Religio-cultural ideals of women's body shapes: A review of black women's engagement with bodybuilding

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of existing literature around the conceptions of women's engagement in the sport of bodybuilding. It aims to explore specifically how religious and cultural conceptions of black women's bodies influence their engagement in bodybuilding, with a particular focus on Zulu Christian women. The review foregrounds debates on how, although a previously male-dominated sport, women all around the world are becoming prevalent participators in the sport. It provides a general perspective of the conceptions of women's engagement in bodybuilding from a western world-view and links it to how black women's bodies are conceptualised from an African perspective. This review is part of a larger study in Gender, Religion and Sexual Reproductive Health Rights and the themes and concepts covered by the literature review, emanate from the intersections of the above three focus areas, respectively. Although most of the literature in the field of women's engagement in bodybuilding pertains to white female bodybuilders, certain concepts can be generalised and related to the context of black female bodybuilders, Zulu, Christian female bodybuilders in particular.

Introduction

A bodybuilder is "any person who lifts weights, trains, and eats methodically in order to obtain an ideally muscular, symmetrical, and proportioned body, primarily for aesthetic purposes often related to his or her participation in bodybuilding competitions."[3]

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[3] L. McTavish, *Feminist Figure Girl: Look Hot While You Fight the Patriarchy*. New York: State University of New York Press, (2015).

The activity of bodybuilding, which was predominantly a male dominated sport in the past, has more recently attracted female participants. Women's participation in competitive bodybuilding has begun to raise controversial questions in current day society when it comes to the understanding of issues of masculinities, femininities and identity.[4] Among such questions is whether those who engage in bodybuilding are more masculine or less feminine than those who do not.[5] Some of the findings of studies on women's participation in bodybuilding reveal that when it comes to black female bodybuilders, the concept of bodybuilding becomes even more complicated. Consequently, the body becomes a contested site of struggle between powers that "strive to exercise control over it."[6] These powers often emerge as a result of socialisation through religious and cultural institutions. Thus, religious and cultural conceptions of women's bodies have been discussed by some scholars as some of the factors that influence the way women perceive their bodies and the way their bodies are perceived and conceived by others.[7] It is these religious and cultural conceptions of women's bodies that are often used as a critique of women who engage in bodybuilding as their bodies are said to be unusual and not shaped according to their religious and cultural expectations.

Women's engagement in bodybuilding as a sport is not a new phenomenon. However, it is still shunned upon by many because of the perceptions in most communities that the sport is for men and is not suited to women.[8] In the midst of these perceptions, more and more women are engaging in bodybuilding.[9] Religious and cultural conceptions restrict women's engagement in bodybuilding because of the existing societal ideals of 'feminine' and 'masculine' beauty and self-image.[10]

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[4] R. Duff and L. Hong, "Self-Images of Women Bodybuilders," *Sociology of Sport Journal*, no.1 (1984.): 374-380.
[5] Duff & Hong, "Self-Images of Women Bodybuilders,"
[6] P. Loeto, "Notions of Beauty and Attractiveness," *Buwa! Feminism and Culture* 2(2) (2013): 52-57.
[7] P. Roussel, and J. Griffet. "The Path Chosen by Female Bodybuilders: A Tentative Interpretation." *Sociology of Sport Journa*l 17 (2000):130-150.
[8] Roussel and Griffet, "The Path Chosen,"
[9] Roussel and Griffet, "The Path Chosen,"
[10] Roussel and Griffet, "The Path Chosen,"

What follows in this article is a broad overview of the discursive gender debates around female masculinity and transgression, and the reinforcement of gender norms within the subculture of body building. It explores how the black female body is shaped and conceptualised within religion and culture, with a particular focus on the Zulu culture and the Christian religion. The study focuses on Zulu culture and Christian religion in order to understand how both have conceptualised women's bodies, specifically the bodies of female bodybuilders. In this way, it could be gathered whether their understandings of religion and culture, from their personal experiences, could be considered as one or separate, hence the use of the term 'religio-cultural'[11] in the title. The implications of intense training and diet regimes on the reproductive health of female bodybuilders during competition preparation is also explored. The discussion then turns to how the female body is a site of struggle for black female bodybuilders as well as how they continuously negotiate a glass ceiling within the sport; and how, in their pursuit of gaining muscle mass, they ensure they still look feminine.

Masculinity vs Femininity

A female bodybuilder is understood as being "any woman who intentionally builds her body through rigorous diet and training to gain significant amounts of muscle mass."[12] Such women are often viewed as transgressing or breaking away from the cultural constructs of gender and how women's bodies are supposed to be; their embodiment of muscle "transgresses gender norms and challenges Western ideals of what it means to be female."[13] They are viewed as transgressors because they are developing a new self-image and identity of feminine beauty in contradiction to the slim and skinny ideal of bodily beauty.[14] As a result, cis-gendered female bodybuilders are continuously marginalised and stigmatised because "new ways of thinking and living move female bodybuilders away from social and cultural norms."[15] Female masculinity is misunderstood because the ways in which

[11] The term 'religio-cultural' is used because the study was interested in black female bodybuilders who were of the Zulu culture and subscribed to the Christian religion. The use of the term is also as a result of the existing debates around religion and culture being one or separate. Through conducting the study, it could be extracted that based on their lived experiences, as black women, whether they understood religion and culture as one entity or as separate.

