

Muscle, Femininity, and Stigma: A Feminist Exploration of Women's Bodybuilding

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ABSTRACT. Becoming a bodybuilder does not ‘naturally’ correspond to the social expectations traditionally directed towards women. The discipline demands extensive training and other lifestyle commitments in building a muscular female body. Drawing on personal experiences, this project explores key dimensions of a journey through the world of bodybuilding. Utilizing a feminist approach and the concept of stigma, the study focuses on the emotional and physical labour involved in developing a muscular physique while simultaneously navigating the socio-cultural expectations attached to femininity. This article centres on a three-year period and includes insights gained from a European competition’s Figure and Physique divisions. Central to this exploration is the tension between constructing a muscular body and negotiating the challenges of being a woman in the male-dominated subculture of bodybuilding.

Keywords: *bodybuilding, women, autoethnography, sociocultural norms*

INTRODUCTION

The first author embarked on her fitness journey at the age of 23, specifically to address her weight concerns. With limited fitness knowledge and driven by the desire to shed 30 kilos, she considered her body as a project in need of transformation. She began her journey by reading a book on bodybuilding that her father had purchased from a thrift shop, which became her number one

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guide. The cover featured Frank and Christine Zane, well-known figures in the bodybuilding sub-culture, was entitled *Super Bodies in 12 Weeks*. She followed its guidelines religiously to transform her body to a more desirable form.

A year later, the first author returned to the Philippines and her first thing to do was to join a local gym. She found one just a five-minute walk from home. When entering the gym, she encountered a typical bodybuilding facility characterized by its spartan simplicity. The atmosphere was set by loud rock music emanating from a nearly broken speaker and by the equipment which bore the marks of heavy use. One, rickety treadmill stood on the verge of collapse, a stationary bike was alongside it, and rows of dumbbells and barbells, encrusted in a rust, stood at the ready. Although the facilities were worn, they were functional. The walls were plastered with centrefolds from exercise magazines and the serious ‘stares’ of the male bodybuilders in them welcomed as she entered. Instead of feeling discomfort at seeing their prominently muscular physiques, she experienced a surprising sense of belonging. She vividly remembers being drawn to a poster of Ronnie Coleman (ex-pro bodybuilder), which seemed to epitomize the spirit of the environment. His image did not merely stand as a representation of physical excellence, but as a symbol of the deeply gendered landscape that defines much of the bodybuilding culture.

Two decades later during the first author’s doctoral studies, the question of gender imbalance in bodybuilding re-surfaced as she re-entered this male-dominated arena. She could not help but wonder: Does she belong here? Or is she just an outsider in this over-masculinized environment? These questions reflect the broader tensions between cultural norms, **gender identity, and embodied practice**, especially in settings such as bodybuilding, where dominant forms of masculinity are frequently praised (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The fascination with that image of Ronnie Coleman was not purely a form of admiration. It was also a confrontation of her own situation in a sport that historically has excluded and marginalized women, especially in the Philippines (Junio, 2024). This observation led to a critical reflection on whether her passion and the tacit idea that power, strength, and visibility are, by cultural default, male preserves.

Consequently, this autoethnographic study explores her lived experience as a female bodybuilder through the lens of Judith Butler’s (1990) concept of gender performativity and framed around two main themes: becoming a female bodybuilder in a man’s world and facing socio-cultural challenges as a female bodybuilder. In the sections below, her experience of building her body and the challenges inherent in being a woman in this male-dominated subculture are connected and critically analysed. There is specific emphasis on the psychological work involved in building muscle and balancing the sociocultural ‘demands’

of Western womanhood. Thus, this study critically examines the discourse surrounding women's (lack of) agency in sport, the objectification of the female body, and the gendered expectations imposed on bodies in competitive settings through deploying Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma.

