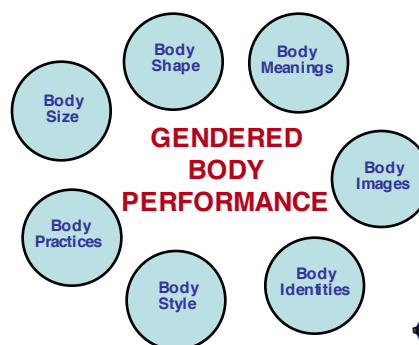


## “Sport, Femininities and Body Hierarchies”

David L. Andrews  
Physical Cultural Studies Program  
Department of Kinesiology



This gendered and gendering sport culture leads to the establishment of very different bodily conventions/expectations.



## Sport, Physical Culture, and the Gender Binary

MASCULINE  
EXPERIENCES,  
IDENTITIES, AND  
BODIES



FEMININE  
EXPERIENCES,  
IDENTITIES, AND  
BODIES



Learned, Performed, and POLICED Embodiment of Gender

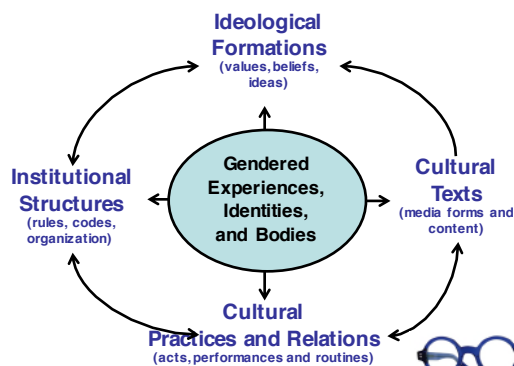
## Theme 1:

### Performing the Female/Feminine Body

Through **social and cultural engagement**, we learn the **gender role, relations, and norms**, which subsequently **shape our gender identities and experiences**.

In other words, we are **socialized into our gendered bodies/beings**.

## The Social Construction/**POLICING** of Sporting Gender



The traditional **Ideology of Femininity** (the notion that women should be beautiful, small, thin, and thereby relatively weak) physically constrains (**constricts**) female bodies.



As women strive to meet this **CONSTRUCTED** cultural norm/ideal of femininity, they construct their bodies as **SEXUAL OBJECTS** to be evaluated by the **EXTERNAL (male) GAZE** of society.

### CONSTRUCTED PHYSICALITY

### The Hierarchical Inequality of the Gender Binary

**Masculinity (males)**



Inferior social value, influence and power: **SUBORDINATE**

Superior social value, influence and power: **DOMINANT**

**Femininity (females)**

### Self-Disciplining/Constructing/Subordinating the Female/Feminine Body as **SEXUAL** Object



Diet/Weight Control  
Exercising  
Hair Removal  
Cosmetics  
Dress



Objectifying, controlling, and subordinating the body in order to be seen to perform gender norms and conventions

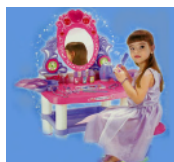
### Self-Policing and Self-Disciplining Institutions I



**The (Andrews) Family** as a Gendered (feminized) and Gendering (feminizing) Institution?

### Self-Policing and Self-Disciplining Institutions II

**Commercial Culture** as a Gendered (feminized) and Gendering (feminizing) Institution?



**Barbie Doll:** Unrealistic proportions, not enough room for organs, could not support own weight or walk.



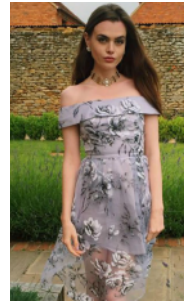
**The Lammily Doll:** Proportions Match those of the Average American 19 year old.

### Modelling: A Self-Policing and Self-Disciplining Institution



### Modelling: A Self-Policing and Self-Disciplining Institution

“The more you force us to **lose weight and be small**, the more designers have to make clothes to fit our sizes, and the more **young girls are being made ill**. It’s no longer an image I choose to represent.”



Charli Howard

Source: Gayle, D. (2015, October 16). I refuse to lose weight, says model who vented fury at fashion agency. *The Guardian*.



### Self-Policing and Self-Disciplining Institutions III

Media Culture as a Gendered (feminized) and Gendering (feminizing) Institution ?



