

“Pretty Good for a Girl”: Feminist Physicality and Women’s Bodybuilding

Abstract

Most feminist literature on bodybuilding has focused on the debate between whether women's bodybuilding is a form of empowerment which defies gender expectations or whether it perpetuates oppression even while masquerading as an emancipatory act. The sociocultural variables that contribute to the woman’s built-body are relatively neglected, particularly those which explain the gap in muscularity and size between women and men who actively participate in competitive bodybuilding. Building upon existing feminist and gender constructivist literature and the author’s own 50-year experience as a professional bodybuilder, this paper explores the social environment in which female bodybuilders find themselves as the explanatory mechanism for why female bodybuilders are consistently smaller and less muscular than their male counterparts.

Keywords

feminism, bodybuilding, feminist physicality, sport, gender

Most feminist literature on bodybuilding to date has focused on the debate between whether it is a form of empowerment which defies gender expectations, or a form of oppression masquerading as an emancipatory act. Leslie Heywood (1998) made a strong case for bodybuilding as a third-wave feminist means to physical empowerment, a deterrent to male violence, and recovery from past abuse while Susan Bordo (1990) argued strongly that women's bodybuilding simply requires women to shape their bodies to a different kind of feminized ideal and is therefore far from liberating. Other feminist scholars, particularly more recently, have taken a more nuanced and ambiguous position and found elements of both empowerment and continued oppression in women's bodybuilding. They have focused on the way in which women negotiate expectations of feminine beauty, which require smallness and weakness, while building up their musculature (Aspridis et al 2014; Boyle 2005; Bunsell 2013: 44-48; St. Martin and Garvey 1996; Tajrobehkar 2014, 2016). Comparatively neglected, however, are the sociocultural variables that contribute to the woman's built-body both in concept and physicality, particularly regarding cogent explanations for the relative gap in muscularity and size between women and men who actively participate in competitive bodybuilding. This paper seeks to develop this avenue of exploration.

Building upon existing feminist sport and physicality literature, I explore specific ways by which the cultural and social environment in which female bodybuilders find themselves is the most cogent explanatory mechanism for why women bodybuilders are consistently smaller and less muscular than their male counterparts. The relevant cultural forces socialize women bodybuilders to be smaller than their male counterparts in general and arise in three overlapping domains: gym culture, the culture surrounding women's bodybuilding competitions/judging, and society/culture at large.

To support my thesis, I use a feminist theoretical perspective derived from Shari Dworkin's (2001) "glass ceiling on women's muscular strength" combined with Roth and Basow's (2004) inquiry into physical liberation. Dworkin, then later Roth and Basow, provided us with broad templates and guideposts explaining why, for example, "Women's displays of physical power are often prevented or

undermined, typically in ways centering on the concept of femininity” (Roth and Basow 2004: 245). Roth and Basow interrogate the “myth of women’s weakness” and show it to be largely culturally constructed. For example, they write, “It is commonly accepted as fact in our society that women are physically weaker than men. ... In fact, it turns out that often women are not weaker than men, at least they are not naturally weaker, nor weaker to the extent commonly believed. (245–246).” Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Roth and Basow go on to explore the ways in which cultural forces and gendered spheres of activity shape women’s bodies. “Thus, sexed bodies are constructed through the activities we do continually, often without conscious thought. Butler’s point perhaps can be extended to the strength differences, which liberal feminists sometimes accept as natural” (247).

Dworkin investigates the ways in which these gendered expectations impact women’s bodybuilding, particularly regarding the eponymous aspect of *building of their own bodies*, and effectively captures the impact of gym culture and its masculinist notions on feminine physicality for women in bodybuilding when she writes, “women in fitness—particularly those who seek muscular strength in the weight room—may find their bodily agency limited not by biology but by ideologies of emphasized femininity that structure the upper limit on women’s ‘success.’ Results show that non-lifters and moderate lifters uniquely negotiate the glass ceiling by avoiding, holding back on, or adjusting weight workouts” (Dworkin 2001: 1). Dworkin also shows women’s own experiences to contradict received wisdom on the innate physical inferiority of women.