Bodybuilding – A male dominated sport

He evolution of women's participation in bodybuilding reflects broader tensions surrounding gender norms and athletic embodiment. Chapman (1994) notes that bodybuilding emerged as a fundamentally male-dominated arena, with female participation only beginning to take shape in the late 1970s (Aspiridis et al., 2014). Women were largely absent from competitive bodybuilding until Doris Barilleux, the First Lady of woman's bodybuilding and thirteen other women participated in what is widely regarded as the first national women's bodybuilding competition in 1978 (Todd & Harguess, 2012). The subsequent decades witnessed a substantial growth in women's engagement with both recreational training and competitive bodybuilding (Andersen, Brownell, Morgan, & Bartlett, 1998; Probert, Leberman, & Palmer, 2007a), with the early 1980s marking a particularly significant surge in female involvement (Bunsell, 2013; Grogan, Shepherd, Evans, Wright, & Hunter, 2006).

This expanding participation necessitated the creation of specialized competitive frameworks, each governed by distinct categories, regulations, and stringent qualification criteria designed specifically for female athletes (Grogan et al., 2006; Grogan, 2017). The competitive landscape has undergone continuous transformation since 1986, characterized by the introduction of new divisions and evolving judging standards that reflect changing perspectives on female muscularity (Grogan, Evans, Wright, & Hunter, 2004). However, the mainstreaming of women's bodybuilding has not occurred without resistance. The 1991 Ms. Olympia contest, broadcast for the first time on ESPN (a multinational sports media conglomerate), generated significant viewer backlash, with the network and the International Federation of Bodybuilding & Fitness (IFBB) receiving numerous complaints expressing discomfort with the display of highly developed female muscularity (Lowe, 1998). This public pressure ultimately compelled the IFBB to impose restrictions on female competitors' muscular development, revealing the cultural anxieties surrounding women's transgression of traditional Western gender boundaries and the perceived threat posed by muscular female bodies in mainstream media discourse.

Role of autoethnography

Autoethnography was identified as the most appropriate methodological framework for this study given the first author's established position within bodybuilding culture. Maréchal (2010, p. 43) characterises autoethnography as fundamentally "associated with narrative inquiry and autobiography," emphasising experience and personal narrative as central mechanisms for meaning-making. The first author's identity as a female bodybuilder provides critical insider access to a subculture that paradoxically champions women's empowerment through strength and discipline while perpetuating exclusionary practices that have historically marginalised female participants.

This deep cultural immersion fundamentally informs the methodological approach. Autoethnography functions both as analytical process and scholarly product, enabling critical examination of personal experience within broader cultural, gendered, and institutional contexts. Rather than treating subjective knowledge as methodological limitation, this approach positions it as an essential, reality-congruent lens for exploring how power relations, gender norms, and identity are embodied and enacted (Maréchal, 2010). As Bochner and Ellis (2006, p. 111) articulate, autoethnography "depicts people struggling to overcome adversity" and portrays individuals "in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles."

The alignment between autoethnography and feminist scholarship proves particularly significant, as both recognize that the political is personal and that individual experience can illuminate concealed dynamics of systemic oppression (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). This methodological approach enables the integration of memory, emotion, observation, and embodied knowledge into an account that maintains both reflective depth and analytical rigor.

Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Judith Butler and Tanya Bunsell, this study demonstrates that female muscularity extends beyond the physical boundaries of gym spaces, emerging through negotiation with broader social discourses. Through autoethnography, the researcher's body becomes simultaneously a site of inquiry and a mechanism of knowledge production, asserting that writing about lived experience, particularly embodied experience, generates novel epistemological possibilities (Silverman & Rowe, 2020).

The research process resonated strongly with McLean's (2023) reflections as an academic bodybuilder, particularly her observation that simultaneous research participation and cultural immersion reignited personal aspirations toward idealized physique achievement while intensifying engagement with cultural practices and rituals. Similarly, this investigation not only rekindled personal physique improvement goals, but also created additional accountability

pressures, pursued independently without established support networks. Engaging deeply with bodybuilding culture enhanced cultural awareness and sharpened understanding of gender as a socially constructed and contested category. Despite entering this research with prior amateur competition experience, the extent to which the investigation would demand sustained mental, physical, and emotional labour remained underestimated. The process ultimately proved far more challenging and personally revelatory than initially anticipated.