### The State of Gendered Play?

Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue and Idealized/Objectified/Sexualized /Feminine Bodies









**BECAUSE YOU  
GOTTA GET  
READY FOR  
SWIMSUIT  
SEASON.**



**Finish Line**  
finishline.com

Physical Culture and the **CONSTRUCTED** Feminine Ideal

## Theme 2:

### Sport and Feminine Performativity

The **ACTIVE** [female] **BODY** is not a **WHOLLY NATURAL** entity.

It is also **PHYSICAL** and **SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION**:

The **ACTIVE** [female] **BODY** is shaped by, as it helps to shape, the **SOCIAL CONTEXT/ENVIRONMENT** in which it is located.

How do we begin to understand the **socially constructed active [female] body**?

The myth of female frailty/weakness becomes embodied, and thereby reinforced, through the sporting performance of gender:

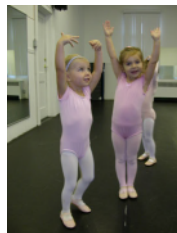
**“That is, *doing* masculinity builds strength, whereas *doing* femininity builds weakness”**

(Roth & Basow, 2004, p. 247)



Source: Roth, A., & Basow, S. A. (2004). Femininity, sports, and feminism; Developing a theory of physical liberation. Journal of Sport & Social Issues, 28(3), 245-266.

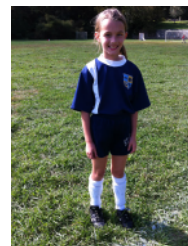
Males tend to accumulate muscles and relative strength (particularly upper body) according to their embodied socialization.



Females tend to accumulate flexibility and poise (and relative upper body weakness) according to their embodied socialization.

### Disempowering Girls/Women?

Mr. Carter’s “girls’ push-ups”



**“That is, *doing* masculinity builds strength, whereas *doing* femininity builds weakness”**

(Roth & Basow, 2004, p. 247)

### Throwing Like a Girl 1?

A study of 2<sup>nd</sup> graders found that:

Boys through their dominant arm **72% faster** than girls

Boys and girls **performed identically** with their non-dominant arms.

The conclusion was that throwing is not a factor of **sex difference**, rather it is a result of **cultural practice**.

Source: Dowling, C. (2000). *The frailty myth: Women approaching physical equality*. New York: Random House

### Throwing Like a Girl 2?: Policing Physicality



[See Video Clip 1](#)

### Throwing/Running Like a Girl 3?



[See Video Clip 2](#)

Modern sport could be said to be structured in a **patriarchal** manner, in that they provide a **forum** for the **expression** and **celebration** of masculinity.

Women's sporting prowess is largely **devalued** since they are generally not able (or encouraged) to compete at the same level as men in these **masculine oriented practices**.

#### Traditionally Male Sports

FOOTBALL

HOCKEY

BASKETBALL

BOXING

BASEBALL

#### Traditionally Female Sports

VOLLEYBALL

TENNIS

GYMNASTICS

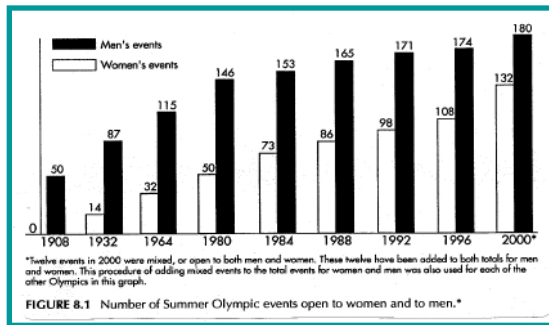
S. SWIMMING

SOFTBALL

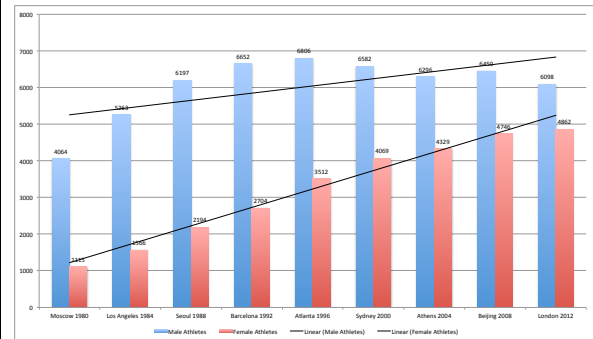
Thus, through sport, the **active** and **aggressive body** became synonymous with the **male body** and masculinity.

Whilst, through sport, the **female body** and femininity was further tied to expressions of **passivity** and **docility**.