On the one hand, "commonsense" ideologies tell everyday women in fitness not to fear the weight room because natural, biological difference from men prevents them from getting "too big." At the same time, many women can and do experience gains in muscle mass when lifting weights, particularly women who do so regularly. The tension that results from the difference between common sense and knowledge of one's own bodily experiences is compounded by widespread bodily ideologies about what women's bodies should do. (2001: 333– 334)

Building upon a then-significant corpus of feminist literature, that is, Dworkin powerfully identified and called out the illusion of biology as a specious physical determinant of musculature, including within women's sports and women's bodybuilding.

It is through this lens for understanding how discrete yet overlapping cultural variables intersect and physically manifest in women bodybuilder's bodies that size differences can best be explained. From this theoretical base, I go on to fill in specific contributory variables (e.g., trap development and "good/not bad for a girl") that act in concert to inhibit woman bodybuilders from achieving their full potential. After echoing and (re)emphasizing the nugatory effect of biology and the indispensable role of culture in the formation of women's bodies, I move beyond Dworkin, as well as Roth and Basow, by calling for a kind of feminist bodybuilding.

This is important because Dworkin (2001) and Roth and Basow (2004), stop short of extending their conclusion into the realm of praxis and building upon calls for a feminist bodybuilding by enacting cultural changes suggested by the literature that rectify or even substantively address these phenomena (Balsamo 1994; Hentges 2014: esp. 90–134). Feminist bodybuilding is the next step toward actualizing feminist sport scholarship as applied to bodybuilding and to removing the mutable barriers that prevent women from achieving physical parity with their male counterparts. In this sense, the call for feminist bodybuilding not only builds upon the existing literature but ultimately resituates the objective of bodybuilding to fairness and justice for women and women's bodies.

Far from being ultracrepidarian, I am a 70-year-old male bodybuilder who has earned a pro card in (men's) bodybuilding (a "pro card" is vernacular for "professional card," meaning recognition that the card holder is a professional bodybuilder and can enter professional-level national and international bodybuilding contests), and for more than half a century I have personally witnessed and been complicit in the myriad hegemonic forces shaping both men's and women's bodybuilding. My observations therefore derive not only from my extensive experience competing at the national level, but also from having trained/coached/mentored women and men at gyms around the world.

Consequently, I have direct, firsthand experience observing the ways in which cultural forces shape a woman's body that are easily wedded to the extant theory on women's sport from a feminist perspective. Though the theoretical considerations extend far beyond my own lived experiences, the observations here are built upon extensive personal experience that I then integrate with a vast body of feminist (sport/bodybuilding) literature. Taken together, these inform my arguments as to how a feminist bodybuilding could reshape and even rescue bodybuilding from masculinist, hegemonic forces (including linguistic, social, cultural) and attitudes. Consequently, this paper builds upon my active experience of more than fifty years in the hyper-competitive world of bodybuilding, draws from rich veins of scholarship across multiple realms of thought, and uses feminist theoretical considerations to analyze the social and cultural environment (including assumptions, expectations, norms, and discourses) in which women's bodybuilding, and thus women bodybuilders, are situated.

To reiterate, there are three relevant domains pertinent to my thesis. First, the prevailing culture in the gym—which pushes women's bodybuilding in different directions from men's—is grounded in “good for a girl” assumptions. Second, the pervasive culture in women's bodybuilding, including official judging criteria, are contaminated by sexism while placing a premium on very specific expectations of a woman's physique and physicality that are inherently less muscular than their male counterparts. These entrenched expectations are easily seen as being rooted in traditional, masculinist notions feminine beauty. Third, though I will not develop them independently from the more salient considerations just mentioned due to their abundance in the existing feminist literature, the overall culture of the society which, from a very early age, encourages prettiness and thus discourages women from becoming “too muscular” enforces gendered expectations of feminine beauty upon women that ultimately socialize them to constrain their own physical limits. Finally, I conclude this paper by issuing calls for feminist bodybuilding and raise questions about what it fundamentally means to “build a woman's body” in the context of feminist physicality—that is, absent masculinist, hegemonic forces.

