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Journal of Sport and Social Issues 2004; 28; 245

DOI: 10.1177/0193723504266990

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FEMININITY, SPORTS, AND FEMINISM

Developing a Theory of Physical Liberation

Amanda Roth
Susan A. Basow

U.S. society continues to accept myths regarding the supposed weakness of women's bodies. Women's displays of physical power are often prevented or undermined, typically in ways centering on the concept of femininity. Increasing numbers of female athletes have not led to a true physical feminist liberation, one which would increase women's confidence, power, respect, wealth, enjoyment of physicality, and escape from rape and the fear of rape. Despite these possible benefits, most feminists have not encouraged the development of physical power in women. Although caution regarding physical power is warranted, the benefits of a physical, liberatory feminism outweigh the risks.

Keywords: *feminism; femininity; sports; female strength*

Six male and 20 female students, accompanied by two professors, traveled for a 3-week college course, moving to six different hotels. The male professor insisted that the men carry the suitcases and load them on the bus as much as possible. When one female student carried her own suitcase, she was told, "Let one of the guys do that." When she helped the men load the bus, bags were forcibly taken out of her hands. One young man in particular often struggled with the heavy suitcases, yet the woman was criticized for her efforts to, literally, carry her own weight. When she complained to friends, she was told she was overreacting: "They were just being courteous, some of the women probably couldn't carry their own suitcases, men generally are stronger than women." If the woman had been treated as intellectually inferior to the men on the trip simply because she was a woman, (most) people would have been outraged. So where is the outrage over the fact that a woman who was perfectly capable of carrying her own bag was not allowed to on the basis of her sex?

It is commonly accepted as fact in our society that women are physically weaker than men. Women are shorter, smaller, have less muscle, can lift less, and run slower. To a lesser extent, it is also sometimes accepted that women are not just weaker but are just plain weak. Thus, instead of men simply carrying the heaviest objects and leaving the moderate objects to

Journal of Sport & Social Issues, Volume 28, No. 3, August 2004, pp. 245-265
DOI: 10.1177/0193723504266990
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women, men often carry all the objects. But as many women and men know, women are certainly not weak. In fact, it turns out that often women are not weaker than men, at least they are not naturally weaker, nor weaker to the extent commonly believed. Yet the myth of women's weakness often goes unchallenged even by feminists..

The roots of this relative inattention by feminists to claims of women's weakness can be found in many of the dominant feminist theories, yet each of those theories also contains the ingredients that will be necessary for overcoming the myth of women's weakness. Liberal feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Cady Stanton who fought for women's rights in the 18th and 19th centuries argued that the rights of freedom and equality are owed to all rational beings regardless of sex (Jaggar, 1983). This emphasis on rationality, however, can lead to a disregard for the body, and it may leave unchallenged the idea that women are physically inferior to men. Eventually, liberal feminists were instrumental in the passage of Title IX legislation in 1972 that offered women, among many other rights and protections, equal opportunity to participate in athletics (Costa & Guthrie, 1994). However, the resulting influx of girls and women in sports did not necessarily challenge the dualistic view of human nature and the valuing of the mind over the body.

Radical feminism, like liberal feminism, seems to be a bit ambivalent about female participation in athletics. On one hand, those sects of radical feminism that encourage the revaluing of specifically feminine traits and talents would seem to encourage female participation in female-only sports that emphasize cooperation instead of aggression and competition (Theberge, 1987). Along these lines, radical feminists might likely point out and criticize the fact that sports often value male strengths like upper body strength over female strengths like agility (Costa & Guthrie, 1994). Simultaneously, however, radical feminism has pointed out the use of male physical strength to ensure the inequality of the sexes on a grand scale (Jaggar, 1983). MacKinnon (1987), in fact, has even explicitly connected gender hierarchy and athletics in a speech, "Women, Self-Possession, and Sport." These contributions have functioned as building blocks in the development of a physical feminism.

Postmodern feminists, like radical feminists, have put forth more building blocks. Judith Butler (1990) pointed out that gender is not a given, nor something inscribed upon us. We perform gender by *doing* femininity and masculinity. In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), Butler went further to claim that sex is also a constructed aspect of bodies. She claimed that "the regulatory norms of 'sex' work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies," and by performative, she meant "reiterative and citational practice" (Butler, 1993, p. 2). Thus, sexed bodies are constructed through the activities we *do* continually, often without conscious thought. Butler's point perhaps can be extended to the strength differences, which liberal feminists sometimes accept as natural and which radicals see as being used ideologically to

maintain male dominance. According to Butler's view of bodies as constructed, strength differences are constructed as bodies *do* femininity and masculinity. That is, *doing* masculinity builds strength, whereas *doing* femininity builds weakness.

Shirley Castelnuovo and Guthrie (1994) went further than the previously discussed theories by incorporating components of each. They called for a theory of feminism that "bridges the mind-body chasm" and that advocates a "liberatory strategy that involves an Amazonian transformation, that is, one in which women are empowered physically, not just mentally" (pp. 12-13). The authors incorporated liberal feminism's emphasis on equal opportunity in physical activities, radical feminism's recognition of physical strength's role in maintaining male dominance, and postmodernism's understanding of the constructed nature of the body to form a unique theory. They claim that women's physical liberation is a necessary step in the endeavor for total liberation.

