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“Do You Even Lift Bro?”: Exploring the Gender Gap in Gyms

Have you ever walked into a gym and noticed how most benches are occupied by men or how yoga classes are almost all women? Even someone who does not use the gym or have that exact experience will likely picture a yoga teacher as female and a weightlifter as male due to the existing gender stereotypes. The stereotypes surrounding how each gender interacts with their health influences their experiences with the gym and other exercise-related activities.

Despite the continued push for gender equality in all sectors of society, physical health and engagement with weightlifting seems to fall behind the rest of society. In 2020, in the United States 34.8% of men and only 25.8% of women “met the recommendation for muscle-strengthening activities” demonstrating the significant difference in each genders’ engagement (Nuzzo 1). Because weightlifting and resistance training benefits strengthening bones and connective tissue, improving endurance and metabolism, and preventing future injuries, it is important to investigate the causes of these gender-based differences so that in the future, the gym can be universally accessible and provide all people with the health opportunities they deserve.

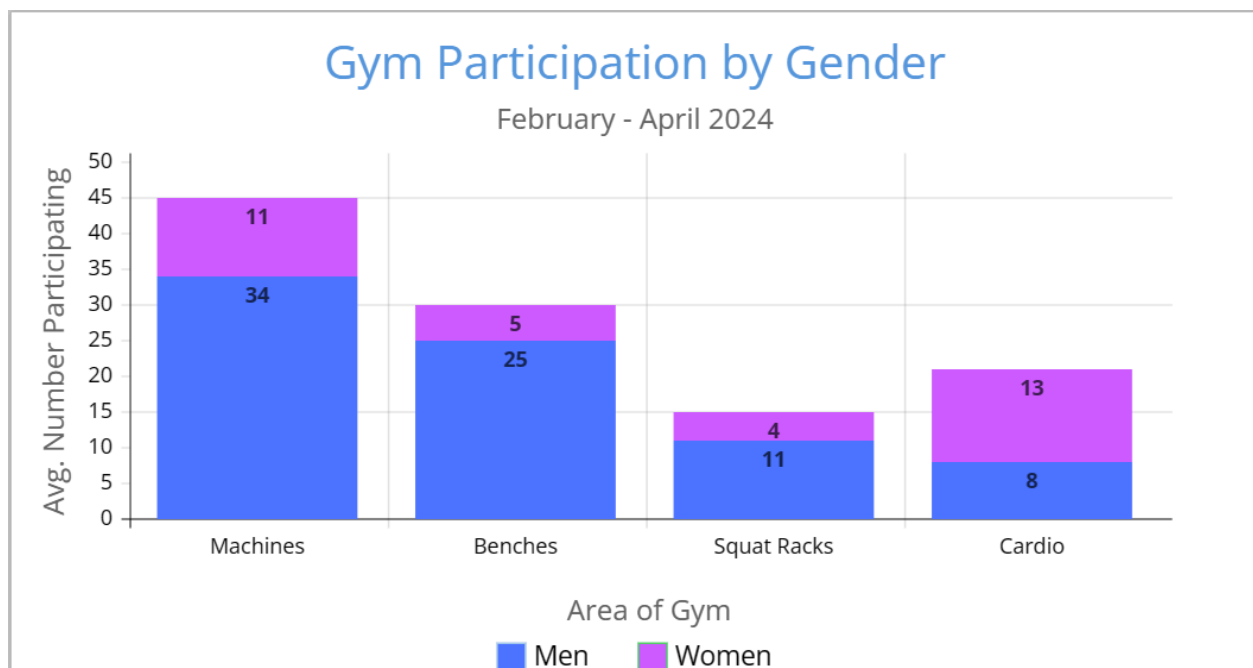
Up until recently in history, weightlifting and the idea of physical strength has been connected to masculinity. From gladiators fighting in the Roman Colosseum to only men being subject to army drafting in the United States to the 1970s bodybuilders like Arnold Schwarzenegger, men have always been tied to strength and logic whereas women are

stereotyped as physically weaker and more emotional. These historical roots grew into the current distinctions between male and female experiences in the modern gym as women have recently started engaging in historically male-centric activities with the rise of female sports and more women entering male-dominated career fields.

Furthermore, society continues to treat women and men in the gym differently due to gender-based stereotypes. Media portrayals perpetuate those stereotypes, with posters and advertisements for activities within the gym typically showing a gendered participant with posters for weightlifting typically showing men. On social media platforms, female fitness influencers are constantly criticized for showing too much/not enough skin or for seeking attention in their comments. Conversely, they are questioned for wearing large/baggy clothes and hiding their body while working out. For example, Katie Fleshood (@fitwith\_kate), a fitness influencer with over 70,000 followers posted a video working out in sweatpants. Some of the comments were things like “it’s nice to see women enjoying working out without sexualizing themselves for attention” while others commented that she “chose to single out other women as sexualizing their routine” and accused her of “tearing down other women”. Regardless of what they wear, negative comments will be made that push women away from the gym due to judgment.

