopped 3 times on the whole stand and 12 times on the various groups of cheerers and on different slogans, which is 3 times as much as in women's matches.

During televised coverage, statistics also appear several times on TV screens, namely at the begin and during time-outs, several times at the end of the half-time and at the end of the match. As regards showing of statistics, no differences were established between women's and men's handball matches. The differences were only in the commentation on the statistical data.

In summary, we can say that in men's handball matches more slow-motion shots were shown in almost all of the cases. As regards the total televised coverage of the contest, it may be established that television broadcasts show a greater number of technically more interesting shots in men's handball matches than in women's handball matches; there are more slow-motion shots; more angles of view are shown; and a larger number of cameras is used. In addition to image the televised coverage also includes the relevant commentation.

*Commentation by the reporter*

Various researches (Duncan, Messner, & Williams, 1990; Kinkema & Harris, 1998) show that the reports after the match are on average longer in men's than in women's matches. In men's matches, they show the most interesting scores, the winning team, the best players, the interviews with the best players, and the interviews with the coach of the defeated team. In women's matches, they show the winning team, the losing team and the players in tears, and to a lesser extent, the interviews with the best female player (Duncan, Messner, & Cooky, 2000).

Interesting are the differences established in description of male and female athletes. If a female athlete is unsuccessful, reporters emphasise her lack of knowledge; however, if a male athlete fails, his failure is ascribed to the excessive strength or ability of the opponent. When describing male athletes reporters often emphasise how tall the players are, how important the match is and how important their scores are.

In men, reporters more often talk about their abilities, strength and endurance; in women, about their weakness. If a man succeeds, this is the result of his talent, intelligence, strength, and instinct; in the case of a woman, emotions, happiness, and family are also mentioned (Duncan, Messner, & Williams, 1990; Kinkema & Harris, 1998).

If, for example, a female athlete fails to score, reporters clearly tell this, e.g.: "she missed". In men, they do not comment on the missed shot or they say that the player was surprised when he got the ball and therefore missed the shot, or they minimise the mistakes ("how unusual that he missed"), or they say that it was extremely difficult to score or that the player had no influence on the situation.

Based on the analysis of the match of the European Champions League the following was observed: the reporter called women handball players simply by their names or referred to them as "our champions" or even "girls", "our captain", "Croatian captain", "the Ukrainian player", "second oldest player" etc. Male handball players were often referred to as "champions" or called by their surnames. Calling of male and female athletes significantly differs in the fact that the reporter added some accompanying designations to names of female handball players describing the nationality of a player or her position in the team. The "hierarchy of naming" by gender is clearly evident in the analysis of handball matches. The language used by commentators to describe women is often infantilising ("girls"), while the language used to describe men linguistically grants them the "adult" status. This occurs despite the fact that both female and male athletes are approximately of the same age.

When during a men's handball match an action has successfully been concluded or a goal has been scored, the reporter clearly states this fact by saying, for example: "excellent defence of the goalkeeper of Magdeburg", "excellent assistance", "a masterly ball", "a bomb", "good play in defence on both sides", "even if outnumbered, our side took advantage of the opponents", "good defence", "the Celje team now fight as lions in defence", "that is the way to do it", "what an accurate defence by the goalkeeper" etc. If the action fails or the ball is lost, he mainly does not comment on this fact and, if he does, he never reprehends a particular player. In such cases, the following can often be heard: "our side cannot bring the action to a conclusion", "it won't go with individual actions", "our side must start to play more as a team", "such errors are grist for the mill of the opposing team" etc. Many times the reporter, rather than reproaching, tries to find the reasons for failure or lost ball: "excellent goalkeeper of the opposing team", "this



could also be a violation in attack”, “the penalty should be the most severe one”, “it is difficult to stop this giant”, “the best player of the European Championship scored” etc. The reporter tries to justify the goals received; he also tries to justify failed actions.

The commentation by the reporter in the case of a successfully concluded action of female handball players is similar as in the case of male handball players. The reporter clearly praises what deserves praising: “a well co-ordinated combination”, “the player scored from a difficult position”, “nice action of the goalkeeper”, “she beautifully came to the closing shot”, “a nice move”, “a beautiful and high jump” etc. In the case of male players, it is often emphasised how tall they are, how important the contest is and how important their scores are. In addition to the commendation for the scored goal, the reporter also tells something about the male player or comments on the spectators’ reaction, for instance: “Pungartnik, the best shooter in the history of the club”, “he scored, the whole hall rejoices over this goal”, “difficult position”, “he fought so hard” etc.

When female handball players fail to score a goal or the ball is intercepted, the reporter tells this immediately and clearly: “the player will get a minus for the penalty shot at the goal”, “the player missed”, “a wasted ball on our side”, “the player tried two times and has not yet scored a goal”, “today, the outer players have difficulties in coming to a closing action”, “our players return too slowly”, “blind passing and wasted attack”, “wasted ball by our champions”, “is this a fatal mistake of our captain?” etc. In female handball players, the reporter almost never seeks justifications for a poorly performed action or a missed shot at the goal (“too high ball for a certain player”, “the goalkeeper of Krim was close”, “bad luck for the player”).