In this article, we will discuss the *doing* and *undoing* of femininity by looking through the lens of sports. Sports offer a unique venue for feminist theorizing, as gender issues are both replicated and magnified within it (Frey & Eitzen, 1991). In the 1970s, for instance, a tennis match between Billy Jean King and Bobby Riggs was sold as "The Battle of Sexes," and, in fact, for many people, this match represented the clash between traditional male-dominated society and the feminist movement that was also occurring at that time (Carillo & Deford, 1999). Sports should also be a feminist concern, because they are activities in which large numbers of women and one third of high school girls participate (Lawler, 2002). Like education, work, religion, and family, the cultural institution of sports has the power to affect women's status in society, and not necessarily in a positive manner. Despite its being an institution that is nearing 50/50, male/female participation, the institution of athletics continues to both conform to and to bolster male dominance. "Through sport, the male body signifies 'better than,' 'stronger than,' 'more than.' And this superiority appears to be inevitable—a 'natural' result of the differences in size, strength, and physical power" (Dowling, 2000, p. 192).

Thus, although women and girls have been *doing* sports in great numbers since the passage of Title IX, that participation has not thus far been in large part a liberating activity to the extent to which it can and should be. In this article, we will examine the interaction between athletics and the ideology of femininity to show why sports have not resulted in a feminist liberation. We will then discuss what women would gain from physical liberation, why feminists have been hesitant to advocate it, and why they must overcome their concerns and do so. Ultimately, we hope to show the need and possibility for a physically based feminist liberation strategy.

MYTHS AND REALITIES OF WOMEN'S BODIES

To understand the role of athletics in oppressing, and potentially liberating, women, one must first have some knowledge of women's bodies as

they are, whether they have gotten that way artificially or naturally. One facet of this knowledge regarding women's bodies is the fact that even the feminine body is not as weak as is often assumed. Despite our culture's tendency to cast males as being large and muscular and females as being small and thin, the average man is only 10% to 15% larger than the average woman (Dowling, 2000). Given how great the strength difference between men and women is thought to be, this 10% to 15% seems minor. Female bodies are not small, and they are not weak either. In a study of females who fell within the height/weight standards of the army but were not involved with the military, 24% of the women could lift 100 pounds before training to increase their heavy lifting ability (Gutmann, 2000). One out of four untrained women can lift 100 pounds, and women are naturally weak?

In another study, the average military woman could lift 66 pounds (Goldstein, 2001). This may seem unimpressive given that the average man in that same study could lift 119 pounds. But certainly the ability to lift 66 pounds (approximately the weight of the average 10-year-old boy) is not characteristic of weak individuals (Lambert, 2001). Goldstein (2001) pointed out that, although this study shows a significant difference in the amount of weight the average male or female participant can lift, it also shows a noteworthy overlap of more than 10% in the bell curves of the two variables. A 10% overlap also occurs in the bell curves comparing male and female height. So the strongest women are stronger than the weakest men in the same way that the tallest women are taller than the shortest men in terms of percentages. But height is more visible than strength; therefore, the strength overlap between the sexes is typically unseen and unknown.

Even those differences that do exist between men and women depend not on sex differences directly but on muscle mass differences. In fact, 97% of apparent gender differences in strength are actually the result of muscle mass differences (Freedson, 1994). Although muscle mass is related to testosterone levels, typically higher in males than females, Natalie Angier (1999) pointed out that science and society must be wary not to overcredit testosterone in the realm of muscle development. She cited a study in which one group of men abused steroids, whereas another group did not use steroids but diligently exercised. The steroid users had 5 times as much testosterone in their bloodstream as the control group participants, yet after 10 weeks, each group had comparable strength. So increasing testosterone levels by five times was not enough to overcome the effects of exercise. Thus, although men have much more testosterone than women, strength differences between the sexes are likely to be mitigated by exercise.

However men accumulate their muscles, it is clear that men generally have an advantage in upper body strength. Freedson (1994) cited studies from the 1970s in which women were able to lift 40% of what males could bench press, and 75% of what males could leg press. When strength ability was measured relative to muscle mass, however, the results were very different. Women actually leg pressed 110% of what males could leg press per

kilogram of lean body mass. In this way, women's leg muscles are actually stronger than men's. The upper body strength gap also closed considerably when it was measured according to lean body mass.

Thus, women are not weak, yet many believe that they are (because society tells them that they are). In a study of 9-year-olds, both sexes performed equally well in an anaerobic pedaling activity, but girls consistently perceived themselves to have performed worse than did their male peers (Dowling, 2000). Why might this happen? Dowling (2000) pointed out that physical fitness criteria for boys and girls differ by holding boys to a higher standard in every category except agility, yet from elementary school to the brink of puberty, girls continue to score higher than boys overall on these tests. Although girls actually outperform boys, the lower standards for females give the impression that girls are less able by virtue of their sex.

We see that society is successful at convincing women of their weakness, but this alone is not enough to explain the differences in male and female physical performance. Femininity ideology goes far beyond convincing society and women themselves that they are weak; the ideology actually makes them weak, or at least weaker than they need be. 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. As women strive to meet the ideal of femininity, they construct feminine bodies through the self-disciplines of dieting, exercise, hair removal, cosmetics use, and so forth (Bartky, 1998). The existence of these feminine bodies then sustains the ideology.

The ideal of the feminine (i.e., weak) body is transmitted to women and men in virtually all aspects of life and through all societal institutions: family, religion, professional life, and the media. Being feminine becomes crucial to a woman's sense of herself as a woman (Bartky, 1998), and indeed, this is to be expected given how repetitive and consistent these forms of body discipline are. Watching one's weight, exercising, shaving, and doing one's hair and face are for the most part *daily* activities in which women seem to treat their bodies as objects. Treating one's body as an object has profound implications, because, as Merleau-Ponty (1962) pointed out, the body is not "an object of the world, but . . . [is] our means of communication with" the world (p. 92). Thus, seemingly subconscious routines become internalized as bodies embody consciousness in the form of self-identity and self-image (Guthrie & Castelnuovo, 1994).