[12] V. Felkar. "Marginalized Muscle: Transgression and the Female Bodybuilder." *Ignite UBC Women's and Gender Studies Undergraduate Journal* 4(1) (2012): 40-49.

[13] Felkar, "Marginalized Muscle," 40.

[14] Roussel and Griffet, "The Path Chosen,"

[15] Roussel and Griffet, "The Path Chosen," 131.

women's bodies are conceptualised do not encourage the co-existence of both femininity and masculinity in one body. Female bodybuilders in their pursuit of muscle provide a counter narrative and a different way of imagining the female body; that it is possible for what is understood as femininity and masculinity to exist in a female body.

For Worthen and Baker, "the desire to compete in bodybuilding is coded as masculine behaviour, thus women bodybuilders exemplify gendered deviance and a risk of social stigma."[16] Engagement in and with bodybuilding becomes more of a lifestyle than an activity. Their bodybuilding routine is adhered to from the time they wake up until they sleep. Thus, all their activities are centered on their pursuit of building muscular bodies. As a result, "their bodies no longer meet the traditional and acknowledged criteria of femininity."[17] Instead, "while a slim and slender, willowy body is the ideal in feminine beauty, the extreme muscularity of these women's bodies causes them to be viewed as manlike by the lay person".[18] Muscular female bodies are misunderstood as deviant and different to the accepted norm and, as a result, female bodybuilders are often marginalised and stigmatised for their 'abnormal' ways of defining themselves and defining female beauty in general.[19] These perceptions of the deviance of the muscular female body have motivated the larger study that investigates the experiences of black female bodybuilders with the aim of understanding how religious and cultural conceptions of their bodies, as black women, influenced their engagement in bodybuilding.

The Black Female Body and Culture

Within the context of black female bodybuilders, the criticism is influenced by historical understandings of the black female body; as sexualised and warranting regulation.[20] A typical example of these perspectives is the issue of Sarah Baartman and the nineteenth century phenomenon known as Baartmanmania. Sarah Baartman, a black South African woman, was displayed in the zoos and museums of Europe during the nineteenth century due to her extremely large hips, breasts and buttocks. [21] This was in an era that viewed black bodies as slaves

[16] Worthen and Baker, "Pushing Up on the Glass Ceiling," 471.
[17] Roussel and Griffet, "The Path Chosen," 131.
[18] Roussel and Griffet, "The Path Chosen," 131.
[19] Felkar, "Marginalized Muscle,"
[20] F. Settler and M.H. Engh. "The Black Body in Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse in South Africa," *Alternation Special Edition,* 14 (2015):126-148.
[21] M.T. Jackson, "MeTelling: Recovering the Black Female Body," *Visual Culture & Gender,* 8 (2013): 70-81.

and commodities. The parading of her body in particular indicates the commodification and policing of her body and the black female body in general.[22] She was advertised as possessing the "kind of shape which is most admired among her countrymen."[23] Her kind of body shape was considered as being the ideal feminine shape by black African men. Mastamet-Mason reiterates how, "in most African countries, it is still a common belief that thin women are not attractive."[24] This is because full-figured women are considered more attractive, respected and their "padded (with flesh) and curvaceous bodies" are said to represent wealth, good health and fertility.[25] This is evident in how:

> overweight or obese women of Zulu ethnicity are generally viewed in a positive light, with favourable cultural associations ranging from beauty to physical wellbeing, happiness, vitality, affluence and fecundity-all linked to the fuller figure.[26]

This can also be referred to as the 'traditional' Zulu female body ideal.[27]

Culture often plays a role in the construction of the 'ideal body' with women's bodies being constructed and shaped as per male preferences. Often, "the privileging of patriarchy in Zulu culture has meant that often women are denied the opportunity to question their own behaviour in relation to the body ideal, size and shape".[28] As a result, black women are denied ownership of their bodies in consideration to male cultural preferences.[29] This policing of women's bodies can be linked to the historical regulation of women's bodies. As Pumla Qgola states, "women's bodies are seen as accessible for consumption and control".[30] However, in contrast to the regulation of women's bodies, black female bodybuilders, through their embodiment of muscle, communicate a message of resistance by claiming ownership of their bodies. Whereas in

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[22] Jackson, "MeTelling: Recovering the Black Female Body,"
[23] S. Qureshi. "Displaying Sara Baartman, The 'Hottentot Venus," *Science History Publications*. (2004): 233-257.
[24] Mastamet-Mason, "The Saartjie Baartman's Body Shape versus the Victorian Dress," 114.
[25] Mastamet-Mason, "The Saartjie Baartman's Body Shape versus the Victorian Dress," 114.
[26] W.N. Ogana. and V.B. Ojong. "Sexual body ideal among Zulu women: Continuity and Change," *Indilinga African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems,* 11(1) (2012): 32-48.
[27] Ogana and Ojong, "Sexual body ideal among Zulu women,"
[28] W.N. Ogana and V.B. Ojong. "The thin/thick ideal: Zulu women's body as a site of cultural and postcolonial feminist struggle," *Agenda* 27(4) (2013): 110-119.
[29] Ogana and Ojong, "The thin/thick ideal,"
[30] P.D. Gqola. "How the 'cult of femininity' and violent masculinities support endemic gender based violence in contemporary South Africa," *African Identities*, 5(1) (2007): 111-124.