Although the ideal body for women has evolved throughout the ages, it typically represents fertility and softness rather than the hardness and muscularity associated with the ideal male body. These differing body goals can affect how many women versus men engage with the gym and the ways in which they train. Consequently, both historical and societal factors contribute to the gym environment being a gendered space which ultimately blocks access to areas of the gym for both genders due to the prevailing gendered stereotypes.

The historical origins of weightlifting and athletics as a male activity provide a basis for the modern gym as a gendered space. The gym as we know it today, with different spaces for cardio, machines, weightlifting, and private classes, stems from “the weight-lifting gym [which] was a typical male space” (Johansson 34). As a result, the current weight-lifting sections of gyms maintain a vast majority of males because those spaces were originally meant for men and society has habituated those ideas. Over the course of 2 months in 2024, I attended the college gym at Virginia Tech and found that in the area reserved for benches and dumbbells, women only made up about 15.1% of the total participants on average (See Fig. 1). Compared to other areas, the bench room had the starkest difference in male and female participants, likely due to the male origins of weightlifting. This could also indicate that women feel least comfortable using benches whether due to lack of experience with the exercise or feeling judgment in that space. If they chose to use benches, women may feel out of place because society typically relates benches to upper body strength and masculinity.



**Fig. 1** Average number of people in each section of the gym by gender. Data collected in McComas Gym at Virginia Tech on Wednesdays and Sundays at a time between 3 and 7 pm from February 18th to April 7th, 2024.

Women who enter a male-dominated weightlifting space may face psychological challenges such as questioning or judgmental looks, the fear of doing an exercise wrong, or any type of harassment. Another historical example provides a basis for these emotions as “the masculine environment of the 1990s ‘hardcore’ gym could be ‘unsupportive, isolating and discouraging’ for women’s training, making many feel ‘unwelcome’ or ‘intruders’ in male-dominated areas of the gym” (Turnock 4). Despite the considerable changes undergone by society since the 1990s, the feelings of unwelcomeness in weight-lifting spaces still lingers as demonstrated by the small number of women utilizing that space in McComas Gym in 2024.

As a woman who frequently uses the weightlifting space, I also relate to the discouragement of being one of very few women in the space. Because of the minority, I often compare my strength to the men around me which discourages me when lifting lighter weight even if the strength difference is partially based on endocrine and anatomical differences. Without other women in weightlifting areas, it can be difficult to gauge a ‘good’ amount to lift and how quickly to progress. Rather than experiencing the negative associations of being a female in an almost completely male space, many women choose to use other areas of the gym or workout in a safe space like their home which can block access to the health benefits provided by weightlifting.

Physical factors also add challenges for many women who, in a space built for men, may not have the lighter weights that they need, or may have difficulty in reaching certain equipment. As mentioned, the current gym caters many of its programs towards the stereotypical gym attendant, able-bodied men. In many gyms, “gym staff [are] unwilling to cater programmes to

those outside the stereotypical gym user” and there is a distinct “lack of formally-structured weight training classes” (Turnock 2). The lack of beginner-focused training is one of the reasons that discourages people from attending the gym as they may be afraid of using the equipment incorrectly and facing judgment or even risking an injury because of their lack of proper lifting technique. These obstacles may lead women to use other sections of the gym that are more even, like the cardio room, despite the potential benefits of weight training.

In a survey of Virginia Tech students, one woman cited “not knowing how to do stuff at the gym” as her primary reason for not going. On the other hand, the most cited reason by male respondents related to the McComas gym having “long lines” or being “too crowded.” The men placed blame on the external factor of the gym environment for their not going while women placed the blame on their own lacking knowledge. Because of the stereotype of the gym as a male space, more boys are exposed to and expected to have an interest in weight training from a younger age. Without the normalized, regular exposure to weightlifting, young girls are less likely to feel comfortable using the gym in their adult life, thus blocking one method of achieving the muscle-strengthening recommendations.

The historical context of male weightlifting both stems from and gives root to the stereotypes surrounding each gender, which still affects gym interaction in our current 21st century society. The idea of masculinity being associated with strength and “‘the strong man’ is an old concept” that has molded our society for many generations (Johansson 41). Although an ancient idea, the association between men and strength still exists in everyday life. To illustrate its continued relevance, in elementary school, I remember teachers asking for a “strong boy” to help them stack the chairs in the classroom. If I raised my hand to volunteer as a girl of roughly 10 years old, I’d receive looks of skepticism or be ignored. The teachers seeking someone of the

male gender for an activity involving physical strength at a young age maintains the stereotype that women aren't as strong as men. Personal history like growing older exposed to this strength stereotype, to an extent, causes women to internalize that they don't belong in a space centered around physical strength. When women with similar experiences where their physical strength is discredited in favor of a boy's strength enter a strength-based environment they will initially feel they don't belong due to the ingrained stereotype that women aren't strong or at least not as strong as men.