Femininity discipline begins working upon females during childhood (perhaps even infancy) by transmitting to children a mental connection between femaleness and weakness and by forcing girls to embody that weakness in their bodies. Dowling (2000) cited a study that involved parents sitting in the middle of a room blockaded by pillows; their toddlers were left outside the blockade trying to get to their parents. Parents were likely to lift girls over the pillows while encouraging boys to climb over them. Similarly, Iris Young (1990) pointed out that girls are taught not to get hurt, not to get

dirty, not to tear their clothing, and so forth so that their movements are constrained, and they eventually come to have a feminine (i.e., constricted) walk, way of sitting, and other movements.

The embodiment of femininity then shows itself in the way girls and women use their bodies and the ways they do not use them. Sojourner Truth (1992) was one of the first feminists to point out the way socialization affects women's bodies when she pointed out her physical equality with men by asking, "Ain't I a woman?" Just as social circumstances (slavery) made Truth's body strong and upper-class White women's bodies weak, so the social circumstances in our society determine the abilities of (most) women's bodies. For instance, a study of 2nd graders found that boys threw with their dominant arm 72% faster than girls did. Yet when the same children threw using their nondominant arm, boys and girls performed identically. The boys' better performance on the first task was not a matter of sex but of practice (Dowling, 2000). Because girls typically are not taught how to throw in this society, girls' bodies are not as able as boys to do so.

Luckily, such ways of using one's body can also, in some cases, be changed with relative ease (relative ease given that such differences between the sexes are often deemed biological or natural). In the previously described study, initially 24% of nonmilitary women could lift 100 pounds; after 14 weeks of training 5 days a week for about an hour a day, 78% of women could lift 100 pounds (Gutmann, 2000). Another instance of body malleability and embodiment of ideology is discussed by Shari Dworkin (2001) in her work regarding women weightlifters. She found that 75% of the women acknowledged a self-imposed glass ceiling—the maximum point they wished to reach in terms of strength and muscularity. Some women negotiated this goal by limiting the amount of lifting they did or by holding back. Many of the women claimed they held back to avoid growing large and looking masculine, although they also claimed that most women are not as able as men to build muscle. They appear to negotiate this contradiction by believing that they are an exception among women instead of trusting their own experience of being able to become large and strong as is normal for women. This study illuminates the way in which women's bodies are socially constructed to be weak(er) and the femininity ideology (the contradictory beliefs about whether women can actually get large and the imperative not to do so) that drives that social construction.

Naomi Wolf (1991) in *The Beauty Myth* explored the origins of the White female body ideal in American culture as small, thin, and weak. She argued that what is considered beautiful in a society is never about appearance but, instead, is about prescribing behavior. Women are encouraged to have a certain look, because getting that look requires certain profitable behaviors. The women in Dworkin's (2001) study got the look by enforcing their own glass ceiling over their body's strength potential. Many American women and girls also attempt to conform to a glass ceiling in terms of body size/weight through dieting. Wolf quoted a study that found that men on low-calorie diets become passive, anxious, and emotional—all traits

traditionally associated with femininity. Thus, thinness is promoted not solely as an aesthetic ideal but because the activities used to become and stay thin produce feminine traits, especially the trait of powerlessness. Wolf also pointed out that, since the 1970s when feminism began making rapid progress, models and Playboy playmates have gotten progressively thinner. At the same time, the ideal male body type has gotten larger (in terms of muscularity). GI Joe and Batman figures have been bulked up in recent years; the X-Men Wolverine figure, in fact, if it were human height, would have a 32-inch bicep, larger than any male bodybuilder in history (Hall, 1999). Thus, gender differences are increasingly being inscribed on the body.

It is important when viewing female body ideology in the context of Wolf's (1991) analysis, however, to recognize racial and class differences. The ideal of femininity in *The Beauty Myth* is a White ideal. The models, Playboy playmates, and Miss Americas who consistently become thinner are mostly White; Black women often have a higher body self-esteem (Poran, 2002) and lower incidence of eating disorders (Root, 1990). This racial disparity regarding the ideal body can be traced back historically. As slaves, Black women in the 18th to mid-19th century were exploited and abused alongside their male counterparts. As Truth (1992) pointed out, Black women of that period and even into the mid-20th century were never given the opportunity to be feminine. They were never helped into carriages, carried over mud puddles, or given the best of anything. White plantation owners' rape of Black women during slavery also led to the myth of Black women's hypersexual nature, as Dorothy Roberts (1997) pointed out. Black women were described as having a "strong robust constitution" (certainly opposite the supposed fragile and weak constitution of White women) that made them particularly sexual beings (Roberts, 1997, pp. 10-11). Thus, Black women have never had the opportunity to conform to the White feminine ideal; historically, their very existence has been defined by White society as distinctly unfeminine.

The White feminine ideal also does not apply to Latina women. Linda Delgado (1999) remarked that as a child her skinniness was regarded as symptomatic of illness, and failure to eat enough was an insult to the cook/hostess. Such positive emphasis on food is not common in White culture, perhaps with the exception of older generations and ethnic Mediterraneans. Delgado claimed that eating/having a solid body was traditionally considered important for Latina women, because they carry the burden of being a good wife, mother, child-bearer, and follower of God. Latino men generally consider thin women to be dating, but not marriage, material. Thus, because Latinos view femininity as less about appearance and more about proper behavior as a woman, they tend to be more accepting of larger body types.

