

## FBBs: The Ultimate Feminists?

*New images of women are produced when some women develop strong, muscular bodies. As female bodybuilders defy canons of the feminine aesthetic, building their bodies beyond traditional limits, they destabilize feminine bodily identity and confuse gender* (Sawicki in Johnston, 1996, par. 49)

Women's lives are dictated by the double-standards of men. They are told by magazines such as *Cosmo* to diet, while *Southern Living* encourages them to prepare and indulge in multiple luscious desserts. Images bombard women, demanding that they conform to be uniformly light-skinned, tall, thin, and expressionless in order to be desirable to men. Contrastingly, they are also told that curvy is sexy. How is it possible for women to find a balance between these extremes? Within the last few decades, American women have been subjected to not being fit enough. We have entered the "fitness era," in which women, and increasingly men, cannot diet or exercise enough. Women must be in shape, lean and trim. However, they must also not be too muscular or threatening at the same time. Women's bodies must conform to a standard that is acceptable within male dominated society's definition of "feminine."

Since their debut in the 1970s, female bodybuilders (FBBs) have challenged popular culture's definition of "feminine." FBBs challenge and seek to redefine popular culture's standards of "beauty." In a way, female bodybuilders are some of the most proactive feminists, challenging hegemonic notions of "femininity" through re-sculpting their physiques. In order to investigate the FBB subculture, I looked at many books and published articles on female bodybuilding. I consulted sources written by men, but mostly women on the subject. Most of the sources were feminist critiques or analyses of female bodybuilding. As a weightlifter myself, I also reflected upon my own experiences in the gym to include in my discussion of female bodybuilding.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

*The cultural currents in North America in the late 1970s increasingly heralded women's physical achievements. Women's athletic programs were fought for... All were part of the attack on cultural myths about women, at the center of which was the view that women were physically weak. At the same time, [female] bodybuilding was rapidly rising in popularity (Klein, 1993, p. 161).*

Before the feminist movement of the 1960's, female bodybuilding was unheard of. It was a time when even women's participation in sports was socially unacceptable. Charles Gains, author of *Pumping Iron II: The Unprecedented Women* (1984) comments:

The question is, where in the world, in the history of the world, did women with muscles come from? The answer is not many places. Though standards of beauty for women have historically varied more often and more radically than those for men, it is difficult to find muscular women celebrated or even recorded anywhere in written or visual history, including mythology (p. 19).

Female bodybuilding emerged during a feminist era, the seventies, “when ripening feminism and a worldwide craze for fitness combined to produce a fashion that all but forced it to occur” (p. 26). During the seventies, women began exercising to be healthier and to take control of their bodies.

FBB competitions also began during this time period. Originally “add-ons” to the men's competitions, FBB contests were “treated as sort of chauvinistic relief from the seriousness of judging the muscular males” (Helms, 1995, par. 5). The first official professional FBB contest was “Ms. Olympia” in 1980. Afterwards, interest in female bodybuilding increased exponentially. But the Ms. Olympia contests were hardly showcases for feminists. Instead, female contestants posed on stage in high heels and bikinis (Ian, 2001, par. 1), a far cry from showcasing empowered women. Although these women had worked hard to redefine

“femininity,” they found themselves subject to proving their femininity rather than their well-proportioned musculature to the judges by parading on stage in bikinis.

From the first competition, FBBs have struggled to be judged on a similar criterion as men; to this day, FBBs’ “femininity” is an extra qualification in addition to their musculature for judging. In an effort to discourage the acceptance and glorification of women who had worked hard to achieve the musculature similar to a man’s, judges made sure to deny the most successful FBBs recognition and merit in early competitions. For example, in the first Ms. Olympia contest, Bev Francis, an Australian power-lifter, had:

...bulk'd herself up into a simulation of the Incredible Hulk. She clearly [had] the most daunting set of muscles in the Las Vegas bodybuilders' competition... But she loses because the judges think she looks to 'masculine'. Bev is not, that is to say, the Venus de Milo (Morrow, 1985, par. 4).

In fact, Bev never even had a chance at winning the 1980 Ms. Olympia. After Joe Weilder, the head of the competition, found out that Bev was in first place far beyond the other competitors, he passed a note to one of the judges explicitly stating: “Under no circumstances shall Bev Francis win this contest” (Ian, 2001, par. 11). Of course, Bev didn’t win. Bev Francis, by far the most deserving of the title Ms. Olympia, due to her supposed “masculinity,” did not represent a prize-winning FBB according to the judges; she was represented as one of the “freaks” or “she-men” instead. Even the more “feminine” contestants who won early contests were controversial. The first live broadcast of the Ms. Olympia competition aired on ESPN in 1991. Immediately ESPN and the IFBB received complaints from viewers who telephoned to “complain about the grotesque spectacle on ESPN” (par. 11). Discrimination of this type is not uncommon in the

bodybuilding world. Women who are the most successful at resculpting their bodies are penalized for being too “masculine” and threatening. FBBs are caught in a confusing Catch-22.