As a whole, history creates the basis of the gym as a masculine space. The origins of the gym from male weightlifting gyms lessens the likelihood of women using weight-lifting sections of a gym now. The historical lack of beginner-friendly lifting programs makes it difficult for anyone, but especially women, to access weightlifting without previous experience. The aging of history and combination of personal histories feeds into how our current society regards each gender. Some of the main ways in which society impacts the relationship between gym and gender are gender-based stereotypes, the differing idealization of bodies, and how advertisements, media, and magazines perpetuate the stereotypes.

First of all, society stereotypes men as the stronger gender, with an inherent tie between physical strength and masculinity existing for many. In a study conducted by author Stephanie Coen, one subject, a 58 year old man, noted that "we like to be able to pick up heavy objects, you know. It's kinda a manly thing I suppose" (31). He connects his physical strength and ability to his masculinity, as justification for heavy weightlifting. Because of society's binary associations with male and female being viewed as opposites, masculinity's connection to physical strength prevents the same association between femininity and physical strength. As a result, women seeking physical strength may feel out of place because society connects that trait with the

opposite gender. The discomfort of pushing past society's stereotypes can stop some women from pursuing heavy weightlifting at all.

Those who do surpass the initial discomfort still face continuous challenges when comparing their exercises to other men. In another study, one female subject mentions that when she lifts far less than the surrounding men, "they sort of look and ... make [her] feel like a little bit of a giggle. It might not be anything towards [her], but it feels like they are laughing at [her] because [she's] not lifting a heavy weight" (Clark 13). Although she overcomes the initial barrier of entering the male-dominated weightlifting space, the respondent feels continuously perceived as weaker and less serious about her lifting. As a result, she will inherently believe she is weaker and lift less due to a self-fulfilling prophecy which continues the repetition of the stereotype of women as weaker. The perceived abnormality of a woman in the male-majority space draws additional attention which adds pressure on her to perform to a certain standard.

Furthermore, another gender-based stereotype that applies itself to the gym setting is the tie between masculinity and dominance. In the gym, this stereotype presents itself in several ways, specifically in the amount of space taken up by each gender. In Coen's study, women often reported how "men consumed more space than women materially in terms of the exercises performed (bigger exercises with bigger weights) and sonically in terms of exerting sounds of effort or noises from the weights themselves" (33). In this sense, women are expected to give up some of their space, both physical and mental, to the men as they are considered outsiders in a weightlifting gym in addition to the stereotype of women as polite and submissive. Consider how normalized it is for men to grunt and drop weights onto the floor compared to how rarely women match with the same audible volume. From my observations in McComas at Virginia Tech, most women keep to themselves, generally wearing headphones and going through their workout as

efficiently as possible. Rather than addressing any disruptions caused by the loud grunting, most women choose to tune it out with music, which successfully blocks the noise but places responsibility on women for adjusting to the disruptive environment created by men.

To further exemplify the stereotypes I've mentioned, men in McComas have taken weights from the rack I am actively using without permission. Over the course of two months where I noted my on-site experiences, this occurred on four separate occasions. Removing the weights without asking gives rise to two possible assumptions. The first assumption is that they, as men, have greater right to use it, expressing their perceived dominance over the space as well as the idea of the gym, especially the weightlifting section, as a male gendered space. A second possible assumption is that I, as a woman, would not need to use the weight, which correlates to the first stereotype of men as stronger. In either circumstance, after my weights were removed I felt a mixture of anger and annoyance, but nonetheless continued my workout because addressing the transgression would bring more attention to me and contribute to my discomfort in the space.

In the same way that stereotypes impact how others view each gender in the gym, society's ideal body can impact how an individual views themselves, and thus how they interact with the gym. To achieve these ideal bodies, men and women will interact with the gym in different ways, whether or not they acknowledge wanting to develop their body as motivation for attendance. The differing ideal bodies thus contribute to the gendering of the gym by filtering more men into weightlifting sections and more women into cardio sections.