The fact that the weak femininity ideal is specifically White has interesting consequences for non-White women. On one hand, these women may be less susceptible to mainstream White body discipline. On the other, not fitting into the ideal or having a distinct cultural ideal may also be damaging. The supposed lack of femininity, oversexuality, and irresponsibility of

Black women, for instance, has been used by mainstream society as an excuse for exploiting Black women economically and sexually. The rejection of Latina women who are too thin is very similar to the rejection of White women who are not thin enough. Yet, the fact that Latina and Black women are not entirely held to the White femininity standard also offers them some benefits. In particular, Latina and Black women have traditionally been expected to be strong of will and of body. Thus, being physically strong as a Black or Latina woman may be more acceptable in society than being physically strong as a White woman. This has implications for women's participation in self-defense and sports.

SPORTS AND FEMININITY

The extent to which a sport is framed as feminine or masculine controls if and how women participate in it. Because sports offer women the "potential for reducing physical power imbalances on which patriarchy is founded and reified" (Castelnuovo & Guthrie, 1998, p. 13), one way to limit and deemphasize women's physical power and capabilities is to associate female athleticism with female sex appeal. For instance, in gymnastics, figure skating, dance, and cheerleading, femininity is written into the rules of the sport (Nelson, 1994). Integral to a woman, or more likely to a teenage girl, winning a gymnastics or figure skating meet is her sexy skating outfit (which shows much more skin than a man's outfit) and the dance aspects of her routines (which are not required of her male counterparts). This tendency of ensuring the acceptability of female athletics by making them appealing to men is referred to as "the feminine apologetic" (Lawler, 2002; Theberge, 2000). What could women/girl's legs being observable under a barely there skirt; a sparkling, sexy outfit; and a plastered on, lipsticked smile possibly add to the performance of a triple axel? It certainly helps viewers forget the incredible amount of strength that is necessary to perform a triple axel. Instead of appreciating skaters' thighs for the power they possess and the feats they can perform, male viewers are given a perfect chance to appreciate those thighs as sex objects. And female viewers are reminded not that women's bodies are capable of incredible strength, but that they are expected to demonstrate incredible femininity.

The use of sex to reinforce femininity also applies to sports that may not be sexy themselves but that are sold through sex. Nelson (1994) discussed such an instance when Olympic gold-winning runner Florence Griffith Joyner appeared on the cover of a magazine bending over to touch her toes with nearly bare buttocks in the air. Sex is not something that can be sold on the track, but runners are expected to sell it in their time off. Another ad shows only a male pelvis covered in tight jeans with a mini-television in the front pocket. The caption reads, "Get the entire USA women's hockey team in your pants" (Nelson 1994, p. 215). The ad implies, of course, that, when one watches women's hockey, one does not watch athletes who happen to be women, but women who happen to be athletes. And because they are women first, anything they do is sexual—even playing hockey.

Femininity is also reinforced in athletics through team names and descriptions of female athletes. A 1989 study by Eitzen and Zinn of more than 1,000 American college and university sports teams found that from 38% to 56% of schools displayed sexism in team names, logos, mascots, or some combination of the above. Women's teams were called *belles*, *girls*, or *gals* or the suffix *ettes* was added to the male team name. These additions imply that the male team is normal, whereas the female is a deviant derivative that must be marked as female. In one case, a school called male teams Blue Hawks and female teams Blue Chicks, whereas another used the names Bears and Teddy Bears. In these cases, hawks and bears are aggressive and violent, whereas chicks and teddy bears are cute and nurturing.

But, of course, encouraging sexuality and femininity in female athletes will not work for all women in all sports. In such cases, then, the objective is not to deemphasize women's power by focusing on femininity but to threaten women's power by admitting it exists and claiming that its very existence implies that the woman is not a real woman.

When is a woman not a real woman? When she is a lesbian, of course. In the early 1980s, tennis player Martina Navratilova was ridiculed in the press as a "bionic sci-fi creation" who was bisexual and must have a "chromosomal screw loose" (Dowling, 2000). Christine Grant, the women's athletic director at the University of Iowa, stated that the association of sports with lesbianism scares all women athletes, lesbian or not (Carillo & Deford, 1999). The fear of being labeled or outted as lesbian can lead to an even greater emphasis on femininity by female athletes either to prove that they are not lesbians or to hide the fact that they are. And these fears, of course, are justified given the level of homophobia in society. Women athletes who still do not receive anywhere close to the amount of media coverage, money, or respect that male athletes receive often cannot afford to add battling homophobia to their to-do list.

In other cases, the accusation of not being a real woman implies that a woman is really male. In 1990, 10-year-old soccer goalie Natasha Dennis performed so well that a father of a child on the opposing team began calling to her, "Nice game, boy." He even demanded that Natasha's sex be verified in the bathroom (Dowling, 2000; Nelson, 1994). Sex tests have also been a staple of the Olympics for the purpose of preventing women with genetic abnormalities (which may give them an *unfair* benefit) from competing (Dowling, 2000). Many sports sociologists, according to Dowling (2000), find it telling that "sex testing became institutionalized just as women began storming the upper ranks of athletic competition" (p. 174). The testing is the ultimate accusation of masculinity as women are required to prove that, "though strong, they [a]re actually female and not male" (Dowling, 2000, p. 188).