### **FBBs not (M)BBs?**

*The bodybuilder... is involved in actively reconstructing the body's skeletal frame through the inscription of muscles (the calculated tearing and rebuilding of selected muscle according to the exercise chosen) and of posture and internal organs (Grosz in Johnston, 1996, par. 1).*

*To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men (John Berger, n.d., Ways of Seeing, p. 46)*

Ideally, the definition of female bodybuilding should be no different than male bodybuilding. However, women are rarely viewed at the same level as men, especially in the realm of sports. In bodybuilding, women consciously or unconsciously redefine and negotiate popular culture's definition of “femininity.” Beginning a weight-training program for women does not have the same social implications as men. Distinguished scholar and popular culture analyst bell hooks writes:

When I told my friends of my decision to work out with a trainer, they teased me about being a Buppie and spending my money foolishly. I realized that we think it's fine to spend our last dime on a designer outfit, but when it comes to fitness, the cost and effort often seem too great” (1995, par. 11).

Unfortunately, women are discouraged from exercising regularly. Rigorous dieting is often the only acceptable means of losing weight for women, while men are looked down upon if they do not maintain “ripped” physiques by regularly attending the gym.

Similarly, men are encouraged to lift heavy weights while women are not in order to avoid becoming “bulky” or “manly.” It has been scientifically proven that regular exercise that includes weight training greatly reduces a woman’s risk of developing osteoporosis, yet women continually avoid lifting weights in order to “not get too big.” Women are told that if they lift weights, they’ll “look like a man,” or “guys will be intimidated to ask you out” (Starling, 1998, par. 2). All the while, men are encouraged to not only lift weights, but do so on a regular basis.

Lynda Johnston comments:

Ironically, it could also be argued that the display of hyper-masculinity, an attempt to render the whole body in a phallus, together with the narcissistic reinvestment of the male body, is a feminine activity. The FBB works her body and creates a differently sexed body which confuses and confounds traditional notions of ‘femininity.’ Muscles, supposedly ‘natural’, are dangerous and out of place on women (par. 34).

It is increasingly difficult for women to negotiate aerobics, weight training, and hypertrophy when popular culture discourages them from realizing their true potential as athletes.

In my own experience, I was deeply affected by the cultural myths of weight training, favoring ANYTHING over weight training. Even as a varsity athlete in high school, weight lifting was a “last resort” to improve my performance in swimming and cross-country. However after graduation, I began regular weight training as an addition to my aerobic workout between my freshman and sophomore years of college with the insistence of my partner, a weight training coach at our high school, St. Stephen’s and St. Agnes’ School.

Unlike most, my overall experience in the gym has been positive. Although I do get a lot of stares from both women and men in the gym, I’ve learned to accept them as compliments

rather than judgment. Very few people verbally interact with me, but those that do mostly have positive things to say. One night, a girl approached me and said, “Wow – thirty pounds, I could never lift that.” I told her that if she trained regularly that she’d be able to do it sooner than she thought, explaining that I was only two months into my training program. I can only hope that my dedication to weightlifting positively influences these women not to shy away from lifting, as I did for so long.

Despite society’s negativity towards muscular women, many other women chose not only to lift weights, but heavy ones. Fiona, a long time FBB, states:

I really quite like the idea that it’s unnatural. I don’t know whether I should admit that or not? There’ve been massive changes in me and yes, I think I quite like the fact that it’s unnatural. In fact, people make comments and it just spurs me on all the more (Focus group, 12 June 1994 in Johnston, 1996, par. 51).

Fiona’s statement represents the mindset of many FBBs; they are defiant but still find themselves negotiating popular culture’s standards of what is what acceptable for a woman, what is “feminine.” However, despite society’s disapproval of muscular women, FBBs continue to push the limits of their bodies and ultimately “femininity.”

Females who lift weights “disrupt binary notions of femininity and masculinity” (par.