## Things are changing...



## Male/Female Athletes at Summer Olympics 1980-2012

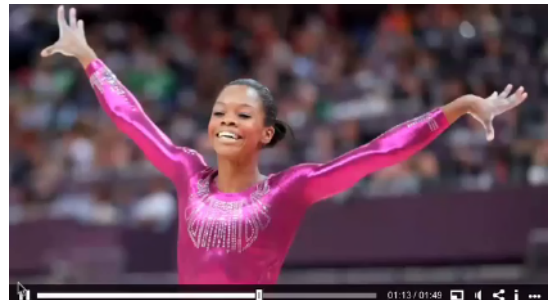


## The Womens' Olympics?



- A record 4,847 women (44.7% of total athletes) took part
- First Olympics to feature a women in **every national team**
- US females (269) **outnumbered US males** (261) for the time
- US females earned more medals than US males: 56% of nation's medals, 66% of gold medals

## The Womens' Olympics?



See Video Clip 3



**Women's boxing** a medal event for the first time at London 2012.

From 2016, **[women's] rugby** and golf will be Olympic events, effectively replacing baseball (men) and softball (women).



**But, traditional female/feminine relations, roles, and identities would seem to be still in evidence within sport and exercise culture?**

## Theme 3:

### Sport, Emphasized Femininity, and Constricted Bodies

Evidently, women are influenced by pervasive cultural norms related to the way that feminine bodies should act and look within and through sport and physical culture...

According to cultural norms, codes, and conventions, which is the more female/feminine athletic body, and why?



Bodybuilder - Jody Wald



Track Athlete - Sanya Richard-Ross



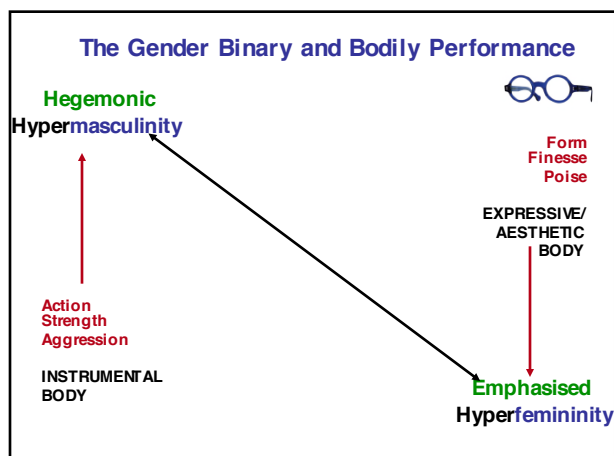
Golfer - Natalie Gulbis

Are any of these athletic bodies deemed unacceptable according to cultural norms, codes, and conventions of femininity? If so, which ones and why?

Clearly, as with masculinity, there is no SINGULAR FEMININITY. Rather, there are competing and often contradicting FEMININITIES operating within contemporary culture.

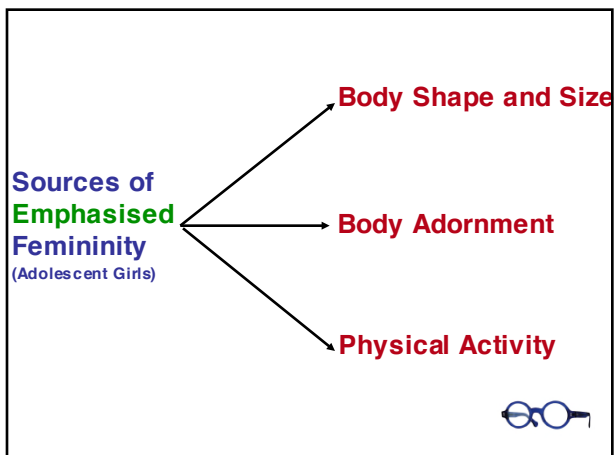
The most prevalent form of FEMININITY has been described as culturally EMPHASISED or PREFERRED femininity.

The cultural convention of EMPHASISED FEMININITY exists at the opposite end, and in relation to, the physicality of HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY.



Hence, certain sporting forms--and the bodies that derive from them--are considered suitable expressions of EMPHASISED FEMININITY.