If accusations of lesbianism and maleness are not enough to keep women out of sports, other obstacles are thrown their way. For instance, competition is segregated by sex (Dowling, 2000), and female versions of sports (with just a few rules changed) have developed. Theberge (2000) discussed the no body-checking rule that applies to Canadian women's hockey but not

to the men's National Hockey League. Body checking involves charging into an opponent, often knocking them against the wall. Most of the female players with whom she spoke favored body checking and even thought that the game was safer when body checking was allowed (because there was less motivation to illegally hurt an opponent). Despite these views, however, body checking remained illegal. Others attributed the rule in part to the fact that society is not ready to see women acting that aggressively, because aggression is associated with masculinity. As one male cliff-diver put it while arguing for the disqualification of a woman from competition, "This is a death-defying activity. . . . What would be the point if everyone saw that a woman could do it the same?" (Dowling, 2000, p. 194). There would be little point, indeed, inasmuch as male physical prowess is used to validate male dominance.

It turns out, however, that the point of male activity as validating male dominance may have already been lost. New research indicates that elite female athletes do compete with males at comparable levels. For instance, when the 7.5-inch height difference between Florence Griffith Joyner and Carl Lewis are factored in to their running speeds, it turns out that she runs at a relative velocity of 0.28 heights per second faster than he does. Similar results hold for swimmers, as well, with women out-swimming men with regard to height (Dowling, 2000). Women have also broken numerous records in endurance events such as cycling from San Francisco to Los Angeles and in the 24-hour race (Dowling, 2000). In 1994, a female crew team defeated an all-male crew in the America's Cup Defenders challenge twice, even though the average strength of the male crew was greater than that of the women's team (Oglesby et al., 1998). So even if women are not as strong as men in absolute terms, they can still be formidable opponents.

Society, however, is often not very accepting of the idea that women might be men's physical equals. Angier (1999) discussed a study published in the 1990s that reported that women's elite running times had been increasing and quickly approaching men's, which suggested women would eventually catch up to men. Angier reported that one male exercise physiologist she interviewed said, "It's [the study] not even worth discussing. To suggest that women will approach men is ludicrous, just ridiculous" (1999, pp. 322-323). Her editors also encouraged her to be as skeptical as possible about the accuracy of the study in reporting it. Katherine Switzer invoked a similar reaction when she entered the Boston marathon using only her initials in 1967, because women were not allowed to compete. During the race, one of the race codirectors saw Switzer running, physically accosted her, and attempted to rip off her numbers. Switzer escaped from the director and finished the race only to be disqualified and suspended (Carillo & Deford, 1999). The fear exhibited by the codirector was fear that Switzer would do just what she did—finish the race—and do so in a respectable time thus demonstrating female physical ability.

Reactions like these reveal just how threatening to male dominance female athleticism can be. It is strange in one sense yet fitting in another

that the men would react to a feeling of physical impotence through physical means. The intense association of masculinity with physical power as well as the male shame that stems from being beaten physically shows how much women have to gain from reaching their physical potential. Men would not be physically assaulting women to stop them from doing some activity unless that activity represents a true danger to male privilege.

WHAT WOMEN (AND MEN) GET OUT OF FEMALE STRENGTH

Why should men be so frightened that women might be as strong as they? What do women gain from realizing their physical potential? There are a number of obvious potential benefits including money and fame. Wealth is abundant for many top professional sports players (most of them men), and higher salaries and endorsements for women will increase as women's professional athletics grows in size and popularity. Participation in athletics can also be a factor in one's opportunities for higher education. Two years after the passage of Title IX, only 50 women were attending college on an athletic scholarship compared to 50,000 men, and even as recently as 1997, men continued to receive two thirds of all such scholarships (Riley & Cantu, 1997). As women continue to participate in athletics, such scholarship awards (one hopes) will increase.

Women are also likely to gain confidence and enjoyment from participation in physical activities. Jennifer Lawler (2002) gave considerable focus to the idea that sports are ends in themselves for many women. One woman is quoted as stating, "I enjoy hitting people" (Lawler, 2002, p. 40). Another stated that most people do not understand "how much we [women in martial arts] enjoy the physical contact" (Lawler, 2002, p. 41). It is obvious from these responses that part of the benefit of contact sports is the physical contact itself. Women also report having a greater confidence as a result of sports and self-defense training. One woman claimed that only after she began playing violent sports did she learn to "stop apologizing for the space [she] take[s] up in the world" (Lawler, 2002, p. 43). Studies also show that self-defense gives women a greater sense of self-efficacy—the belief that one can change the world around them (McCaughey, 1997). Nelson (1994) pointed out studies that show that female college and high school athletes rate themselves as better able to lead, motivate, share, compete, and reach goals than women with no athletic experience.

But there is even more to explain the male fear and backlash against women in sports—the possibility of women gaining security, specifically security against rape. 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. In the past, particularly in the 1970s and 80s, women have been advised not to physically resist a rapist. Self-defense manuals and courses stressed avoiding dangerous situations and the use of vomiting, urinating, defecating, or menstruation to disgust the rapist and thus escape (McCaughey, 1997). It turns out, however, that women who physically resist rape have much higher rates of stopping the

rape from being completed. Women who use one or two methods of self-defense (fighting, yelling, running away) have a 60% to 80% chance of escape compared to only a 20% chance for those who do not use these methods (Easton, Summers, Tribble, Wallace, & Lock, 1997). And contrary to some widely held beliefs, physical resistance does not lead to further physical injury (Heyden, Anger, Jackson, & Ellner, 1999). Women who play sports that allow them to develop strength and physical abilities may be better able and more willing to physically resist a rape.