Challenging Norms: A Feminist Framework for Understanding Muscularity

Feminist scholars have extensively documented bodybuilding's empowering potential for women, positioning muscular development as a form of corporeal resistance (Brace-Govan, 2004; Brady, 2001; Heywood, 1998; Krane et al., 2004; Ryan, 2001; Shea, 2001). Wesely (2001, p. 173) demonstrates how female bodybuilders frequently conceptualize their muscular development as a "semi-rebellious act" that directly challenges dominant Western constructions of femininity. This perspective aligns with Griffin's (1998) assertion that women's serious athletic engagement inherently constitutes feminist praxis. Through muscular embodiment, women can strategically (re)negotiate social interactions and life circumstances, thereby disrupting binary assumptions traditionally governing the relationship between muscle and gender (Edwards, Molnar, & Tod, 2017).

Certain feminist theorists argue that female bodybuilders fundamentally contest hegemonic gender norms by reshaping their bodies according to self-determined standards, creating autonomous spaces of resistance (Bunsell, 2013). Shilling's (1993) concept of 'body projects' proves particularly salient here, emphasising how women's bodybuilding can subvert conventional beauty ideals to produce alternative, empowering physiques. Similarly, Hewitt (1997) contends that women who radically transform their bodies not only defy societal expectations but also reclaim agency over their own physicality, offering critical insights into how patriarchal norms operate both within broader society and specifically within bodybuilding culture.

Reflecting upon the first author's embodied practice reveals the persistent gendered nature of strength and muscularity while questioning how women's bodybuilding participation simultaneously challenges and reinforces existing gender norms. As Molnar and Kelly (2013) argue, the persistence of patriarchal systems continues to exclude women, necessitating from a radical feminist perspective the creation of alternative structures by women themselves. Through muscular development, women challenge cultural narratives associating femininity with softness, passivity, and physical restraint, transforming their bodies into

active sites of cultural resistance (Bunsell, 2013). In other words, for a female bodybuilder, the body functions not merely as a source of physical strength but as a powerful site of resistance. Female muscularity actively challenges traditional Western ideals of femininity. From a feminist perspective, physical strength should not undermine or negate womanhood but rather expand the possibilities of what it means to be a woman. By applying feminist theoretical frameworks, this study examines the intersections between gendered ideologies and physical culture, particularly focusing on muscle building and constructions of womanhood.

Feminist theorists advocate reconceptualising the gendered body not as a fixed, static entity but as a product of accumulated and repeated actions. Butler (1988) argues that gender is not an innate quality but is performed through a continuous succession of acts that are repeated, reinforced, and ultimately solidified over time. From this perspective, bodybuilding practice represents not merely physical transformation, but a means of engaging with and ultimately disrupting gendered performances developed throughout one's life. Thus, building muscle has deepened some women's awareness of how femininity is simultaneously socially constructed and vigilantly policed, yet remains open to subversion and resistance. Hours spent training in the gymnasium, developing a muscular physique, are far from neutral acts. Rather, they represent deliberate, gendered performances that actively resist and upset cultural narratives of female passivity and corporeal docility. Each lift, each demonstration of physical power, becomes a reconstituted act of resistance. Through this repetition, the body transforms from a symbol of gender conformity into a dynamic site where gender is continuously contested, destabilized, and reimagined.

Becoming a female Bodybuilder – The corporeal challenge

Cultural emulation involves the admiration of certain figures or ideals and often entails an internalized drive to conform to culturally sanctioned standards (Klein, 2007). Baghurst, Parish and Denny (2014) argued that emulation is a significant reason why many women become competitive amateur bodybuilders. Baghurst et.al (2014) added that emulation is conceptualized as a form of motivation originating from external sources, such as family members, professional bodybuilders, or even fictional characters.