many cases “women’s ideal body preferences are often marginalised”, engagement in bodybuilding by black women shows defiance and a refusal to shape their bodies for the male gaze.[31]

It is worth noting that in as much as the voluptuous body ideal is still held by Zulu people in contemporary times, the beginning of the twenty first century has seen a shift in how isiZulu-speaking women perceive the female body ideal, leaning “increasingly toward the western thin ideal.”[32] Having said that, however, it is interesting how the “Western society views a thin body as the ideal body”[33] while black African, especially Zulu societies, view the curvaceous full-figured body as the ideal body and how black female bodybuilders, choose to conform to neither of the two body ideals. In so doing “the female bodybuilder provides a new space for thinking about the body and produces a new image of what women can achieve.”[34] The existing cultural conceptions of black women’s bodies often coincide with religious conceptions of women’s bodies.

Female Black Body and Christian Religion

It is necessary to point out that Christian religion is not a homogenous religious tradition. The data provided below cannot be generalised for all Christian church denominations. As this study did not focus on any particular Christian church denomination, this section seeks to provide a general dominant understanding of women’s bodies from a general Christian perspective.

During the colonial era, missionaries did not only shape women’s individual identities but also “constructed the meaning of womanhood based on predetermined social and sexual mores.”[35] For example, in Zimbabwe, the sexuality of women “was governed by religious codes of sexual purity legitimated by biblical teachings.”[36] From a Christian perspective, “Christian missionaries viewed African’ women’s exposed

[31] Ogana and Ojong, “The thin/thick ideal,”
[32] Ogana and Ojong, “Sexual body ideal among Zulu women,” 32.
[33] Mastamet-Mason, “The Saartjie Baartman’s Body Shape versus the Victorian Dress,”114.
[34] L. Johnston. “Flexing Femininity: Female Body-builders refiguring ‘the body’.” *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography,* 3(3) (1996.): 327-340.
[35] Kezia Batisai. “The Politics of Control and Ownership over Women’s bodies: Discourses that shape reproductive and sexual rights in Zimbabwe,” In *Bodies, Morals and Politics: Reflections on Sexual Reproductive Rights in Africa,* eds. Kezia Batisai, Perspectives Africa, (2015).
[36] Batisai, “The Politics of Control and Ownership over Women’s bodies,”

breasts and limbs in moral terms."[37] Public nudity was perceived by the missionaries as "a general lack of moral restraint among Africans; an outgrowth of their unbridled sexuality, and a testament to their need for Christian redemption."[38] This is an indication of the influence of Christian religion in shaping and defining women's sexuality. In contrast, however, the nakedness of African women in precolonial times was viewed more positively; it was not attached to negative connotations of sexual impurity and immorality.[39] The colonial perception of women's bodies as sexually unclean and more prone to sin meant that "women's bodies became a yardstick of morality in both traditional and religious perspectives".[40] These notions of women's bodies as sinful have prevailed in the post-colonial era.

According to Settler and Engh, "the constructions of black women's bodies as unruly and deserving of regulation persists even in the postcolonial state."[41] More often than not, this regulation of the female body is based on religious views of the female body. From a Christian perspective, "women's bodies, because they have been inscribed as a source of mystery and danger, carry the meaning and potential for disorder and chaos more than do men's bodies."[42] This has also been linked to the perception of the female body as having uncontrollable sexual urges and therefore requiring control.[43] One example of the control and regulation of the female body is seen in how Christian church sermons place emphasis on the dress code and the adornment of women. Clothes are said to "evoke intimate responses: our deepest feelings of love, the passionate expression of our sexuality."[44] Teachings on being a godly Christian woman, whether married or not, is that a Christian woman ought to dress decently in order to "preserve and protect something fragile which can easily be lost: her ability to be intimate with her husband."[45] From this it is clear how Christian religion places the onus on women to control their sexuality and yet does not

[37] B. Talton. "All the Women Must Be Clothed: The Anti-nudity Campaign in Northern Ghana, 1957-1969," In *Imagining, Writing, (Re) Reading the Black Body*, eds. Sandra Jackson, F. Demissie and M. Goodwin (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2009).
[38] Talton, "All the Women Must Be Clothed," 82
[39] Talton, "All the Women Must Be Clothed,"
[40] Batisai, "The Politics of Control and Ownership over Women's bodies," 7.
[41] Settler and Engh, "The Black Body in Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse in South Africa," 131.
[42] Sheffield, 2002:9
[43] Settler and Engh, "The Black Body in Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse in South Africa,"
[44]Samuele Bacchiocchi. *Christian dress and Adornment*. USA: Biblical perspectives, (1995).
[45] Bacchiocchi, "Christian dress and Adornment," 44.

place that kind of responsibility on men. The above may be viewed as attempts to control the sexuality of women.