Perhaps even more important than the ability of a woman who happens to be attacked to escape rape is the ability of all women to escape the rape mystique. According to Dowling (2000), the rape mystique refers to rape's power to control women by keeping them fearful and forcing them to constrict their lives. This tendency of women to be controlled grows as more women believe more strongly that there is no way to stop an attempted rape from being completed. A 1997 study documents that women consciously change their activities to avoid rape: 90% of the college women surveyed claimed they had changed their lifestyle by keeping doors locked, staying in well-lit areas, not going out after dark, and carrying weapons because of fear of rape (Easton et al., 1997). Alison Jaggar (1983) suggested that rape and other violence against women is so common that women "may not notice it until it is removed" (p. 94). Thus, women may be suffering under the rape mystique without even realizing how deeply entrenched their knowledge is of their possible victimization.

Another benefit for women is the potential change in sexual scripts for which self-defense and women's physical power might be a catalyst. Currently, sexual scripts often dictate female passivity and vulnerability and male dominance and aggressiveness. Tali Edut (1998) discussed the fear of emasculating a man by being too aggressive in dating or sex. To avoid this possibility, she recalled scheming and tempting instead of being direct. Catherine MacKinnon (1989), in a critique of pornography, claimed that sexuality is based upon the dichotomy of femininity (submission eroticized) and masculinity (dominance eroticized) that is found in sexualities of all kinds including male/female, lesbian butch/femme, and sadomasochism top/bottom. She concluded that, because of this dichotomy of masculinity/dominance and femininity/submission, "male pleasure is inextricably tied to victimizing, hurting, exploiting" (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 328). Mikki van Zyl (1990) further claimed that vulnerability is thought to be one of women's most endearing qualities and is found sexually arousing by men. Indeed, in a survey cited by Wolf (1991), more than 90% of men said they liked to dominate a woman, and more than 60% claimed they got excited when a woman struggled over sex or would be excited to use force against a woman.

Thus, male and female sexualities are constructed according to women's being able to be raped—in their being weak, fragile, and passive. For women to find a way to stop rape and to become powerful and assertive is to threaten male sexuality. If women stop being weak, the basis for the traditional definition of sexuality collapses. The possible benefits for women are a

more woman-centered conception of sexuality and the ability to stop violence; the loss of privilege for men, then, is the loss of male-centered sexuality and the loss of the ability to do violence.

Along with the benefits that physical development will bring (and have brought) to women will be benefits for men. If women develop their physical abilities (or if society would simply recognize the physical abilities that women already have), men will no longer be unfairly expected/forced to perform physical labor simply because they are men. Men would also benefit inasmuch as the definition of *masculinity* would be transformed by women's physical development. Masculinity is often associated with being physically strong and aggressive. Men who do not demonstrate these qualities to a sufficient degree may be ridiculed as not being a real man. Perhaps men of lesser strength would not be ridiculed if the greater strength of other men were not privileged (over the strength of women). If women become and are recognized to be strong, even if not in every way *exactly as strong as men*, there will no longer be a stigma associated with men being bested physically by women.

When there is so much to be gained, then, by both women and men, why has the physical development of women not become a major social movement? Specifically, why have feminists not advocated it? Feminism's failure to seriously advocate women's physical development is in part due to the lack of proper attention that feminist theories have generally paid to the body. But, in fact, the failure goes further than this. Some feminists may be overtly against a feminist theory of physical liberation.

FEMINIST WORRIES ABOUT ADVOCATING PHYSICALITY AS FEMINIST LIBERATION

Those feminists who may be most reluctant to encourage women's violent sports and self-defense are cultural feminists. Cultural feminists are those who believe that the problem of violence, and thus the problem of women's oppression, is due to male biology. Specifically, men are more violent because they lack the ability to give life and the nurturing qualities that accompany it (Jaggar, 1983). Thus, according to cultural feminists, women may be naturally less violent than men, and women's ways of being are superior to men's. In this view, for women to engage in violence would be to take on male values that are inferior to female values.

In advocating a physical feminism for women, McCaughey (1997) answered this claim that women are naturally less violent. She insisted that "women are not as violent as men *only because women have not been entitled to violence, politically*" (McCaughey, 1997, p. 184). Furthermore, it seems that any claim based on the naturalness of violence or nonviolence will lack justification, for how can we ever isolate nature from socialization?

Even noncultural feminists, however, may be reluctant to advocate physical feminism. Given the way that physical force functions to oppress women, (radical) feminists may see it as patriarchal and oppressive. Even if men are not naturally more violent than women, violence has been one of the

major forces in oppressing women. Thus, women cannot hope to use violence to liberate themselves, because they would only be contributing to oppression (McCaughey, 1997). As Audre Lorde (1997) wrote, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 27).

McCaughey (1997) answered these potential accusations, as well. She insisted that the idea of women having nonviolent/nonaggressive purity, whether naturally or by choice, is a privileged view of women. Only White, upper/middle-class women have ever had the option to be nonviolent. Poor women, non-White women, and women in developing nations have traditionally been forced to engage in physically demanding and aggressive activities for their survival. Truth's (1992) famous words, "Ain't I a Woman?" point out the way that womanhood during slavery was socially constructed such that Black women could never be real women. And, in fact, because Black women never were associated with nonviolence/physical purity, they were able to gain access to the sports world in the 1940s and 50s before White women were given the opportunity. In the first Olympics after World War II, for instance, 9 of 11 women on the U.S. women's track and field team were Black (Carillo & Deford, 1999).