2). FBBs:

Pose an even greater threat to traditional notions of masculinity and male dominance since strength, muscularity, leanness, and hardness define male bodies; while weakness, lack of muscularity, curvaceousness, and softness define the female body (Shea, 2001, par.8)

FBBs bodies fluctuate between acceptable and unacceptable; beginning as a traditionally “feminine” body, that which is soft, which through weight-training becomes a hard, muscular, “docile body.” Even though female bodybuilding was not around, Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, “drives to the heart of bodybuilding as a cultural entity,” (Klein, 1993, p. 188). Foucault writes:

What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behavior. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it... Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, “docile bodies” (in Klein, 1993, p. 188).

While the built female body threatens popular culture’s notion of “femininity,” contrastingly, men are praised for the very same unnatural transition. Unlike their male counterparts, FBBs reshape their bodies, in addition to traditional notions of femininity.

## **WOMEN IN THE GYM**

*[FBBs] are many things, among them, symmetrical, strong, sensuous, and stunning. When photographed in competition shape, repping and grimacing or squeezing out shots, they appear shredded, vascular, and hard, and they can be perceived as threatening* (Shea, 2001, par. 18).

Although women were never formally forbidden to enter the gym, they have been discouraged from entering the male dominated weight room, consistently favoring aerobic machines over free-weights. It is not uncommon for women to be harassed, teased, or verbally/physically attacked in the gym in order to maintain an “ovary free” environment (Klein, 1993, p. 161). Alan M. Klein argues: “The camaraderie [between men and women in the gym] is fairly recent, and obscures what once was and still may be hostility by men towards women” (p.

160). The rationale of men's intimidation of women in the gym lies in any number of reasons and insecurities. Primarily, the gym is a homo-sexualized arena where men are voyeurs of other men's physiques, working to achieve a comparable hyper-masculine physique (Klein). The presence of a woman disrupts this atmosphere, and turns the attention surplus back to repressive heterosexual pursuits. A woman's presence in the gym reinforces the hypersexual nature of the gym and redirects its energies to a heterosexual dialect. In the gym, women are disruptive on many levels.

The voyeuristic nature of the gym is exemplified in the unspoken dress code. Men are allowed to wear practically anything they wish, baggy sweats, ratty t-shirts, wife-beaters, sometimes no shirt at all. On the other hand, women are not allowed the same freedom. They are restricted to clothes that emphasize their "female" characteristics: spandex, short-shorts, tank tops, sleeveless t-shirts, and sports bras. Former FBB Lisa Bevington adds, "Many [women] overdo their makeup, hair and clothing and augment their physiques with breast implants. They allow themselves to be sexualized even though it works against the goals of being an athlete" (in Scott-Dixon, 2003, par. 5). Women's dress must reflect their gender, whereas men do not have the same expectations. The gym's dress code emphasizes the fact that women in the gym can never just be athletes; they are sexualized objects of men's desire. Women must be aware that their presence in the gym will often be mistaken as an invitation for unwarranted sexual advances.

Not only do the men in the gym blatantly discourage women from lifting weights, the facilities themselves physically divide men and women. Traditionally male and female spaces



are created in gyms; aerobic machines for women, and free weights for men. One striking example of the segregation of the sexes is the “Black and Blue Room”:

Its name and décor (painted black and blue), links weight training with (potential) masculine violence. However existing at the other end of the décor/sex space binary is the aerobics and weight machines room, which is painted a pink shade and is brightly lit (Johnston, 1996, par. 20).

Physically dividing men and women in the gym directly influences women’s decisions to avoid lifting weights.

Despite men’s attempts to discourage women from lifting weights, some women continued to lift with even more enthusiasm, and without the help of men. In an interview with a FBB, Lynda Johnston asks Sarah about her first experiences at the gym:

Lynda: And when you started body-building, did anyone help you in the gym?

Sarah: No they didn’t help me um no. It was um it was more like a man’s gym. It was out there on your own and your experience and you train on your own (22 June 1994, par. 28).

Sarah continues to describe the gym as an “unsupportive, isolating, and discouraging” environment; although “she was not asked to leave, she was not made to feel welcome” (par. 29). Men are often threatened and unwelcoming of females who enter “their” territory in the gym.

## THE GAZE AND ABJECTION

*There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that s/he is her/his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over and against her/himself. A superb formula; power exercised continuously and for what turns out to be at a minimal cost (Johnston, 1996, par. 39).*

The “gaze” of men undeniably shapes women’s actions. John Berger argues that men see and women are seen. Thus, “men look at women...[and] women watch themselves being looked at” (Berger, n.d., p. 47). Therefore, a disapproving look from a man is detrimental to a woman. It is impossible for women to function without worrying about judgment from others, especially men, hindering women from freely acting. Women must consider their actions in relation to the way that men will see them first. Thus, women who seek to challenge the “gaze” of men are viewed as abject.