### Emphasised Feminine Sport Performances

- Physical structure and form
- Physical grace and beauty
- Capacity for physical expression

**Sporting Emphasised Femininity**

**Bodily appearance and actions** conforming to dominant conventions relating to femininity.

Such sporting emphasised femininity demands:

**A body which is petite, slender, toned, yet not overly muscular!**

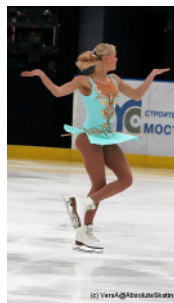
A virtual physiological impossibility...

Within many of these emphasised feminine sports, the **CODES of FEMININITY** are written into the structure of the sport.

Certainly, with regards to figure skating, gymnastics, and synchronised swimming individual's are **evaluated/scored by judging criteria based on traditional assumptions** of what the female body should **look like** (size and proportion), and how it **should act** (poise and grace).

### SEXUALIZATION

(treating the female body as an object of male desire)



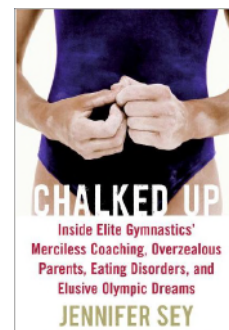
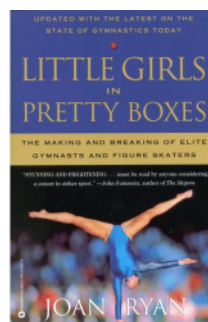
### INFANTILIZATION

(to present/treat the female body as a child-like state)

The irony, of course, is that in order to conform to the feminine body ideals demanded by these sports, female athletes are compelled to work tirelessly to **CONSTRUCT** their **body size**, while still creating bodies which are sufficiently **strong and agile** enough to produce their **seemingly effortless** (but nonetheless hugely demanding) **performances of emphasised femininity**.



## CONSTRICTED FEMININITY



The female body **constrained by, and shaped** according to **traditional codes and conventions** of female physicality.

"Figure skating is a girl thing. Athletes in sequins and "sheer illusion sleeves" glide and dance, their tiny skirts flapping in the breeze. They achieve, but without touching or pushing anyone else. **They win, but without visible signs of sweat.** They compete, but not directly. Their success is measured not by confrontation with an opponent, nor even by a clock or a scoreboard. Rather, **they are judged as beauty contestants are judged:** by a panel of people who interpret the success of the routines. **Prettiiness is mandatory. Petite and groomed and gracious, figure skaters** – like cheerleaders, gymnasts, and aerobic dancers – camouflage their competitiveness with niceness and prettiness until it no longer seems male or aggressive or unseemly."

Source: M.B. Nelson (2001, April 25). I won. I'm sorry. *Women's Sport Foundation* (originally published in *Self* magazine).

Through emphasised feminine sports, the general public is reminded:

**"not that women's bodies are capable of incredible strength, but that they are expected to demonstrate incredible femininity"**

(Roth and Basow, 2004, p. 252)

Source: Roth, A., & Basow, S. A. (2004). Femininity, sports, and feminism; Developing a theory of physical liberation. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 28(3), 245-266.

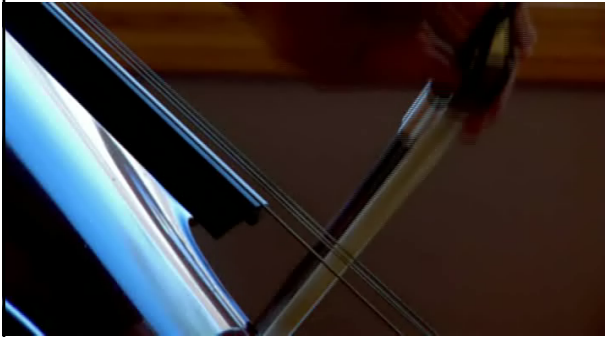
Many athletes in traditionally female sports are thus compelled to involve themselves--and their bodies--in **unhealthy physical and dietary regimes**, with sometimes **unfortunate physiological and psychological consequences**.

Certainly **body image and weight control** related issues are prevalent within the world of sporting emphasised femininity.



The **Feminizing Discipline** of Synchronised Swimming

#### Video Clip 4



### The Female Athlete Triad

Intense levels of sport/exercise for women are **AT RISK** for the following conditions:

#### 1. Eating Disorders

Losing weight in order to improve athletic performance can lead to serious **eating disorders** such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa.

#### 2. Amenorrhea

Intense exercise can lead to decreases in estrogen and **disruption to/interruption of menstrual cycles**.

#### 3. Osteoporosis

Low estrogen levels and poor nutrition can lead to a **lowering of calcium levels and bone density/bone strength**.