The combined effect of focusing more on strengths than on weaknesses, more on success than on failure, and of using many and varied martial metaphors and power descriptors when describing men athletes has the effect of linguistically weaving an aura of power, strength and human spurt around male athletes. By contrast, in women’s games, commentators tend to utilise martial metaphors and power descriptors far less frequently, employing a much higher proportion of verbal attributions of weakness and focusing on the reasons for a player’s failure, rather than on the reasons why her opponent won.

In men’s handball matches, the reporter often commentates on the spectators and cheerers in the stands, while in women’s matches, his comments are less frequent. The comments were as follows (the match between Celje Pivovarna Laško and Magdeburg is taken as an example):

- More than 3,000 spectators in a crammed hall of Golovec;
- Here is also one of those true sports cheerers who does not miss any genuine sports event, the President of the State, Milan Kučan;
- Here are many male handball players, coaches; in a few words, the whole handball world has gathered today in Celje;
- Surely, it will boil here like in a pressure cooker; as I already said: the hall is packed;
- Now you can hear the loud support of the Celje cheerers;
- Our President is also in a better mood now;
- It is boiling here in Celje like in a pressure cooker;
- The Celje cheerers are very loud;
- It is hot in the Celje hall, more than 3,000 spectators;
- It is not hot only for the club manager but also for all of us who are in the Celje hall of Golovec. Now the cheerers are loud, they feel when our champions need encouragement;



- These are the people of Celje: will they help our champions to qualify for the semi-finals for the sixth time in succession? Everybody is on their feet in the Celje hall; everybody is waiting to see what will happen.

In women's handball matches, the reporter paid very little attention to the spectators and cheerers (the match between Krim Eta Neutro roberts and Montex Lublin is taken as an example):

- Here are also those who will be the loudest: in the hall at Kodeljevo there are more than 2,000 cheerers;
- A beautiful cheering mood at Kodeljevo;
- It is getting hotter and hotter in the hall at Kodeljevo.

In the men's handball match, the reporter comments on the spectators and cheerers more often; in addition, the comments are more interesting. However, it is also true that in the men's handball match there are much more cheerers and they are also much louder.

At the beginning of the women's handball match, the reporter tells something about the men's handball match that took place a day before; namely: "Yesterday, you most probably enjoyed the victory of our champions in Berlin. Let's hope that today in Ljubljana we shall enjoy the victory of our women champions and that the Celje team will qualify for the semi-finals and the Ljubljana champions for the quarter-finals." In the men's handball match, the reporter tells that our women champions have already been eliminated from the women's champions league.

The commentating on the referees differs substantially between the men's and women's handball matches. In the women's handball match, the reporter only presents the referees and afterwards practically forgets them. In the men's handball match, the reporter already during the presentation of the referee adds the comment: "Let's hope, the refereeing will be fair." And then during the match he often makes comments, such as:

- Whistling of cheerers, a reaction to bad refereeing by Spanish referees;
- Tonight's refereeing is not in favour of our champions, it is more likely to their disadvantage; as if they were giving something away, the two Spanish referees made up a violation;
- All goes in favour of Magdeburg;
- The two Spanish referees have not stopped the clock.

The way in which television covers, or fails to cover, women engaged in sports affects the way in which female athletes are perceived in a society. Television both shapes and reflects the attitudes of society and also tells us something about the status of women in a country. Television is a medium which constructs and manipulates feelings (Wenner, 1989). It follows that television networks' different levels of commitment to producing, editing and presenting men's and women's sports are likely to produce very different feelings in viewers – feelings that operate below the level of conscious thought. The men's games are produced and framed in such a way that viewers are likely to feel that they are privileged to be watching an exciting, dramatic spectacle of historic importance.

The lower technical quality, less exciting visuals and less informative verbal commentary, combined with production decisions which frame the women's contests ambivalently combine to add to viewers' perhaps already existing sense that women's handball is less important, and of lower quality.

If we draw the line, we can see that there are still differences in the attitude of the media as regards gender. The differences are, however, not so marked as pointed out by, for example, the American and Australian researchers. However, we must be aware that the cultural environment in Slovenia differs in many aspects from that in the USA and that it has its specific traits also in the so-called European cultural space. We must also not forget the fact that women's handball in Slovenia attains better results on the club level than men's handball and that it keeps in front of the small screen and attracts to the actual event hundreds of spectators. Should a similar analysis of basketball and volleyball matches be carried out, we venture to postulate that the differences and inequity would be much more pronounced. It has to be emphasised that in Slovenia women's handball has reached a specific position over the last 6 years. This specific position is above all due to high successfulness of the Krim team in the international arena. In the last four years, the Krim team was three times the finalist of the women's champions league and twice they won the title of European champions. An important reason lies also in the sponsoring of the said club. The team is sponsored by some leading Slovenian companies (Mercator, Krka, Državna založba Slovenije, Eta etc.); in the stands, the leading Slovenian managers and even most influential Slovenian politicians gather. They are led by one of the most successful and at the moment perhaps the most recognisable Slovenian manager. This is also one of the likely reasons why the Krim team is, in comparison with other teams, very present in the media. The presence and public recognisability of women handball players is prevailing in comparison with other team sports. Despite the said specific position of women handball players, differences in commentating were established, indicating a privileged position of male athletes in the media in comparison with female athletes.

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