The first author's primary objective was not explicitly to become a bodybuilder, but to lose the 30 kilograms of excess weight. Over time, this unwavering commitment to fitness, however, evolved into a deeper personal project, focusing on the following question: what would it mean to test the limits of her body and will? As noted above, bodybuilding emerged not just as a sport and physical activity, but as a personal provocation, which many bodybuilders

undertake to challenge corporeal cultural norms. However, this aspect of the sub-culture has different meaning to men and women. The first author reflected on the gender dynamics of bodybuilding:

The first author has had limited connections to the bodybuilding community within her local gym in the Philippines. At the same time, she has encountered a few individuals involved in the sport, but they all have exclusively been men and no women bodybuilders around. Additionally, none of them truly encouraged her to take this sport seriously. Therefore, at the beginnings, she often felt reluctant to disclose her aspiration to become a bodybuilder to male counterparts. There was a part of her that was driven by fear of exclusion from both the sub-culture and mainstream society. Bunsell (2013) detected similar concerns expressed by her female participants who were immediately ostracized as abnormal when they decided to embark on a quest for muscularity. The first author's fear of exclusion did not exclusively derive from her own personal insecurity, but also from a broader socio-cultural issue which have an impact on women who decided to pursue traditional male activities, leading to experiences of discouragement and exclusion.

Women's marginalisation in, and exclusion from, serious or competitive bodybuilding has largely been shaped by traditional gender norms surrounding femininity and masculinity. Bolin (1998, p. 196) captures the crux of this exclusionary logic in her observation: "...at no time has the muscled woman been regarded as a paragon of beauty." This statement highlights not only the absence of the muscular female body within hegemonic discourses of beauty but also society's broader unease with women who visibly transgress conventional boundaries of femininity.

This cultural tension is often experienced in everyday gym spaces, where female participants who demonstrate discipline, physical strength, and muscular development, achieved through sustained effort, are frequently met with confusion, discomfort, or even disapproval, rather than admiration or recognition. Bolin's insight is therefore critical for understanding how cultural standards of beauty function not merely as aesthetic ideals, but as gendered mechanisms of social control. These norms work to reinforce normative femininity while policing and disciplining bodies that deviate from entrenched gender expectations.

Lowe's *Women of Steel* (1998) offers an interesting balance around the concept and practice of female bodybuilding. On the one hand, there is the suggestion of women developing steel-like muscles, but, on the other hand, female bodybuilders to "look like women again," they must, as a duty to themselves, adorn their bodies with makeup, nail polish, and hairspray. This imperative to reassert normative femininity serves not only to conceal the physical toll of the sport, its fatigue, hunger, and dehydration, but also exposes the persistent

cultural expectation that women must perform femininity, even at the height of physical achievement. The first author reflected on Lowe's account as follows: *'Gazing at my own reflection in the mirror, my face gaunt from months of rigorous dieting and physical discipline, I felt the full emotional weight of Lowe's observation and the urge to play along and rekindle my femininity.'*

Lowe's critique brings into sharp focus the enduring force of the *feminine apologetic*, the expectation that women must soften or offset their strength to remain legibly feminine. It reveals how the female bodybuilding body, despite its transformation through intense labour and discipline, remains subject to gendered cultural scripts and policing that prioritise aesthetic legibility over bodily autonomy.

"The Feminine Apologetic" (Self-Construction)

When women decided to get serious with bodybuilding, they are often unaware that they would tap into conventional gendered borders and disrupt and challenge gender norms (McGrath and Chananie-Hill, 2009). Women often feel culturally compelled to explore and align themselves with feminine cultural traits. As they become more muscular, face thinner and jaw more pronounced, women tend to respond to social pressures in a way what Ussher (1997) called "doing girl". In other words, they begin to include feminine practices into their daily life such as getting false eyelash extensions, wearing lipstick, and growing their hair longer. Grogan *et al* (2004) described it as a "balancing act" between the competing demands of femininity and muscularity as a result of training hard with heavier weights, which further deviates from gendered norms. In opposition to the image of the big hard female body, according to Joana Frueh (2001), in her book *Monster/beauty: Building the body of love*, "some female bodybuilders feminize themselves by dyeing their hair blonde (employing a sign of vulnerability and innocence); painting their nails and curling, ornamenting, or upsweeping their hair (using the artifice of grooming); having breast implants (emphasizing a fetishized part of female bodies); and wearing corsets or other lingerie for photo shoots becoming pinups in order to court stereotypical sexual fantasy" (p. 108).

I despise wearing high heels, but succumb to the idea of wearing them in the competition. With the physique that I achieved, my confidence has multiplied, covering the fact that I don't know how to wear high-heeled shoes at all. I went and got a lash extension as the fake lashes make my diet face more wide-eyed and cheerful. I had my nails done and had nail extensions, it gave the illusion of having long fingers, despite loving the veins and callus that formed on my hands and arms.