[Not forgetting self-harming].

## Theme 4:

### Sporting Femininities and **Instrumental Bodies**

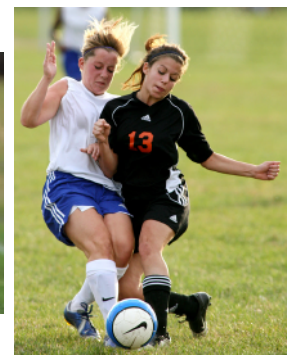
In recent years, the amount of females participating in **traditionally masculine, physically contact based "invasion" games** has risen sharply.

This has particular consequences for challenging hegemonic perceptions related to the **accepted norms of feminine physicality** (how the female body should act and look).

#### Sporting Challenges to **Emphasised** Femininity?

Soccer  
Football  
Wrestling  
Weightlifting  
Boxing  
Hockey  
Rugby

### The *Feminine* Soccer Fallacy



Football and *New Femininities* [See Video Clip 5](#)



"True-Hearted Vixens" (2001)

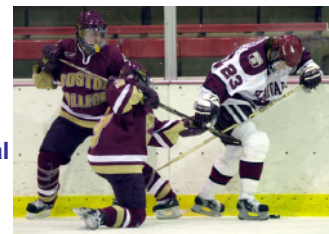


Wrestling with Femininity

[See Video Clip 6](#)



Emergent Instrumental  
Femininities



[See Video Clip 7](#)



Invading a Male Preserve

**Instrumental sporting femininities** are not concerned with the **shape/size (form)** of the female body, but are concerned with **its effectiveness (function)** within the given activity.

As such, and within the context of the sporting activity, **traditional feminine codes and conventions become irrelevant, and are effectively undermined.**



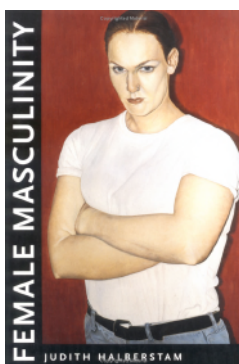
## Theme 5:

### Emergent and Negotiated Sporting Femininities

The growing popularity of these activities has **challenged traditional assumptions** about female physicality and femininity.

They are, to some degree, **normalizing** for women what have been traditionally perceived to be **masculine attributes** (strength, toughness, aggression, violence).

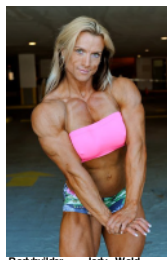
Thus, it is possible to discern the emergence of “**masculine**” **femininities**, or what has been described as a “**female masculinity**.”



The demonstration that power, strength, and aggression are **as much female** as male attributes.

Source: Halberstam, J. (1998). *Female masculinities*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

According to **cultural norms, codes, and conventions**, which is the more female/feminine athletic body, and why?



Bodybuilder – Jody Watney

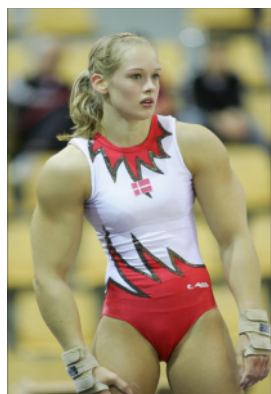


Track Athlete – Sanya Richards-Ross



Golfer – Natalie Gulbis

Are any of these athletic bodies deemed **unacceptable** according to **cultural norms, codes, and conventions of femininity**? If so, which ones and why?



An unidentified (perhaps Photoshopped?) Danish gymnast

How does this female athletic body relate to the dominant **cultural norms, codes, and conventions of femininity**?

Does she **challenge or reinforce** dominant expectations of female physicality?

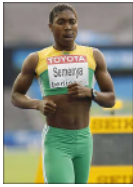
### The **Problem** of Female Sporting Physicality



- Non-traditional sports
- Non-traditional bodies
- Overly successful

The powerful, aggressive, and successful female athlete challenges traditional assumptions about the female body/femininity.

### Pushing the Boundaries of Emphasised Femininity



Caster Semenya, 2009 IAAF 800m world champion

Challenging or reinforcing the traditional gender binary?

Elisa Cusma, the Italian who finished in sixth, told reporters: "She's a man."