Gym Culture

“[Gyms] reflect and perpetuate gendered power relations and highly prescribed cultural expectations for femininity around women's bodies, appearances, strength, and abilities”
(Fisher et al. 2015)

The “gendered nature of the gym space,” that is, gym culture, thwarts women’s potential and prevents women in bodybuilding from getting “too big” (Brace-Govan 2004; Dworkin 2001). In this context, “too big”—a phrase *never* uttered or even considered in men’s competitive bodybuilding, where bigger is universally better so long as certain aesthetics are maintained—refers to any state in which a woman's musculature exceeds normative boundaries and expectations placed upon women, particularly when it in any way challenges or disrupts prevailing cultural standards of feminine beauty. (Worthen and Baker [2016] refer to this as “gendered deviance” while Shilling and Bunsell [2014] term this “gender outlaws.”) Liberated from this gendered environment, women would be equally proportioned and wear physiques physically indistinguishable from men (Dworkin 2001).

Within competitive bodybuilding gym micro-cultures there is a dominating binary-enforcing attitude that women's physical development should take a different (prescribed as “female”) form. The prevailing “feminine ideal” within this culture accentuates alternative aspects to male physical development, the latter of which is focused on muscle hypertrophy (an increase in volume of an organ or tissue caused by enlargement of component cells), muscularity, vascularity (having prominent, visible veins) overall size, and definition of muscle striations (Bryson 1987; Fisher 2015). Female physicality, even within competitive bodybuilding, by contrast, is constrained by notions of a gendered “feminine” aesthetic and by hegemonic expectations of feminine beauty (Chare 2014; Fisher 2015; Gillett and White 1992). For example, virtually no women’s competitive bodybuilders attempt to develop their “traps” (which is shorthand for the trapezius muscles) because it is widely considered “unfeminine” to have well-developed traps. (NB: While this is understudied in the peer-reviewed literature, a quick Google search of popular websites will reveal scores of pages devoted to this topic.)

Consequently, not only does this gendered expectation limit the development of the traps, but there are more problematic aspects for the woman bodybuilder as well. Particularly, the traps are one of the major muscles of the back which act to stabilize the scapula and thus help to decrease the likelihood of injury; therefore, under-training this muscle group in relation to others has the direct consequence of severely limiting potential development of lean muscle mass, back development, and even shoulder, neck, and rear deltoid expansion (Henning et al. 2016; Li et al. 2015; Nimbarte 2014;). Thus, the gendered culture within bodybuilding itself not only discourages women from building their body to a certain aesthetic but also limits functionality and increases the likelihood of injury, hence decreasing (on average) the amount of time that can be dedicated to training and getting larger, more developed muscles.

Moreover, within the gym micro-cultural milieu, in addition to conceptions of what a woman's body should be that derive directly from hegemonically masculinist views of both men and women's bodies, there are pervasive concerns over what a woman looks like, how she should present herself, and what exercises she should prefer and avoid. These are particularly reinforced by gendered expectations upon an "ideal female" set of bodily proportions and the usual dietary expectations placed upon women that, especially, moderate the grams of protein that should be consumed. Further, there are also ubiquitous "good for a girl" expectations that implicitly limit how heavy women can and should lift, the number of repetitions they should perform, and the "appropriate" size to be gained through training. These "good for a girl" expectations are not only demeaning to women they are also causally delimiting (Kaskan and Ho 2016). That is, they are a soft form of external and internalized sexism that are ultimately belittling and degrading while also serving to prevent women from achieving their full physical potentials.

Because of the pervasiveness of gendered physical expectations and how these attitudinally manifest and due to sexual desire for women in the gym (as I have determined from my own personal experience and that of many men with whom I have trained), men in gyms want women in gyms to

look certain ways. Ultimately, the drives underlying these expectations placed uniquely upon women exist so that they remain physically and sexually appealing according to an athletic variant upon the typical standards of conventional beauty, and this attitude almost universally eschews viraginity. Indeed, women in bodybuilding gyms, as in broader culture, are socialized to respond to these desires by conforming to them (Bridges 2009; Bryson 1987; Drummond 2010).