Johnston argues that, “FBBs become erotically constructed by ‘the gaze’, which acts to personify them as abject. The abject built body, established Western hierarchal corporal binaries, such as feminine/masculine, soft/hard, weak/strong... and even pain/pleasure” (1996, par. 68). The abject, repelling and attracting “the gaze”, is both “fascinating and disgusting” at the same time (par. 70). It is “meaningless and repulsive in an irrational, un-representable way” (par. 70). FBBs are a prime example of the abject object, beautiful yet threatening, all the while attracting ‘the gaze.’ This phenomenon presents “an interesting paradox: female bodybuilding simultaneously empowers and disempowers women by challenging yet reinforcing traditional notions of femininity” (Shea, 2001, par. 2).

From my own experience at Goucher College, I’ve been given dirty looks as well as verbally identified as “abject.” One night, I asked to “work in” (share a machine) with a male on the lat pull-down machine. After he finished his set, I immediately got on the machine, without adjusting the weights, and did my set with the same weight he had just lifted. I got off the machine and he commented, “You’re making me look bad.” I laughed that off, as is necessary

most of the time, but I thought to myself, “I’m making you look bad? Or are you making me look good?” My interpretation of the incident was that my ability to lift the same weight as this man was impressive. However, the man’s point of view drastically differed. Instead of being an accomplishment, it was an insult to his ego that I could lift the same weight.

Instances such as this one are unfortunately not uncommon. Jenny, a FBB, describes one incident in the gym:

One guy said, “Oh, do you need a hand with that?” And I was carrying it [the bar bell] over to prepare to set up and do an exercise and I said, “No, I’m alright.” He said, “Oh are you going to use it?” and I said, “Yeah” and he just had his mouth wide open (in Johnston, 1996, par. 30).

However, non-verbal instances occur more than verbal exchanges. Most often than not, men in the weight room will stare rather than converse. While women are allowed in the gym, there are still unspoken limits as to what is acceptable for women to do in the gym.

## **THE GLASS CEILING**

*It is vital to understand women’s narratives that reveal careful negotiations regarding bodily knowledge, ideologies, and practices, which in turn construct the bodies we see. As women define, contest, and press current definitions of emphasized femininity in the new millennium, they push upward on what I argue is a historically produced and shifting glass ceiling, or upper limit, on women’s strength and size (Dworkin, 2001, par. 8).*

Professor Shari L. Dworkin’s article, “‘Holding Back’: Negotiating a glass ceiling on women’s muscular strength” discusses how women are shaped by popular culture’s notions of “femininity” in relation to their bodies and workout routines. She divides women into three categories: non-lifters, moderate lifters, and heavy lifters. Focusing on non-lifters and moderate lifters, Dworkin examines the rationale of each group’s decision not to lift heavy weights. Non-

lifters “focused on weight work and bulk as ‘masculine’ bodily villains and cardiovascular work as a ‘feminine’ bodily savior, making comments such as, “I don’t want to look like a female bodybuilder... I don’t ever want to be non-feminine” (par. 14). These women accepted popular culture’s definition of femininity and internalize it, rendering the FBB “non-feminine” and freakish.

Moderate lifters rejected heavy lifting, but struggled to balance weight workouts and hypertrophy with “femininity.” Dworkin explains:

Moderate lifters uniquely mediated the perceived pleasures and “evils of weightlifting not by avoiding weights altogether, but by seeking strength and pushing upward on the glass ceiling of strength. At the same time, contrary to the widespread belief that women cannot get big from weight training, moderate lifters clearly struggled with their own bodily responses to weights. Moderate lifters carefully negotiated this upper limit, watched their bodies for signs of “excess” musculature, and consciously adjusted or stopped their weight workouts accordingly (par. 23).

Women, as illustrated by the examples of non-lifters and moderate lifters, are affected by popular culture’s strict definition of femininity. Popular culture, “rather than cheer women on to simply ‘just do it,’” tells women not to do “too much of it and to just hold back” (par. 18) when it comes to weightlifting. Dworkin concludes:

As women increasingly flock to fitness sites, daring to cross into the previously male-only territory of the weight room, we must ask whether a contained and ‘held back’ musculature for women is now the heterosexy standard that simultaneously creates ‘new’ womanhood as it re-creates ‘true’ womanhood (par. 48).