From the perception of religious moralists, "by shamelessly flaunting their bodies, young women show their disregard for the body's sacredness, which should be for the intimate gaze of their husbands."[46] This perception is based on the heteronormative order of society and relationships and assumes that all women desire to have husbands. This view shows the conflict between female bodybuilders, who compete on stage in bikinis, and the religious views of the sacred female body. Bodybuilding competitions require that female participants pose on stage in a bikini, and as a result many female bodybuilders face criticism for showing their 'sacred' bodies to the public. Consequently, "nudity or the partially clothed female body is seen as part of a libidinal opportunity that threatens to unleash an unrestrained sexual energy into the world".[47] Therefore, "the moment the naked body moves from the private arena and is displayed in the public realm, it becomes marked as sexual and exposed to social conventions of policing and disciplinary apparatus."[48] This further reinforces the perception of women's bodies as 'unclean'. It is also of importance to this study of female bodybuilders as religious conceptions of their bodies police them by locating them within the private sphere. These religious conceptions of black women's bodies are in conflict with the requirements of bodybuilding competitions which place emphasis on showing the entire body on stage to be judged in front of a large audience, dressed only in a bikini. This kind of show-casing of the female body may be perceived as transgressing from religious morals.

Transgression vs Reinforcement

Female engagement in bodybuilding is often perceived as deviating from femininity and taking on a masculine image. It is often said that "hypermuscular embodiment transgresses gender norms and challenges western ideals of what it means to be female."[49] On many occasions it has been said that in as much as female bodybuilding is an act of subverting the cultural gender norms, it is also a reinforcement of new norms of how a woman's body ought to be.[50] This is due to the fact that bodybuilding competitions have certain criteria of how the muscles on a woman's body should be developed and the kind of shape that she

[46] Bakare-Yusuf, "Nudity and morality," 123.
[47] Bakare-Yusuf, "Nudity and morality," 122.
[48] Bakare-Yusuf, "Nudity and morality," 123.
[49] Felkar, "Marginalized Muscle," 40.
[50] Mc Grath and Chananie-Hill, "Big Freaky-Looking Women,"

should have. Bodybuilding competitions also have their own criteria for judging the female body. One of the criterion is that the female body should show 'symmetry'.[51] The female bodybuilder is "viewed as 'symmetrical' if her lower body is similar in proportion to her upper body".[52] The competitions also differ in terms of the categories and divisions that have their own criteria for selecting a winner; these are "standard female bodybuilders, who compete on the basis of musculature, and others who participate in one or two subcategories of women's bodybuilding called 'Fitness' and 'Figure'."[53] However, in as much as:

> [A]ll three categories involve acquiring more muscle mass than the average gym-user, the latter two, whose aim is to preserve a feminine look among participants, require far less than what is now characteristic of the standard woman bodybuilder.[54]

Getting the body to this level of low body fat requires weeks of intense training and a 'clean' diet, often consisting of reduced carbohydrates and high in protein. It is evident that female bodybuilders are constantly in a battle to uphold the mixture of opposing standards enforced by the sport; "one of masculine muscle mass and the other of murkily conceived feminine beauty."[55] They constantly have to negotiate a balance between the two. The intense training and calorie restricted diet can prove to have severe health risks and as a result, "the deprivation of carbohydrates that characterises the bodybuilder's diet, a tactic that resembles the famous Atkin's Diet, can, in its later stages, bring about mental disorientation and extreme fatigue."[56] There are many health consequences of women's engagement in bodybuilding, as a result of intense training and the reduction in calories consumed.

Female Bodybuilders and Health

Female participation in bodybuilding comes with health consequences. The health aspect often focuses on the reproductive capacity and menstrual cycle of female athletes. The monthly menstrual cycles that women undergo have always been associated with being symbolic of

[51] McTavish, "Feminist Figure Girl: Look Hot While You Fight the Patriarchy,"
[52] Worthen and Baker, "Pushing Up on the Glass Ceiling," 472.
[53] C. Lewis, "Sporting Adam's Rib: The Culture of Women Bodybuilders in America," *The Massachusetts Review,* 45(4) (2004): 604-631.
[54] Lewis, "Sporting Adam's Rib," 606.
[55] Lewis, "Sporting Adam's Rib," 607.
[56] Lewis, "Sporting Adam's Rib," 618.

femaleness.[57] This is largely due to the fact that menstruation has always been viewed as "a sign of a healthy, functional body, not one that is dysfunctional and in meltdown."[58] In many instances, however, women have often faced marginalisation from certain spaces and terrains, especially within sport because "the fact that women menstruate has been used as a justification for limiting women's activities outside of the domestic realm."[59] Their menstrual cycles have been perceived as decapacitating them and their physical capabilities remain unacknowledged. This view is aligned to the accepted societal 'fact' that "women are physically weaker than men."[60]

However, female athleticism challenge to these upheld perceptions of menstruation as female athletes, especially female bodybuilders, do not go through menstrual cycles for long periods of time due to intense training and diet. This is often referred to as the 'Female Athlete Triad'.[61] The female athlete triad is described by Thein-Nissenbaum as the "interrelatedness of energy availability, menstrual function and bone mineral density."[62] It is a condition that results through stress, irregular menstrual cycles and disordered eating behaviours.[63] Having a negative energy balance is the first disorder in the female athlete triad, followed by menstrual dysfunction and low bone mineral density (BMD).[64] Low energy availability occurs through "the setting of both caloric, restriction and excessive exercise."[65] Thein-Nissenbaum agrees with this view and goes on to say that intentional energy reduction occurs "through excessive exercise, by dramatically decreasing caloric intake, or by combining both methods."[66] Low energy is caused by more energy being used by the body than is consumed through intense exercise and a reduction in food consumed. Athlete menstrual dysfunction is the second disorder of the athlete triad and is "more common in active women."[67] Menstrual dysfunction often presents itself as "primary amenorrhea,