While this vicious cycle of attitudinal entrenchment on feminine physicality is perpetuated and permeates gym cultures (there are, for example, almost never pictures of Ms. Olympia winners—the most muscularly developed among women bodybuilders—in gyms or in women’s locker rooms), it is also institutionalized in professional bodybuilding competitions. Bikini competition are one example of the reification of these hegemonic masculinist conceptions. That is, there are women’s bikini sections judged by idealized masculinist conceptions of the feminine ideals to which women’s bodies should subscribe while dressed in minimal-coverage posing bikinis (Owen 2015; IFBB n.d.). There are also no male bikini competitions in professional bodybuilding (men pose in “posing trunks”).

Gendered expectations applicable only within women's bodybuilding and preferable to straight male sexuality also manifest in other ways within the sport, for example, scanty yet showy competition bikinis, unrestrained and ubiquitous self-limitation through cosmetic surgeries (especially of the breasts, which thereby limits functional training of the pectoral muscles, arms, and sometimes back), high heeled shoes for posing, an overemphasis of callipygian (rather than developed) buttocks, strict eccedentesiast demands, and the application of considerable show makeup (as well as expectations of makeup within the gym environment, which is not functional and can limit training), all of which satisfy but are absent among male competitors (Billard 1999). This suite of data points serves as compelling evidence for the manifestations of masculinized notions of female beauty in the world of competitive bodybuilding (cf. Drummond 2010; Wolf 2013). This, of course, is all consistent with and yet extends the observations of Dworkin (2001).

There are also less conspicuous hegemonic forces (un)subtly influencing gym cultures. Many men, for example, while ostensibly appearing encouraging of female athletes, act in ways better described as patronizing that un/consciously enforce gendered norms in the gym. These forces can have the effect of keeping women bodybuilders physically smaller than men, not least by creating social conditions under which women are expected to fail to achieve/exercise their full potential (Bridges 2009; Bryson 1987).

As just one point of contact into secondary forms of gym sexism, “mansplaining,” defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as, “(of a man) explain[ing] (something) to someone, typically a woman, in a manner regarded as condescending or patronizing,” is common within society but manifests nearly ubiquitously in the often still-macho atmosphere of gym culture (Husson 2013). Mansplaining presents in many of the verbal (and even nonverbal) interactions between men and women in gyms; for example, in men’s explaining to women how to engage in a particular exercise (which is often accompanied by the man’s touching of the woman and she moves the weights throughout the range of motion) and in men’s performances of the exercise while having the woman watch. In both instances, men position themselves as experts, that is, as authorities from whom women can and should learn while attempting to exploit a subtle sexual dimension irrelevant to training goals. Not only is this demeaning, it also limits the number of women who are likely to want to engage with and participate in gym environments. More problematically, these performances reinforce the (sexualized) gendered culture of the gym and project male physical and verbal expectations upon women vis-à-vis how they should engage in particular exercises. Obviously, through these acts of male assertion in the gym, men enforce upon women beliefs and expectations about how women can reach *his* ideal for how a woman should train and thus ultimately for how her body should be built (Brace-Govan 2004). In that sense, this particularly common gym performance can also be understood under the restrictive “good for a girl” umbrella.

Yet another problematic and limiting factor in gym culture is that many—and perhaps even most—gyms retain a deserved reputation for being hypersexualized “meat markets.” That is, they are places where men openly seek dating/mating opportunities and therefore sexualize (through gaze, for example), touch, and verbally harass women, often while hypermasculinely (over)performing in the presence of women and while encouraging a culture of speaking crudely and in hypersexualized ways to other men in locker rooms about women in the gym and about performing real and desired sexual acts with them (Curry 1991; Katz 1995; Messner and Sabo 1994). (Not only are their entire lines of feminist peer-reviewed scholarship about these behaviors, but the phenomenon of men’s “locker room banter” recently reached public consciousness when, in 2016, President Trump was caught on tape saying, in reference to women, “Grab ’em by the pussy” [New York Times 2016]. Trump, in his defense, referred to this comment as “locker room banter” [Sanghani 2016; Fahrenthold 2016]). Conceptualizing a woman athlete's body as a skeuomorph for a sex toy to be lusted after, used, and treated as a potential childrearing device to be possessed is not an uncommon attitude among men in gym environments, for whom female physicality is frequently yet another concept perceived only through the male libido.