Our society's ideal male body is muscular, tall and relates to the theme of appearing strong. Conversely, the ideal female body typically represents fertility in some way despite evolving more over time compared to the male's. Currently, the ideal female body is an hourglass



figure, exemplified by the Kardashians. The gym allows one to work and improve their body and many seek the gym with the motivation of changing their body to achieve a certain look, closer to what society considers ideal. Following this logic, “motivations for gym attendance have been tied to weight loss for women and enhancing muscularity for men” which contributes to “cardiovascular exercise and weight training [being] type casted as feminine and masculine” (Coen 30). Several women thus use the gym in a way that they believe will help them to slim down and more closely reflect the female ideal body. On the other hand, men focus on weight training to build muscle and more closely reflect the male ideal body. By associating different regions of the gym with each gender, the opposite gender may experience a barrier when entering those regions. For example, many girls are discouraged from weightlifting because they shouldn’t look too masculine in the eyes of society or limit upper body workouts because having large shoulders is a typically masculine trait. However, both genders experience barriers due to their gender ideals. According to Coen, “even when men and women distanced themselves to varying degrees from the influence of dominant masculine and feminine ideals, many were nonetheless affected by them in determining their exercise practices” (31). Despite not actively considering the ideal body of their identified gender, the way they interacted with the gym altered due to subconscious gendered ideas, both in what exercises were performed and how they were performed. Powerlifting with a low number of heavy reps is more commonly associated with men while circuit training, completing multiple rounds of different exercises, is more associated with women. By overcoming the gendering of these exercises, both genders achieve a more balanced and complete workout.

Ideal bodies clearly affect how each gender interacts with the gym. Social media, advertisements, and magazines all contribute to the development and consistency of the ideal

body because certain types of bodies receive praise while other types of bodies receive criticism or are encouraged to change. Gym or fitness focused advertisements more specifically influence how each gender interacts with the gym by perpetuating stereotypes and creating an ideal.

Media related to the gym portray each gender differently which promotes gender stereotypes in the gym. For example, Johansson notes the high “number of international magazines devoted entirely to the art of bodybuilding... concerned with masculinity” such as “*Ironman, Muscles, Bodypower, Bodybuilding, Musclemag*” (41). *Ironman*, started in 1936, includes the word man in the name, specifying its target audience. By directing these magazines at men, they further the stereotype that bodybuilding is a male activity. Women who engage in bodybuilding feel barriers entering the field and are more closely judged, proven by how Johansson’s interviewees “had negative attitudes towards” female bodybuilders (41). To the contrary, literature concerning women’s fitness included “women who have developed a certain amount of muscles, showing their bodies in minimal swimming suits” (Johansson 41). By displaying a nearly bare muscled body on magazines, the magazines both contribute to a muscled body as ideal and sexualize the muscled woman’s body. Although muscularity as an ideal serves to motivate women to work out, the association of fitness with sexuality oppositely objectifies them. Their motivation to exercise and improve their physicality then roots in a pursuit of beauty rather than a pursuit of strength. This motivation, promoted by magazines, contrasts with men’s motivation which usually relates directly to their strength.

How companies advertise clothing can affect our impressions and actions just as much as how they advertise exercise itself. Commercials and images can be inherently sexual due to the intentional use of music, lighting, and cropping to highlight specific body parts. Following, “gymwear and fitness content being advertised in an explicitly sexual manner...propagated the

impressions that women in gym spaces were seeking male attention, even when they did not wish to” (Turnock 6). By furthering the association between the gym and sexuality, these advertisements inherently sexualize the female gym goer. Despite the benefits of athletic clothing, such as being lightweight, breathable, and comfortable, a woman wearing biker shorts or leggings, in the gym may instead be viewed as wanting to show off her figure due to the sexual undertone of the clothing’s advertisement. These associations make clothing a significant factor and potential barrier in attending the gym as a woman, as we need to find a balance between our own comfort and others’ impressions.

Overall, historical and social factors both play a major role in how different genders interact with a gym environment. The gendering of the gyms encourages and discourages each group in certain ways and may block access altogether to certain individuals. Historical factors like the gym and weightlifting stemming from a male only space, leaves social residue that prevents women from feeling welcome, especially in the weightlifting spaces of gyms. Social factors like stereotypes and ideal bodies typically tie masculinity with strength and femininity with nurturing, making the gym as a strength-based facility more open to men. Media surrounding the gym perpetuates the ideal muscular body for each gender and can potentially sexualize women in the gym.

In order to open access to all genders within the gym, there are several potential solutions that may alleviate the harsh gendered areas in the gym and lower the rates of sexual harassment. All-women gyms separate each gender so that women can feel more comfortable, however this solution doesn’t address the root of gender stereotypes and instead just eliminates men. Both genders experience barriers in how they exercise due to gender stereotypes, not just women. Another potential solution would be to intermingle the different sectors of the gym, for example

adding cardio machines in between benches. This would encourage more interaction between genders and keep certain areas from being vastly occupied by one gender. As a whole, we need to alter our mindsets and continually push back against polar gender stereotypes to improve access to the gym for all.

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