[57] A.E. Kissling. "When being female isn't feminine: Uta Pippig and the Menstrual Communication Taboo in Sports Journalism." *Sociology of Sports Journal,* 16 (1999): 79-97.
[58] Kissling, "When being female isn't feminine," 86.
[59] Kissling, "When being female isn't feminine," 8.
[60] A. Roth and S.A. Basow. "Femininity, Sports, and Feminism: Developing a Theory of Physical Liberation*." Journal of Sport and Social Issues,* 28 (2004): 245-265.
[61] Jill Thein-Nissenbaum. "Long term consequences of the female athlete triad." *Maturitas* 75(2) (2013):107-112.
[62] Thein-Nissenbaum, "Long term consequences of the female athlete triad," 107.
[63] Thein-Nissenbaum, "Long term consequences of the female athlete triad,"
[64] Thein-Nissenbaum, "Long term consequences of the female athlete triad,"
[65] Horn, Gergen and McGarry, 18.
[66] Thein-Nissenbaum, "Long term consequences of the female athlete triad," 108.
[67] M.M. Manore. "Dietary Recommendations and Athletic Menstrual Dysfunction," *Sports Medicine,* 32(14) (2002): 887-901.

secondary amenorrhea, or oligomenorrhea."[68] It is caused by not only energy drain but also due to "high exercise intensity."[69] In many cases, due to "a lack of energy, numerous bodily systems, including the reproductive system, go into "shut-down" mode.[70] It is obvious how female athleticism and its health consequences pose a threat to the reproductive capacity of women. This is an important observation as it links to the issue of sexual and reproductive health rights.

It is therefore important to note that "while exercise is encouraged for general health and disease prevention, female athletes are susceptible to negative health outcomes if energy balance is not maintained."[71] However, in as much as female bodybuilding may be viewed as causing amenorrhea, for female bodybuilders the loss of a period is seen as an accomplishment as it signifies that they have reached a low level of body fat being.[72]

Another health concern within bodybuilding, and particularly female bodybuilding, is the use of anabolic steroids.[73] Some of the negative effects of the use of these substances in women are "libido disorders, cachexia related to chronic disease such as human immunodeficiency virus(HIV), and anemia."[74] These negative effects contribute to the female athlete triad, as discussed above. As a result of their use of anabolic steroids, "women are predisposed to deepening of the voice, increased facial and body hair, scalp hair loss, menstrual irregularities, clitoral enlargement, and reduced breast size."[75] In the process, female bodybuilders who use anabolic steroids develop features considered masculine while they lose features which identifies them as feminine. Interestingly, these changes in the female body place emphasis on gender and how it is not a fixed identity; and that masculinity can exist in a body once understood to be feminine.

Women have historically been confined to the domestic arena because of their supposedly nurturing characteristics and their reproductive roles of bearing and looking after their children. Women's engagement in

[68] Horn, Gergen and McGarry, "The Female Athlete Triad,"
[69] Manore, "Dietary Recommendations and Athletic Menstrual Dysfunction," 889.
[70] Thein-Nissenbaum, "Long term consequences of the female athlete triad," 110.
[71] Horn, Gergen and McGarry, "The Female Athlete Triad," 18.
[72] McTavish, "Feminist Figure Girl: Look Hot While You Fight the Patriarchy,"
[73] Ip et al. "Women and Anabolic Steroids: An Analysis of a dozen users," *Clin J Sport Med*, 20(6) (2010): 475-481.
[74] Committee on Gynecologic Practice. "Performance enhancing anabolic steroid abuse in women," *Women's Health Care Physicians*,484 (2011): 1-3.
[75] Ip et al, "Women and Anabolic steroids," 475.

sport, particularly male-dominated sports such as bodybuilding, and the subsequent halt of menstrual cycles raises a challenge to society's understanding of feminine and masculine traits. Women's engagement in bodybuilding enables onlookers to see how the sport can also be an example of gender performance which is discussed below.

Gender Performance

It is worth noting how contradictory the engagement in bodybuilding is for female bodybuilders. In attempting not to perform societal imposed standards of gender, the sub-culture of bodybuilding has a performative nature especially with the sculpting of the body through strategic eating and training to meet a particular shape. This coincides with Judith Butler's notion of 'Gender Performativity' in that "gender is not a fact."[76] By this she means that gender is not a fixed concept and the behaviour associated with specific genders is determined by human beings and can therefore continuously change. It is for this reason that she believes that "what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo."[77] Gender is performed through various acts or gendered roles of how a girl and a boy should behave. As a result, "gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences"[78], while "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished."[79] Therefore, those who go against what is the norm in terms of gendered behaviours are punished through stigmatisation and marginalisation. This is the case with female bodybuilders. A decision to embody muscle, places them in a position of difference because of their failure to perform their gender. Felkar maintains that the constructed ideologies of gender and gender performativity "exaggerate and naturalize, sex and gender as binaries which has restrained women's opportunities to embody muscle without abject."[80] When women choose to engage in bodybuilding as a way of defining themselves, they are perceived as rejecting traditional femininity in favour of masculinity.[81] The idea of performance is further portrayed in the concepts of the body being a project and having a government of the body. It is to this discussion that we now turn.