The near ubiquity of these behaviors combined with their broad cultural acceptance, even approbation, among male gym members creates an environment in the gym that both actively and passively discourages female participation and engagement. This male toxicity, in turn, goes on to limit the amount of time and effort women want to spend at the gym. It also limits the pool of women who feel safe in the gym and thus come in to train competitively.

The covariant consequence of these conscious, unconscious, aesthetic, social, environmental, cultural, micro-cultural, psychological, and emotional factors is ultimately to enforce, perpetuate, and reinforce masculinist norms, assumptions, and dynamics of male domination that result in women in bodybuilding being smaller than their male peers. By contrast, men, at the least, are free of these influences or, more likely, benefit from feeling them in the opposite direction (Ricciardelli 2010; Sweet

2017). That is, the broader culture generally and gym culture in particular encourages to men to gain lean muscle mass while limiting the same in their female counterparts which ultimately socializes women bodybuilders to remain physically smaller than their male peers.

Women's Bodybuilding

As it may not be widely familiar, I will very briefly explain judging criteria and forms of competition in women's bodybuilding as these relate to my thesis. There are four professional body category divisions in women's bodybuilding: physique ("judged on... athletic physique showcasing femininity, symmetry, muscle tone, poise and beauty/flow of physique"), bikini ("judged on a lean and firm physique scored on proportion, symmetry, balance, shape and skin tone"), figure ("[judged on] a blend of bodybuilding and fitness"), and finally, bodybuilding (which is judged in a way "similar to physique but size and muscle striations are emphasized to a great degree") (Owen 2015; IFBB n.d.).

Women in bodybuilding are judged in competitions and shows according to the above categories by slightly different "grading" criteria. These criteria are strict in that they permit very little variation from competitor to competitor while offering equally little tolerance for the natural varieties of the form, shape, figure, and composition of women's bodies within the hyper-competitive sport of bodybuilding. Women in bodybuilding are simply expected to conform to the judging requirements as closely as possible and thus are held subject to them. Masculinist and other male biases present in the judging criteria or their formulation, then, are thereby enforced onto women bodybuilders by hegemony within the sport. As one might expect within a hypermasculinized sport such as bodybuilding, evidence for such masculinist and other male biases about feminine physicality is readily available. Commonalties among these categories include many exaggerations of idealized conventional expectations defining feminine beauty, such as a thin waist, extremely low body-fat compositions, sturdy calves, athletic build, shapely legs and buttocks, unnaturally large(r) breasts that are extremely uncommon/impossible on very low-fat composition bodies and thus often the product of surgical

enhancement, general cosmetic surgery (e.g. lip plumping), exiguous and showy bikinis, artificial tans, carefully styled (often long) hair, high heels, “glamorous” oversized earrings, presentation/routine (including forced smiling), and the heavy application of show makeup (Billard 1999; Davis 2013).

Among the issues to note in these categorizations is that women’s bodybuilding inherently subscribes to and perpetuates gendered expectations and hegemonic assumptions about female beauty (Gillett and White 1992). To return to a previous example, there are no men’s bikini competitions—this therefore creates gendered expectation both for women and *for men*. Extending from this observation, despite being among the judging criteria in women's bodybuilding, even muscularity for women in the sport of bodybuilding can be seen as problematic. It should also be noted that the Ms. Olympia, the bodybuilding category which showcased the highest level of women’s muscular development in the world, was discontinued in 2014 (Eskilsson 2014).

Because of the criteria governing these categories, along with the stigma of women being overly muscular that is associated with the defunct Ms. Olympia competition, there is a competitive pressure on women not to get “too big.” This results from an appeal to overall feminine aesthetics (as defined by masculinist preferences) instead of a fully engaged building of a woman’s body and an insistence that to win women must sculpt their bodies according to the dictates (i.e., win conditions and grading criteria) of these externally prescribed categories. Men, by contrast, are encouraged to build their musculature without restraint. As an indication of the cultural and economic value placed upon extreme degrees of lean muscle mass reified and quantified by a discrete dollar sum; the title of *Mr. Olympia*, which is viewed as the pinnacle of men’s competitive bodybuilding, provides a purse of \$400,000 (Fitness Volt 2017b; Vallet 2017). For comparison, this prize dramatically overshadows the purse for winning categories within women's bodybuilding; for example, the bikini winner who takes home \$7,000 (Fitness Volt 2017a).