Butler (1990) illustrates how language becomes a site for the negotiation and construction of gender, emphasizing its performative nature, where femininity is not an inherent trait but something continuously enacted and articulated. In contexts such as the Philippines, where female bodybuilding remains largely unconventional and is met with limited public acceptance, women athletes may experience discomfort under the gaze of those outside the bodybuilding subculture. The muscular female body, through its visible transformation, becomes a site of gender nonconformity (Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2019). By cultivating an androgynous physique (Schulze, 1997), these women present a corporeal challenge to dominant gender norms, provoking stigmatization, marginalization, and various forms of sexism. As Felkar (2012) argues, such bodies disrupt culturally entrenched expectations of feminine appearance, revealing the social tensions that arise when women visibly defy normative ideals.

Turning to another dimension of the discussion, the concept of the *feminine apologetic* was first introduced by Jan Felshin (1974) in her seminal essay *The Triple Option...For Women in Sport*. Felshin argued that women in sport occupy a paradoxical position, as sport has historically been constructed as the embodiment of masculinity, strength, aggression, competition, while dominant ideals of femininity explicitly exclude these traits. The *feminine apologetic* refers to the strategies employed by women athletes to counterbalance their participation in a masculinised domain by enhancing or performing conventional femininity. In the context of bodybuilding, this might involve aesthetic gestures such as emphasising appearance, wearing makeup, or highlighting traditionally “feminine” traits to offset the muscularity, competitiveness, and strength that challenge normative gender roles.

Felshin further noted that, because women neither wish to reject sport entirely nor accept total exclusion, apologetic behaviours emerge as a way to justify their presence and participation in the face of cultural disapproval. Yet, while the feminine apologetic remains a persistent cultural mechanism, female bodybuilders’ insight and experience presents a more nuanced perspective. Most women bodybuilders, the first author included, do not see it appropriate to “apologize” for their participation in bodybuilding. Instead, they seek to redefine the cultural boundaries of femininity through the activity. Such women tend to embrace both strength and femininity not as contradictions, but as a deliberate and empowered fusion. As Felshin (1974, p. 40) compellingly concluded, women must be encouraged to explore their full range of possibilities: “for it is self that is sought, and no apology is required.”

Entering a Man's World

Within the traditionally male-dominated arena of bodybuilding, female participants frequently embody what Erving Goffman (1963) conceptualizes as a “discredited identity” - an identity visibly marked by stigma through its deviation from socially sanctioned norms. The muscular female body, conceived as testimony to strength, discipline, and dedication, encounters suspicion, judgment, and disapproval within public spaces. Goffman’s stigma theory, particularly his concept of spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963; Jacobsen & Smith, 2022), provides a compelling framework for understanding the social consequences of gender nonconformity as they are specifically imposed upon women.

While male muscularity typically receives celebration as symbolic achievement, female muscularity becomes a contested site of social tension, subjected to scrutiny, unsolicited commentary, and assumptions regarding sexuality, gender identity, and moral character. This stigmatization positions female bodybuilders within a paradoxical space of hypervisibility and marginalization: they are consistently observed, even fixated upon, yet remain culturally unassimilated, i.e., perpetually seen but seldom accepted. These dynamics illuminate how gendered expectations fundamentally shape the reception of female athletic bodies while reproducing the boundaries of normative femininity.

Importantly, stigma operates not merely as external imposition upon female bodybuilders but also requires internal negotiation, a conscious awareness of how muscular embodiment tests gendered boundaries. Goffman’s (1963) analysis of “discreditable” group membership, wherein one’s body resists normative categorization, reveals the contours of dominant social norms through their transgression. The first author’s experience exemplifies this dynamic:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I developed significantly more muscle mass. When lockdown restrictions lifted and gyms reopened, I re-entered public spaces transformed- returning to familiar environments within an unfamiliar body. Reactions from individuals I had not encountered for months varied considerably. Some expressed admiration and inspiration, while others appeared uncertain or withdrew, seemingly unsure how to respond. I vividly recall receiving particular “looks”, not hostile, yet not welcoming either. These gazes appeared to question what they observed, as if my muscularity somehow disrupted expectations they were unprepared to confront.