The racially specific nature of the concept of female nonviolent purity is also noticeable in the entertainment industry. The movies *Girlfight* (Kusama, Green, Griffin, & Renzi, 2000) and *Love and Basketball* (Prince-Bythewood, Kitt, & Lee, 2000) feature a Latina boxer and an African American female basketball player, respectively. Each of these characters is an athlete, verbally and physically aggressive, and decidedly nonfeminine, yet the women are still portrayed as sexy and desirable to men (at least some men). Thus, it seems that, for these women, being physically strong, physically challenging men, and refusing to conform to the feminine ideal is acceptable. And in relatively progressive storylines, the women are not even punished for their transgressions; whereas many romance movies allow female characters access to male attention only after they have become sufficiently feminine, these two films do not subject their protagonists (nor their viewers) to such a storyline. These women are desirable from the get go because of their power, not in spite of it.

In contrast, White women are not often shown as nonfeminine yet still desirable. Consider the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Noxon et al., 1997). The protagonist is a young adult named Buffy who was chosen to protect the world from evil. She is stronger than any normal man or woman and most vampires, demons, and so forth, as well. Part of the humor in the show is that Buffy is the stereotypical *girly girl*. Tiny, blonde, and often scantily dressed, Buffy is the last person a demon or even an average person would fear. And although she has serious relationship problems, she has never had a lack of male admirers. On one hand, then, the show sends a positive message of female power in the face of stereotypical thinking. On the other hand, however, Buffy conforms in large part to the feminine body ideal. Her strength is acceptable, but perhaps only because she can be powerful without being masculine. Her body shows no signs of her great

strength; there is no bulk and no muscle. Like female athletes who feel the need to emphasize their femininity, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* seems to participate in the feminine apologetic. Buffy can be portrayed as the strongest person on earth on primetime television but only so long as she looks weak and only so long as her strength is supernatural and thus not something a normal woman can ever attain.

Thus, those who wish to conceive of women as nonviolent/nonaggressive and morally superior ignore the fact that not all women have such a luxury. In addition, because passivity and nonviolence (or more specifically weakness and fragility) is part of the White femininity model, feminists should be extremely skeptical of it.

Other feminist viewpoints on the issue of violent sports and self-defense are similar to those regarding women in the military/combat. Ilene Feinman (2000), discussing feminist support of women in the military, quoted Cynthia Enloe (1993): "First we must argue persuasively that the military is too important a social institution to be allowed to perpetuate sexism for the sake of protecting fragile masculine identities. Second we must argue persuasively that the military is too important" (p. 11). This thinking can also be applied to the issues of women's participation in violent sports and self-defense. Because physical strength is so valued in our culture and because rape is so prevalent and significant in women's oppression, women cannot afford the costs of arguing first and foremost that violence is bad. They must first argue that women are capable of violence and give women the knowledge and practice needed to be violent. Only then can they efficiently argue that violence is bad. D. A. Clarke (1993) pointed out that nonviolence is most effective when practiced by those who have the ability to be violent. A feminist encouragement of women's participation in self-defense and contact sports, then, must emphasize teaching women not only how to be violent but also how to choose not to be violent.

It is also important to point out that what a physical liberation theory would teach women about physicality might not accurately be termed violence. By violence, we often mean an insufficiently justified, intentionally harmful force (which is often oppressive). But, of course, women's self-defense and participation in contact sports do not fit this definition. True self-defense intends to be harmful but is justified in being so. If violence is the term that applies to a man who intends to rape a woman to humiliate and harm her, it seems inappropriate to use the same term to refer to that woman's using enough physical power to fend off the attacker and get to safety. A more appropriate term than *violence* might be *physical power*, which may cause harm but is not unjustified and is not used to oppress a group of people. It is important to recognize the oppression component of violence for two reasons. First, male-on-female rape is oppressive because it creates a class of people who, by virtue of their membership, are frightened and controlled even if they are not individually raped. Second, not all violence takes the form of rape or assault. Rodney (1969) suggested that conditions of poverty and lack of health care is a form of violence, as it is harmful,

purposeful, and, above all, oppressive to certain groups of people, namely poor people and minorities. Even if we do not make a distinction between violence and physical power semantically, we can recognize the difference between oppressive and nonoppressive violence. Rodney claimed with regard to the Black power movement of the 1960s that "violence aimed at the recovery of human dignity and equality cannot be judged by the same yardstick as violence aimed at maintenance of discrimination and oppression" (1969, p. 22).

Another criticism of physical feminism is the potential for co-optation. McCaughey (1997) explained this concern as the worry that activities like athletics, although they might have the potential to liberate women, will be taken over by the capitalist system as a new way of selling products. Such concerns are legitimate. The HBO documentary *Dare to Compete: The Struggle of Women's Sports* (Carillo & Deford, 1999) includes a Nike commercial in which parts of Title IX are read as female athletes (some famous) are shown playing their sport while, of course, wearing Nike clothing. Nike, one presumes, is not so concerned with overcoming women's oppression as they are concerned with fully utilizing the new market of female athletes that Title IX helped create (Castelnuovo & Guthrie, 1998). Yet, although the use of sex equality legislation in selling clothing is certainly unfortunate, such consequences are balanced by the greater good that Title IX has accomplished.