It is worth reiterating that, consistent with Dworkin (2001) but extending well beyond her observations, the presentation which is expected of women (the bikini, high heels, makeup, fixed

smiles, fake breasts, conventionally feminine style, etc.) creates a multi-dimensional social universe that, both in part and in totality, acts to prevent women from attaining their full bodybuilding potential. In addition to the highly problematic intrinsic sexism on display, a greater problem has been almost completely overlooked in the feminist research literature about women's bodybuilding and sport: *these objectifying show-based affectations are completely tangential to the point of women's bodybuilding, which is to build the woman's body (muscularly)*. In particular, high heeled shoes limit the full stretch and expression of leg muscles (specifically the calves and glutes), and surgical alterations like fake breasts (and facial injections) severely limit the competitiveness with which women can train, by both requiring recovery time and by surgically injuring the body and thus limiting its overall potential and the intensity with which women can exercise. The nature of women's bodybuilding competitions themselves, which are explicitly seen and referred to as shows, are therefore more masculinist objectification spectacles than exhibitions of women's sport or athletic potential, and these factors delimit the sport of women's bodybuilding and artificially and socially constrain the potential of its participants.

Moreover, in addition to judging criteria, women's bodybuilding judges are predominantly (though not exclusively) men and thus subject to the biases latent within their own hegemonic (hyper-)masculinity. These biases become codified and underscored by the universal adoption of rule sets that further constrain the judges to certain (masculinist) expectations of feminine beauty. It is these systemic forces within the sport that ultimately limit women bodybuilders' potential self-expression (Worthen and Baker 2016).

As a final point, in professional bodybuilding, in order to obtain illegal advantages many, if not most, male bodybuilders utilize exogenous androgens (steroids), which creates a culturo-chemical environment in users that tends to result in greater hypertrophy and muscular development. The same behavior is highly discouraged in women not because steroids are federally illegal, but because it is widely believed that androgens can have the “undesirable” effects of “masculinizing” a woman, e.g.,

squaring her jaw, androgenic (facial and body) hair growth, deepening her voice, thinning her supracapital (head) hair, “masculinizing” (enlarging) her clitoris, and so on (Burke 2001; George 2003; Strauss 1985). All of these features are considered contrary to the conventional standards of feminine beauty and violations of normative feminine physicality and are therefore strongly discouraged for women bodybuilders for reasons extending well beyond legality/illegality or even concerns about health and well-being (Strauss 1985). These beliefs further gender the gym environment and, in turn, further limit a woman's potential bodybuilding gains. (NB: I am not advocating the use of anabolic steroids for women or men. I am merely pointing out that the *social environment* in the gym leads to different outcomes for women that are not applicable to men.)

The result of these problematic institutionalized aspects in women's competitive bodybuilding is that women train to become smaller than they might otherwise be, and that men are free of these forces or feel them in the opposite direction, resulting in a social environment that influences women bodybuilders to remain physically smaller than their male counterparts.

Feminist Bodybuilding

As an answer to this confluence of dominating cultural and masculinist hegemonic variables, I propose a move beyond the theoretical literature and into the realm of praxis by introducing *feminist bodybuilding*. Feminist bodybuilding represents the totality of theoretical and practical steps that can be taken within women's sport in general and women's bodybuilding in specific that can disrupt gendered norms, expectations, and attitudes on female physicality where these are relevant to the sport of bodybuilding. Early efforts to reform or nudge women's bodybuilding were a crude template that attempted to “liberate” women by inviting them to seek out normative hegemonically male expectations on a woman's “feminine” physique and participate in those expectations (cf. Balsamo 1994; Dworkin 2001; Hentges 2014: esp. 90–134; Roth and Basow 2004). Simply stated: women

bodybuilders were encouraged to conform to expectations for sexualized bikini competitors resituated within a “bodybuilding” context.