[76] Judith Butler. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, 40(4) (1988.): 519-531.
[77] Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 522.
[78] Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 522.
[79] Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 522.
[80] Felkar, "Marginalized Muscle," 42.
[81] Duff and Hong, "Self-Images of Women Bodybuilders,"

Body Project and Government of the Body

Settler and Engh point to the idea of the body as being always "simultaneously fixed and flexible."[82] They use the example of a person in a wheelchair to show how the person is 'fixed' in the situation of being in a wheelchair but is also flexible because the person can undergo surgery as an attempt to modify the body and change its supposedly 'fixed' state.[83] The sport of female bodybuilding is also indicative of the 'fixed' and 'flexible' nature of the black female body. Religious and cultural conceptions of the female body may 'fix' it by determining how the body should be, while the transformations that women go through in building muscular physiques, shows the flexible nature of the body. Bryan Turner understands the body as "the living site where the politics of identity is inscribed."[84] This perception differs to Butler's understanding of the body as not "simply a site of inscription but also significantly, simultaneously as a site of performance."[85] The body can also be a site of resistance and self-assertion.

This resistance and self-assertion is seen in how the body becomes a location for the exercise of will over desire and "the personal achievement of personal control over diet is an act of will which enhances self-esteem."[86] This enforces Turner's idea of the 'Government of the Body' in which bodies are controlled and laboured through "eating, sleeping, cleaning, dieting; and exercising."[87] The nature of female bodybuilding clearly shows how, through intense training and strict eating, the body is regulated and controlled.[88] As Worthen and Baker state, "women involved in this sport must follow disciplined and controlled diet and training regimens in order to be successful."[89] Many female bodybuilders view this regimented physical training as "the ultimate form of claiming self-worth."[90] This is due to the fact that engagement in bodybuilding is often linked to past issues in which women had no control and this, as a result, caused them to have a low self-image and low self-esteem. However, through bodybuilding and its

[82] Settler and Engh "The Black Body in Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse in South Africa," 128.
[83] Settler and Engh, "The Black Body in Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse in South Africa,"
[84] Bryan Turner. *The Body and Society*. 3rd ed. USA: SAGE Publications, (2008).
[85] Settler and Engh, "The Black Body in Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse in South Africa," 132.
[86] Turner, "*The Body and Society,"* 153.
[87] Turner, 2008: "*The Body and Society,"* 161.
[88] Turner, 2008"*The Body and Society,"*
[89] Worthen and Baker, "Pushing Up on the Glass Ceiling," 474.
[90] Lewis, "Sporting Adam's Rib," 620.

demands on the body, bodybuilding becomes a liberating sport in which, although women cannot control the forces around them, they can control their bodies.[91] Therefore, diet becomes one of the few areas in which women can exercise personal control and discipline as an attempt to gain personal autonomy.[92] Since women's bodies are policed by religious and cultural conceptions of how they ought to be, the only control they seem to have over their bodies is through controlling their diet.

Chris Shilling poses the idea of the body as a 'Body Project'.[93] According to him, society has a tendency of seeing the body "as an entity which is in the process of becoming; a project which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an individual's self-identity."[94] Bodybuilding as a sport also follows this premise where the aim of embodying muscle, and ensuring that certain muscles are visible, can be seen as a project because of the amount of time and effort that one applies into getting a desired body, and also because of the process of transformation that the body undergoes. According to Shilling:

> [B]odybuilding is a good illustrative example of the body as a project precisely because the quality and sheer size of the muscles achieved by bodybuilders challenges accepted notions of what is natural about male and female bodies.[95]

As a result, "an initial act of governing the body to achieve identity and autonomy is replaced by an anarchy of the body which denies the will of the subject/victim whose response is an intensified programme of dieting and exercise."[96] This intensified exercise and diet programme is a means of escaping the religious and cultural conceptions of the 'ideal body' and a way of achieving one's preferred body.

By virtue of the body being a project, Shilling proposes that it should be accepted that "its appearance, size, shape and even its contents, are potentially open to reconstruction in line with the designs of its owner."[97] This means that the body can "be shaped and honed by the vigilance and hard work of their owners."[98] This view poses a challenge to societal constructs especially within the context of black female bodybuilders

[91] Lewis, "Sporting Adam's Rib,"
[92] Turner, "The Body and Society,"
[93] C. Shilling. *The Body and Social Theory*. 2nd ed. USA: SAGE Publications, 2003.
[94] Shilling, "The Body and Social Theory," 4.
[95] Shilling, "The Body and Social Theory," 6.
[96] Turner, "The Body and Society," 164.
[97] Shilling, "The Body and Social Theory," 4.
[98] Shilling, "The Body and Social Theory," 5.

because if the body is a project that can be reconstructed by its owner, it means that religious and cultural conceptions of women's bodies fall away and have no place to influence women's choices in their pursuit of embodying muscular physiques. It would also mean challenging the belief that muscles are 'biologically male' and what this belief means for women's bodies in the world of sport.