Co-optation is also recognizable in the change in the beauty ideal as women athletes have become more numerous. Jennifer Hargreaves (1994), building on Susan Bordo's (1993) work, pointed out that slender muscularity is the new female body ideal, at least among the White middle class if not across all groups in the United States. Achieving this ideal requires even more discipline than did the earlier ideal of simple thinness. Thinness has been exchanged for "tautness and containment . . . and any form of excess, sagginess or wrinkling—even on a thin body—spoils its line and firm appearance" (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 161). Bordo expressed similar convictions on the subject of female bodybuilding and fitness. She likened the control exerted upon the body by bodybuilders to that exerted by anorexics. Both groups focus on mastering their bodies, as if their bodies were distinct from their selves. Thus, the control of the body through athletics may not free women from body discipline but may entrench them more deeply in it.

Castelnuovo and Guthrie (1998) criticized Bordo's (1993) position as too simplistic. In interviewing a community of female bodybuilders, they found that, although a degree of conforming to a new kind of bodily control was reported, women also reported a sense of resistance that was especially present in the context of shared experiences with other female bodybuilders. Thus, overall, the benefits may outweigh the costs for these female bodybuilders. Although the creation of new body ideals is unfortunate and oppressive, feminists must expect that however one manages one's body, this management will play a part in one's self-image and self-esteem given the Merleau-Pontian framework of body as self. We cannot, nor should we hope

to, disconnect women's esteem and self-worth from their bodies; to do this would be to fall into the trap of dualism. We must instead acknowledge the body's essential connection to self-worth and acknowledge that all bodies are constructed. There can be no choice, individually or collectively, as to *whether* female bodies are constructed, but there can, to some extent, be choice as to *how* they are constructed.

One last potential feminist worry regarding the advocacy of the constructing of women's bodies to be stronger is that this ideal seems to exclude women who suffer from chronic illness or who are not physically able to participate in sports or self-defense activities. Susan Wendell (1996), for instance, pointed out that women with disabilities may feel as disconnected from the feminist body ideal as many feminists feel alienated from the mass media body ideal. She pointed out that we must recognize that the body is just as much a site of pain and frustration as it is a site for feminist liberation. Certainly we should be cautious not to be exclusionary in encouraging physical strength as a bodily ideal for all women; there is nothing inherently good about a strong body. The advocating of increased physical strength for women is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The experiences of chronically ill and differently abled women should remind us of this important point. Even as we encourage women to become stronger, we must also continually work to break down the myth that physical strength makes one somehow more worthy or more important. The point of female physical strength is not to extend male strength-related privilege to women but to end the existence of the privilege altogether.

A FEMINIST THEORY OF PHYSICAL LIBERATION

Given that how the female body is constructed can be, to some extent, chosen, what should the feminist choice be? The first part of this choice, we believe, must be the recognition that the body is indeed a continually constructed entity and that change in the body is change in the mind. Elizabeth Grosz (1994) offered a useful way of thinking about the mind/body relationship: the model of the Mobius strip, an inverted three-dimensional figure eight. The body and the mind are the two surfaces of the strip such that they are continually in relation to one another and "through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another" (Grosz, 1994, p. xii). Moira Gatens (1996) offered another useful view of the body through Spinoza's philosophy, which conceives of the body as a process. For Spinoza, "the mind is constituted by the affirmation of the actual existence of the body, and reason is active and embodied precisely because it is the affirmation of a *particular* bodily existence" (1996, p. 57). Thus, the body and mind are intimately connected in such a way that what affects the body affects the mind and vice versa. A theory/practice of liberatory physical feminism, then, must be equally able to work with both sides of the Mobius strip.

Guthrie and Castelnovo (1994) described their conception of what such a theory/practice might be like. They outlined their idea of a physical education course in which women will come to embody a feminist perspec-

tive. Their course would include the following principles: rejection of dualism, the acceptance of personal bodily experience as the basis of reality, and the rejection of scientific objectivity that disregards subjective bodily experiences. It would incorporate feminist readings, the spoken sharing of body experiences, a written recording of body experiences, and participation in body experiences themselves in sports as well as in body strengthening and self-defense. They pointed out that Merleau-Ponty claimed that such "deeply embodied and interdependent activities can provide the intersubjective experiences that lead to the development of an individual commitment to a political movement" (Guthrie & Castelnovo, 1994, p. 320). Thus, the authors hope that such a physical education course would lead women to undertake a feminist way of being.

The second part of the feminist choice as to how women's bodies are constructed can be completed only after such a feminist way of being is achieved. Achieving this, of course, will in itself construct women's bodies in a certain way; namely, it will make them stronger and more physically able. And it is after this transformation on a mass level that certain other choices can adequately be made. When women en masse have acquired the ability to defend themselves, experience bodily contact sports, and come to fully appreciate their bodies as processes, then they will have to decide how best to continue that process. When women's bodies are as fully capable of violence as are men's bodies, they will have to decide whether and to what extent they shall be violent. If the discourse of femininity is overcome, there will undoubtedly be other discourses ready to take its place, and women fully integrated in their bodies will have to choose, to the extent that they can, whether and to what extent those discourses will construct their bodies and thus their selves. Such options, however, cannot be understood fully (or perhaps understood at all) in the bodily state women currently possess. After all, as our bodies are transformed, so are our minds. Our ways of thinking will certainly change with our bodies; so might our theories and our values. For many feminists who show concern regarding women being taught how to be violent, this uncertainty regarding the future nature of feminist values may be unsettling. Yet, because our bodies, and hence our minds, are processes and constructions, the future of feminist values is uncertain even if feminists do not call for physical liberation. The future values, in this case, will be shaped simply by changes in the current male dominance discourse or by the male dominance discourse that replaces the current one. The difference is that, in teaching women how to use their bodies, even in violent ways, feminists will have at least some say in how the discourse changes.

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