Instead, I offer the following aim and definition of feminist bodybuilding: an approach to the sport of bodybuilding that seeks to identify and disrupt gendered binaries, hegemonic forces, and masculinist biases that constrain and even harass women within the sport. To actualize this definition of feminist bodybuilding in any significant way would take considerable time, but I offer it as an objective and a path forward that is informed by and directly builds upon a considerable body of feminist scholarship. Of course, feminist bodybuilding would require changing culture, both inside and outside of the gym, training men (especially male bodybuilders, coaches, mentors, judges, trainers, etc.) to be more inclusive and aware of feminist theory as it directly applies to sport in general and bodybuilding in specific, and re-evaluating judging criteria for women's bodybuilding so that it not only removes but begins to directly challenge sexist assumptions and gendered binaries. It would also entail reimagining existing bodybuilding categories.

Specific examples of a feminist approach to bodybuilding could begin simply by eliminating the bikini category entirely or making the bikini category open to men. Another step would be to liberate female physicality from masculinist, gendered, and hegemonic constraints in the gym environment and judging criteria. A third would be to recommend and enforce linguistic and terminological changes relevant to cultural artifacts in and around gyms and gym cultures. Regarding the last, because gym machines and the terminology used to capture their description are themselves an outgrowth of masculinist conceptions extended into the linguistic realm, I advocate reconsidering using the words “tools,” “steel,” “bars,” and “equipment,” which make easy allusions to men’s genitals (thus frequent sexualized attempts at humor and flirting) and other exclusionary masculine tropes. Terms in gyms and bodybuilding culture should be encouraged to become more neutral by becoming, whenever possible, anatomically function-specific, such as “pectoral training station” and “gluteal-development exercise.” This consideration could also extend to the physical arena, where the shape of barbells and dumbbells

are broadly phallic despite the fact that other shapes are equally or even more functional for the purposes of strength and muscular development. There are, by salient contrast, no yonic-shaped barbells, dumbbells, free weights, weight machines, or more broadly, their physical analogues. Rounded kettlebells, however, which are already extremely popular training implements, present an example of a markedly neutral shape for some gym equipment that could serve as a useful prototype.

The bulk of additional considerations, modifications, and changes to be recommended by feminist (re)considerations of bodybuilding will be built upon the existing corpus of feminist scholarship while also being influenced by future research. This may include a wide range of options, including cooperative rather than competitive approaches to judging the building of a body, efforts centered upon how to create safer gym and competition spaces for women bodybuilders, problematizing and disrupting less conspicuously sexist phrases along with their linguistic infrastructure, rethinking the way culture enforces gender norms regarding women's muscularity and beauty, and so on.

One first step in realizing feminist bodybuilding is making the explicit acknowledgment that the broader society considers muscular women "gross." The standards of conventional beauty and hegemonic expectations built thereupon insist that women's bodies should, rather than being built according to the wishes and standards of women, be sculpted around satisfying the male libido. Therefore, the open acknowledgement that society holds the sexist assumption that women are routinely expected to be beautiful for men, conform to hegemonically feminine notions of physicality, and to adopt gender performances consistent with those expectations, including prescribed body shapes and not being "manly" (that is, too muscular), makes a necessary first step for advancing the discourse and helping raise awareness that women are socialized to stay smaller than they otherwise would absent these conditions.

A possible second step for feminist bodybuilding is therefore explicitly acknowledging that the confluence of these sustained covariant influences limit women's involvement in bodybuilding and

predispose women from childhood (and even later in the gym as they continue to be pressured to perform traditionally female gender roles as a requisite demand for competing in women's bodybuilding) to develop smaller bodies and smaller physiques than their male counterparts. For example, if a woman bodybuilder decides to challenge existing norms by consuming as many grams of post-workout protein as she desires in an effort to further develop her muscularity and gains a degree of body fat as a result, this should not necessarily be held against her by judges or by the judging criteria they rely upon. Generally, these kinds of phenomena, in turn, multiply under the influences and conditions of women's versus men's bodybuilding. That said, it goes beyond the scope of this paper to suggest additional steps to bring about a feminist revolution in bodybuilding, so I leave that project to arise from women's voices and feminist researchers' future scholarship and lived experiences (cf. Bunsell 2013; McTavish 2015).