### The Amelia Mauresmo Factor



"She's here with her girlfriend. She is half man" (Martina Hingis)

"her shoulders looked huge to me, I think they must have grown . . . a couple of times I thought I was playing a guy" (Lindsay Davenport)

## The Heterosexual Matrix

(Judith Butler)



Gender → Sexuality ↘ Sex ↓	Masculine	Feminine
Male	Heterosexual	Homosexual
Female	Homosexual	Heterosexual

Since emphasised femininity is closely linked to **HETEROSEXUALITY**, female **contravening** of cultural norms and conventions with regard to **BODILY FORM (SHAPE)** and **FUNCTION (ACTIVITY)** frequently leads to accusations/labelling of **HOMOSEXUALITY**.

Sport thus becomes a context for advancing **HOMOPHOBIA** (fear and hostility toward homosexuals)



### Fearless: A photography project by Jeff Sheng



"Fearless" is the name of the photography project I started over 5 years ago about "out" high school and collegiate athletes who openly self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

[www.fearlessproject.org/](http://www.fearlessproject.org/)

In response some female athletes—fearful of the stigma of being labelled as homosexuals—engage in the "female apologetic defense":



"a coping strategy that allows a woman to compensate for the perceived masculinizing effect of participating in sports by exaggerating her [traditional] femininity." (p. 1388)

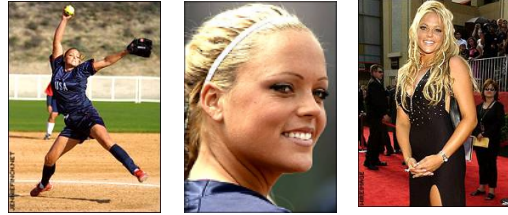
Source: Malcolm, N.L. (2003). Constructing female athleticism: A study of girls' recreational softball. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 46 (10), 1387-1404.

### The Female Apologetic Defense

“associated with a specific set of actions, which include taking care to **present oneself as feminine outside of sports** by wearing hair ribbons, makeup, dresses, and frilly blouses; **downplaying the importance of competition, aggression, and athletic achievements**; emphasizing the cooperative and social aspects of sports; and stressing one’s desire for **heterosexual relationships** by talking about and interacting with boyfriends, husbands, and children” (p. 1388)

Source: Malcolm, N.L. (2003). Constructing female athleticism: A study of girls’ recreational softball. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 46 (10), 1387-1404.

### Former Softball player Jennie Finch



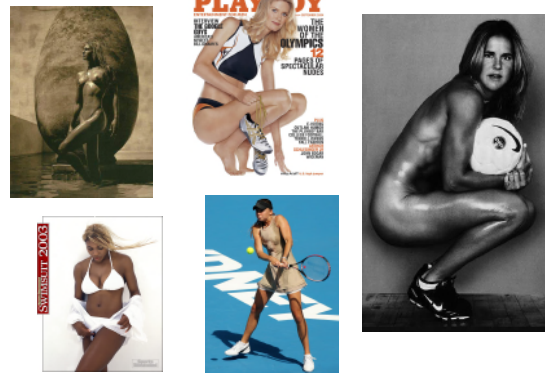
Poster Child for the Female Apologetic Defense?

<http://espn.go.com/page2/s/hottest/female/finals.html>

### The Williams’ Apologetic?



### Objectified as Women, Trivialized as Athletes?



### The Lolo Jones Factor



Source: Longman, J. (2012, August 4). For Lolo Jones, Everything Is Image. *The New York Times*.

### The Danica Patrick Paradox



Gender Advancement or Sexualization and/or Trivialization? [See Video Clip 8](#)

### The Rachel Rousey Paradox



Gender Advancement or Sexualization and/or Trivialization? [See Video Clip 9](#)

## Theme 6:

### Bodywork, Femininities and Exercising Bodies

Sports based on the **codes and conventions** of **emphasised femininity**, do tend to **discipline and create hyper-feminized bodies**.

This can lead to problems emanating from athlete's perceived lack of control over what their **bodies look like (body form)**, and what their **bodies do (body function)**.

However, there are other elements of physical culture in which the individual has a **perceived** (and perhaps real) sense of **control and autonomy over the shaping their bodies**.

This can be referred to as:

#### EXERCISE CULTURE

(and includes the various elements of **individually based exercise, fitness, and health practices** which are an important element of many women's lives)

The various examples of exercise culture all provide a forum for the individual to involved themselves in **BODYWORK**:



"Bodywork is the effort put in to create a specific physicality and draws on the notion of an individual **actively and consciously** make an effort to **create a kind of physicality...the body is an image or text and an active, lived, embodied personal self-projection**"

(Brace-Govan, 2002, p. 404)

Source: Brace-Govan, J. (2002). Looking at bodywork: Women and three physical activities. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 26 (4), 403-420.