## **REDEFINING FEMININITY? SOME CONTRADICTIONS**

*I used to think no way, I'm not going to be a women with muscles because again I envisioned this big huge thing and until you start to push a little bit of weight and notice the change in your body, you start to appreciate that, you know, it looks nice* (Sarah, focus group, 12 June 1994 in Johnston, 1996, par. 63)

Females who chose to weight-train face many challenges, and females who chose to become FBBs and enter competitions face even more. Often, FBBs resist popular culture's definition of "feminine," but at the same time exploit and succumb to it as well. The most blatant example is of course FBBs who get breast implants. As FBBs diet for competitions, they lower their body fat levels; a direct result of that is, of course, reduction of breast size. FBBs in competition shape are "without recognizable signifiers of femininity (breasts), the FBB becomes 'dangerous' and transgressive" (par. 56). Bev Francis comments:

All the top women in bodybuilding have implants now. That's one of the things that annoys me about bodybuilding. We're not supposed to be what conventional women look like, because we've built our bodies. How can we have low body fat and still have breasts? My sexuality isn't threatened enough to stuff things into my chest (in Johnston, 1996, par. 56).

Breast implants are controversial among FBBs. Most professional "natural" FBBs agree with Bev Francis.

"Natural" FBBs, those who do not use artificial supplements, such as steroids, cannot agree on the subject of breast implants. Some argue that implants are 'unnatural,' and distract from the purpose of bodybuilding, proportion and musculature. Others believe that breast implants help achieve the idealized "feminine" body and make the sport and the athlete more appealing to men. With very little financial support, FBB's believe that implants (hyper-femininity) will attract male viewership as well as financing. For example, FBB and MBB

publications seldom feature muscular women on the covers, although the articles inside encourage women to defy traditional notions of femininity. Magazines such as *Muscle & Fitness*

Usually feature fabulously muscled handsome men posing with skinny models, whose only bulges are stuffed into their bikini tops. Bodybuilders pose in skimpy swimsuits in order to best show off the muscles for which they've worked so hard- but those same muscles on a women don't conform to the typical cover model sex-kitten's look (Helms, 1995, par. 7).

All bodybuilding publications follow this model, unfortunately. While female bodybuilding has gained acceptance, they still must keep themselves within an acceptable standard of "femininity." These tensions will remain unresolved among FBBs until popular culture's definition of "femininity" changes.

## **THE FUTURE OF FBBs**

*You would think that just by the nature of the sport, the bodybuilding industry would showcase the strength of its [female] participants, at least physically. However, the industry actually reinforces sexist stereotypes that women have fought hard against. It sets up the women to be in competition with one another for their femininity on and off stage, rather than their physiques, and that makes it impossible for any kind of unity among athletes* (Lisa Bevington in Scott-Dixon, 2003, par. 9).

While FBBs have gained acceptance, they still have a long way to go. FBBs still face many obstacles. Michelle Ian recounts, "The second contest I lost because I was told the judges thought that, given my size and definition, I must be on steroids (They declined to test me)" (2001, par. 2). Additionally, it is increasingly difficult for FBBs to function within the realm of male bodybuilding. Since the addition of "fitness competitions" which are more like beauty contests than bodybuilding contests, FBBs compete with additional contestants in the fitness

competitions for the same prize money (par. 8). FBBs rarely get sponsored to endorse products, often succumbing to ‘schmoes,’ “who pay for photos, private posing, ‘muscle worship,’ or wrestling sessions,” (par. 9). Ian explicitly states that, “world-class female physique athletes have had to acknowledge that the bodybuilding establishment wants them, in effect, dead” (par.

9). She continues:

People who consider bodybuilding to be mainly entertainment explain the demise of female bodybuilding as the logical consequence of the self-evident fact, which they refuse to analyze, that it doesn’t ‘sell’, doesn’t, that is attract paying audiences, and financially cannot stand on its own (without men). It’s not just that mainstream media decline to feature the hyper-muscular women as either positive role models or advertising lures. The bodybuilding media, the magazine and supplement manufacturers, are themselves squeamish about letting her (FBB) to appear (par. 11).

It has become increasingly difficult for FBBs to get any positive publicity, even from their own industry. Surprisingly enough, those who one would expect to promote female bodybuilding are the first ones to suppress it. Thus, the future of female bodybuilding is uncertain in the realm of popular culture. Without any doubt, a select few females will continue to lift weights, whether recognized and supported by the IFBB or not. In the end, FBB are not bodybuilders for the fame, but for their health:

We must, as women, continue to demand more realistic definitions of ‘beauty’ and ‘femininity’. Health is beautiful no matter what sport a woman pursues. Muscle is feminine on a woman who has inner strength as well as physical power” (Helms, 1995, par. 16)

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