Finally, one central and indispensable question that needs to be answered within the context of feminist bodybuilding is, "What does it mean *to build a woman's body*?" As documented here, traditionally women bodybuilders have been forced to subscribe to hegemonically (and ultimately toxic and limiting) male expressions of "bodybuilding," that is, conceptions of ideal female bodies invented by men with masculinist ideals and subsequent judgments made by men upon women. When McTavish, for example, writes of her experience as an initiate into women's competitive bodybuilding, "inviting male judges to evaluate the shape of my ass....," she is subtly referring to masculinist notions of feminine beauty, particularly those which demean and even penalize steatopygia (the state of having substantial levels of tissue on the buttocks and thighs) (McTavish 2015: xx). In bodybuilding competitions, we must ask what criteria, then, should be invoked to judge her buttocks given that she is formally competing against other women bodybuilders and specific, preexisting normative standards such that she will not be demeaned by the process?

Additionally, I must note though its implications currently go beyond my scope, a pregnant woman has certainly built a body worthy of being recognized within the canon of bodybuilding, as it is

the very house and source of existence for future human life, and yet her body is excluded because of the masculinist norms governing the sport. A very simple step feminist bodybuilding could take, then, is to encourage the participation of pregnant female athletes and demand judging criteria and judges consider the pregnant female form to be a particular manifestation of the female built body. Certain requirements would have to change to accommodate pregnant competitors; for example, to protect the health of the developing fetus, the current expectation upon ultra-low levels of body fat and extremely thin waists would have to be adapted to the broader reality of real female physiques, but this should present no significant challenge for judges who are properly trained in the theory, goals, and praxis of feminist bodybuilding.

I do not propose answers to most of these issues, however. Instead, I advocate that such an endeavor could begin by recognizing and acknowledging differing women's body types that constitute a more inclusive, feminist understanding of bodybuilding and female physicality. The sport of women's bodybuilding could thus work toward more inclusive categories and grading criteria so that feminist bodybuilding can continue disrupting binaries, overcoming masculinist assumptions, moving beyond "good for a girl" notions, and allowing women's body builders to flourish, achieve their potential, and develop the bodies of their choosing that accord with their lived experiences.

Conclusion

There are entrenched hegemonic social and cultural forces which directly and indirectly (visibly, linguistically, tangibly) extend into the gym and manifest in women's bodybuilding. These forces constrain women's potential in bodybuilding and thus result in physically smaller women (as compared to physically larger men) in the respective sports (cf. Dworkin 2001; Roth and Basow 2004). Causally, this is due to a wide range of variables acting in concert and that may be capable of being disrupted and remediated by the direct application of targeted feminist theory to the sport of bodybuilding.

Specifically, feminist bodybuilding may be able to address these issues by challenging sexism, dominance, and masculinist assumptions about women, women's strength, female beauty, female physicality, and the accompanying attitudinal dispositions of *both* men and women. Building upon and being informed by existing and future feminist literature and translating and applying this body scholarship into feminist bodybuilding has the potential to disrupt normative, masculinized notions of what a woman's body should be, how women bodybuilders should look, and how and what muscle groups they should train. These forces constrain women's bodybuilding and prevent female bodybuilders from achieving results equivalent to their male counterparts. Feminist bodybuilding is therefore a liberatory project applied to bodybuilding and sport more generally.

Acknowledging cultural and concomitant attitudinal biases against (hyper)muscular women may be a crucial first step in overcoming permeating “good for a girl” and other damaging, hurtful tropes and discourses. These attitudes and the accompanying hegemonic values that are paralleled in society at large hemorrhage into gym cultures and influence participants' dispositions and attitudes. As someone who has been very actively involved in men's and women's competitive bodybuilding for over 50 years, my personal experience witnessing the changes I have seen gives me reason for hope. Times are changing. I am optimistic that we will move toward feminist bodybuilding and with it the hope that women, and how they choose to develop their bodies, will finally have the opportunity to flourish.

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