So, within exercise culture, what kind of **BODYWORK** is being done, and what type of **EMBODIED SELVES** are being **SELF-PROJECTED**?



The **BODYWORK** (body practices, structures and meanings) women undertake in exercise culture is clearly diverse.

For some it is an expression and realisation of physical and personal **EMPOWERMENT**. However, this is often realised in a way which **REINFORCES TRADITIONAL FEMALE/FEMININE CUSTOMS** and **CONVENTIONS**.

Exercise culture is a site through which women's bodies are often, if not always, **controlled/shaped/experienced** according hegemonic norms of "preferred (emphasised) femininity."

Thus, much of exercise culture projects, and to some degree demands, adherence to elements of a **constricted female physicality**.

Source: Markula P. (1995). Firm but shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin: The postmodern aerobicing female bodies. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 12(4), 424-453.



This is women's fitness?

Women's bodies come in a variety of **SHAPES** and **SIZES**. However, the commercial media tend to portray only two:

See Video Clip 10



1. The "THIN" and "TIGHT" good body women are expected to have
2. The "FAT" and "FLABBY" bad body women are expected to be fearful of

## Exercise Culture

Fitness/  
Health

Appearance/  
Aesthetics

A non-necessary relationship between the two.

The (im)possibility of the "fat" and fit body



Cultural  
Impossibility

Cultural  
Impossibility

Physiological  
Possibility

Contemporary culture is centered around a **commercialized ideal** of the female body as **“SLIM”** and **“TONED”**



If being **“SLIM”** and **“TONED”** is the criteria of **attractiveness** and **social acceptance**, any women who is not (or feels they are not) may well feel **UNNATtractive** and **SOCIALLY UNACCEPTED**.

Therefore, in order to gain **social acceptance**, many women engage in activities designed to **MASK** or **ALTER** their **NATURAL BODY** shapes.

Because this is prompted by the perceived need to change bodies to **attempt to conform** to the “narrowly defined beauty ideal”...

Such practices can be seen as being **CONSTRUCTING**, **OPPRESSIVE** and **DAMAGING** to women.



## The Contradictions of Exercise Culture (Aerobics)

Collins (2002) identifies some interesting strategies through which women use aerobics as a means of **countering the oppressive/constricting aspects of fitness culture** and thereby lead to a **sense of personal empowerment**.

These include:

Source: Collins, L. H. (2002). Working out the contradictions: Feminism and aerobics. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 26(1), 85-109.

1. **Distancing** themselves from (tuning out) the more sexist aspects of aerobics
2. **Rejecting** the feminist critique of aerobics as a site for reproducing female physical subordination and disempowerment
3. **Asserting** agency, or controlling the space, by performing practices they preferred rather than simply following the instructor
4. **Making Do**, or resigning themselves to the less acceptable aspects of aerobics, in order to continue to take part



Within the context of aerobics (as perhaps within other physical cultural activities), there is the **possibility for either female empowerment or disempowerment**.

Source: Collins, L. H. (2002). Working out the contradictions: Feminism and aerobics. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 26(1), 85-109.

According to Brace-Govan's (2002) notion of “bodywork”, women become **empowered** through physical activity when they focus on pursuing their bodywork for **INSTRUMENTAL (what the body does)**, as opposed to **APPEARANCE (what the body looks like)** purposes.



Instrumental Goals: Empowerment



Appearance Goals: Disempowerment

Source: Brace-Govan, J. (2002). Looking at Bodywork: Women and Three Physical Activities. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 26(4), 403-420.

## Exercise Culture

**Empowering?**



**Disempowering?**



**Empowering or Disempowering?**  
(Instrumental) (Appearance)



**Empowering or Disempowering?**  
(Instrumental) (Appearance)

See Video Clip 11



**Empowering or Disempowering?**  
(Instrumental) (Appearance)

Clearly physical culture is a context in which understandings of femininity are being **contested**, with **emergent (instrumental)** and **residual (emphasised)** femininities presently competing for **dominance/ascendancy** in terms of defining the **cultural norms and conventions of females/femininity...**

See course website for related required readings, video clips, key concepts, thematic review questions, and essay question.