Throughout their active participation, female bodybuilders often develop strategic abilities to disregard external gazes and reactions from individuals outside the bodybuilding community. This defensive approach minimizes the adverse impacts of social stigma (Goffman, 1963). Individuals face stigmatization for

failing to meet categorical expectations, in this case, gender category expectations. Goffman (1963) designates individuals as “normal” when they conform to social expectations, while those who deviate experience stigmatization. Consequently, female bodybuilders strategically redirect emphasis toward external opinions that accept their embodiment, utilizing supportive perspectives as primary reference points. By positioning themselves as intentionally “different,” they render “general public” opinions (particularly negative ones) less significant (Grogan et al., 2004).

The corporeal exposure inherent in competitive bodybuilding, both on stage and within gym spaces, raises critical questions about whether such public display constitutes surrender, potentially transforming the body into a site of male gaze and desire (Patton, 2001). Laura Mulvey's (1975) “male gaze” theory demonstrates how visual culture constructs itself around masculine viewing subjects while positioning women as passive objects of desire. Within female bodybuilding contexts, this gaze operates with particular complexity: the muscular female body simultaneously invites viewing while resisting objectification, thereby offering a form of resistance to gender normativity.

Although audiences may attempt to view muscular female bodies through heteronormative frameworks, these bodies simultaneously challenge the terms of the gaze through their disruption of traditional feminine softness. The muscular female body emerges as a site of productive tension, i.e., visible yet not fully integrated within contemporary definitions of femininity, thereby exposing the limitations of conventional frameworks that reduce women to sources of visual pleasure. This embodied resistance reveals the instability of gender categories while simultaneously demonstrating the persistent power of normative expectations to shape social interactions and related self-perception.

CONCLUSION

This autoethnography traced the first author's journey into female bodybuilding, documenting her commitment to a sport deeply rooted in masculine culture and her navigation of the complex socio-cultural environment that continues to stigmatize muscular femininity. What began as an individual pursuit of strength evolved into a confrontation with deeply entrenched gender expectations. Drawing upon Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, the analysis demonstrates how the muscular female body contradicts the scripted boundaries of femininity, rendering gender visible not as fixed essence but as continually performed and open to resistance. The author's muscular embodiment emerges as disruption - one that resists and redefines what is performatively recognized as “feminine.”

By situating this autobiographical narrative within feminist theoretical discourses, the study resists hegemonic discourses that conflate muscularity with masculinity and femininity with weakness or passivity. The first author's embodied experience subverts the gender binary, and it situates the body as a site of empowerment, resistance, and performative agency.

This paradox accounts for how female bodybuilding resists but remains vulnerable to Mulvey's (1975) theory of the male gaze. The body of the muscular woman is a space of tension, both discovered and placed upon under to uncover the shameful reality of the sport's continued masculine bias. The body of the female bodybuilder, as strong as it is, is decided not in itself but according to how well it can be coaxed or talked into conforming or reassuring patriarchal sight. Each workout repetition in the gym, each bodybuilding pose under stage lights and the months of constant dieting, constitutes an act of subversive performance that recomposes understandings of womanhood through a body that refuses diminishment. The competitive stage reveals the persistent tensions within female bodybuilding, and to achieve favourable judging outcomes from the judges, the first author found herself compelled to perform "feminine apologetics" (Felshin, 1974), donning makeup, false eyelashes, and nail extensions to soften what might be perceived as excessive muscularity.

The research reveals a fundamental contradiction: women can lay claim to spaces of strength, yet they remain gendered ideals of apologetic performances of traditional femininity. Female muscle does not emerge as a contradiction but as a declaration of being strong, political, and deeply personal. This study invites readers to reconsider intersections of embodiment, gender, and identity in a way that recognizes bodybuilding as more than sport participation, but as a feminist practice. The study contributes to broader academic discussion about how women navigate traditionally masculine-coded sports while also resisting and being constricted by persistent gender norms that still shape athletic domains and competitive cultures.

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