Black Women's Bodies in Sport

Sport is another domain in which, historically, women have been prohibited from entering. Women were restricted from participating in sport because they were:

> perceived as being too weak for sport, particularly endurance sports, such as marathons, weightlifting and cycling, and it was often argued in the past that sport was harmful to women's health, particularly their reproductive health.[99]

It was the 1894 Olympic movement that denied women access into the sporting arena because the founder of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Baron Pierre de Coubertin, was vociferously opposed to women's participation in Olympic competition."[100] This is a reflection of the "dominant ideology of the nineteenth century that women were unsuited to take part in vigorous physical exercise."[101] It was only in 1924 that women were admitted and allowed to participate in the Olympic Games.[102] The prevention of women's participation ensured unequal gender representation and was further instilled by social constructions of female and male gender roles.

In many instances, "the extent to which a sport is framed as feminine or masculine controls if and how women participate in it."[103] As Rubin states, "sport is then an essential part of the engendering process and helps to entrench 'masculine' and 'feminine' signifiers and forms of behaviour through legitimating and endorsing bodies in certain

[99] United Nations (UN), "Women, Gender equality and Sport," *Women 2000 and beyond*, (2007): 2-40.
[100] J. Hargreaves, "Gender Equality in Olympic Sport: A brief story of women's setbacks and successes at the summer Olympic Games," *Aspetar Sports Medicine Journal*, (2013): 80-86.
[101] Hargreaves, "Gender Equality in Olympic Sport," 81.
[102] I. Parčina, V. Šiljak, A. Perović, and E. Plakona. "Women's Word Games." *Physical education and sport through the centuries,* 1(2) (2014): 49-60.
[103] Roth and Basow, "Femininity, Sports, and Feminism," 252.

contexts."[104] It is the sport that determines whether or not women can participate and sport also becomes one of the institutions for socialisation and enforcing how gender should be performed. Sport also faces the politics of muscle size in female bodies as it associates strength with men and weakness with women. The distinctions are clear because "the masculine ideal is one of physical strength, large size, and aggressiveness. The feminine ideal, on the other hand, is beautiful, small, thin, and perhaps most importantly, weak."[105] These perceptions become problematic for female athletes, such as the female bodybuilders, who seek a body of their preference, a body that embodies muscle, amidst these debates. Consequently, female athletes are perceived as having unnatural bodies and female athletes who are successful in their sport are said to be failing to be feminine.[106]

However, the realm of sport is also one in which gender, gender difference and gender hierarchy can not only be constructed but also challenged.[107] More women are becoming involved in sport and sport has become a lens through which women do and undo femininity. Female bodybuilders and their embodiment of muscle is an example of how women are challenging the societal gender differences and showing new ways of looking at the potential of the female body. As a result, "women who embrace their physical abilities and develop them are, in doing so, producing for themselves a degree of security that women are usually not afforded."[108] They are developing new ways of thinking about the female body and its physical capabilities subverting sexual scripts which have often portrayed females as passive and vulnerable, and males as dominant and aggressive.[109] Historically, "sport has been seen as antithetical to femininity, and sports participation as unfeminine."[110] As more women enter into the domain of sport, this appears to be a progressive move. On the other hand, women who aim to achieve the muscular and physical strength required in athleticism often find themselves in a predicament as their bodies become daily sites of struggle.

[104] M. Rubin. "The Offside Rule: Women's Bodies in Masculinised Spaces," in *Development and Dreams: The Urban legacy of the 2010 Football World Cup*, eds. U. Pillay, R. Tomlinson and O. Bass (Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council Press, 2009), 266-280.
[105] Roth and Basow, "Femininity, Sports, and Feminism," 249.
[106] Kissling, "When being female isn't feminine,"
[107] Kissling, "When being female isn't feminine,"
[108] Roth and Basow, "Femininity, Sports, and Feminism," 255.
[109] Roth and Basow, "Femininity, Sports, and Feminism,"
[110] Kissling, "When being female isn't feminine," 80.

Female Body as a Site of Struggle

Female bodybuilders who become "excessively" muscular might be considered non-normative. Loeto is of the view that the female body is perceived as "a cultural artefact defined and redefined overtime in response to broad cultural and historic transformations."[111] The female body is perceived as having no autonomy and dictated to by society on how it should look. The black body has historically been represented in negative ways that portray their bodies as fixed and without agency.[112] From a young age, women's experience of their bodies is as a "burden, [where] the hormonal and physiological changes the body undergoes at puberty, during menstruation and pregnancy, are felt to be fearful and mysterious."[113]

The body becomes a contested site of struggle due to patriarchal domination which "strives to exercise control by defining what beauty is, controlling the mobility of women and constructing social norms that impact on women's lived experiences."[114] This coincides with Stanciu and Christensen's argument that "female bodies become socio-cultural constructs that serve a particular cultural scheme."[115] Battles for control over the female body are fought daily through emphasis on the ideal body or body image for females. Women's bodies, especially black women's bodies, have been controlled and constructed negatively; the policing and domestication of black women's bodies still persists and this is evident by the criticism received by women, especially black women who engage in bodybuilding.

Although body image should be determined by the owner of the body, culture becomes a limiting factor in that throughout history, it has been a core belief of many African cultures that women ought to have a certain body type; a curvaceous and fuller figure.[116] As a result of being socialised from a young age about how their bodies should look, women often suffer from negative body images. In many cases, as a way of

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[111] Loeto, "Notions of Beauty and Attractiveness," 53.
[112] Settler and Engh, "The Black Body in Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse in South Africa,"
[113] Iris Marion Young, "On Female Body Experience: Throwing like a girl and other essays," in *Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality*. *Studies in Feminist Philosophy*, eds. Iris Marion Young (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27-45.
[114] Loeto, "Notions of Beauty and Attractiveness," 53.
[115] Stanciu, E.L. and B. Christensen, "Controlling Women's Bodies: The Black and Veiled female body in Western Visual Culture. A Comparative View," *Analize-Journal of Gender and Feminist Studies,* 2 (2014): 1-26.
[116] Loeto, "Notions of Beauty and Attractiveness,"

conforming to the societal standards of the desired body ideal, women go through body enhancement procedures to achieve that body.[117] All of these actions indicate how gender is portrayed through performance since women go through body enhancement procedures as a way of proving their femininity within their desired body ideals. Consequently, female bodybuilders are constantly under pressure to negotiate and find a balance between their pursuit of muscle and the criticism they receive.

Negotiating a Glass Ceiling

It is often said that "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 emphasised femininity that structure the upper limit on women's 'success'.[118] Women feel that their bodies are constantly policed by men and their bodies are, therefore, treated as commodities. As a result, they may have no sense of bodily agency. However, other women:

> have experienced sport and fitness as sites of power and agency where they have rejected narrow constructions of femininity and where they can embrace physical power and independence.[119]

Although women experience power and agency within bodybuilding, they are often made to feel inferior due to stigmatisation and are, therefore, under pressure to still look and behave like typical gendered women.

As a result, "despite increased empowerment, the prominent theme of female bodybuilders' experience is one of contradiction, often leading to attempts to 'balance' popular notions of femininity and muscularity."[120] In many instances, female bodybuilders are often faced with the challenge to regulate muscular size to avoid being labelled as being too big or mannish.[121] For women bodybuilders to be successful in the sport, they "must delicately negotiate the edge of the boundaries between masculinity and femininity."[122] These women work hard to obtain a hyper-feminine look in an attempt to subvert gender and sexuality confusion among the general public.[123] They do this in an attempt to

[117] Loeto, "Notions of Beauty and Attractiveness,"
[118] S.L. Dworkin, "Holding Back: Negotiating a glass ceiling on Women's muscular strength," *Sociological Perspectives*, 44(3) (2001): 333-350.
[119] Dworkin, 2001: "Holding Back," 335.
[120] Worthen and Baker, "Pushing Up on the Glass Ceiling," 473.
[121] Dworkin, "Holding Back,"
[122] Worthen and Baker, "Pushing Up on the Glass Ceiling," 472.
[123] Mc Grath and Chananie-Hill, "Big Freaky-Looking Women,"

show a balance between femininity and masculinity since they are accused of being less feminine because of their muscular bodies.

Conclusion

It is clear that bodybuilding and the pursuit of muscle is a contradiction of the cultural expectations of black women's bodies. This may be due to the perception that becoming a bodybuilder is counter-intuitive and that society demands a specific physique for both men and women. However, "the success of black women in bodybuilding offers a positive model of strong, black femininity."[124] In as much as black women's engagement in bodybuilding is associated with negative connotations, other black women within bodybuilding or those wanting to become bodybuilders, feel encouraged to become members of this sub-culture since black women show a sense of strong black femininity.

The black female body has always been a contested site of struggle. With black women deciding to engage in bodybuilding and embodying muscle as beauty identity, they face marginalisation because muscle is gendered as male and the cultural beliefs associated with female bodybuilding think of women who have muscular bodies as being less feminine and more masculine. However, these beliefs do not consider that the level of femininity of women is not determined by how they decide to construct their bodies.

Female bodybuilders argue that engaging in bodybuilding gives them a sense of control over their bodies as well as "the ability to self-create the body and transcend normative notions of sex, gender and sexuality."[125] In essence, female bodybuilding is a method by which women celebrate the female body and by so doing they can manipulate their bodies as they please without considering the oppressive patriarchal limitations. Women's engagement in bodybuilding is "redefining the whole idea of femininity by asking how far a female bodybuilder can go and still remain feminine."[126] Black female bodybuilders are providing other women with new ways of perceiving beauty and femininity that is not the same as the socialised way of thinking about what it means to be a feminine woman.

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[124] Mc Grath & Chananie-Hill, "Big Freaky-Looking Women," 238.

[125] N. Richardson, "Flex-rated! Female bodybuilding: Feminist resistance or erotic spectacle?" *Journal of Gender Studies,* 17(4) (2008): 289-301.

[126] L. Schulze, "On the Muscle" in *Building bodies,* ed. P. Moore (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 9-30.

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