Empowerment and Sport Feminism: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

The idea that sport and physical activity empower women is common, perpetuated by sources as diverse as the popular media and feminist scholars. But not only is empowerment a notoriously under-theorised concept, it is especially problematic when applied to physical activity. While sport may appear to endow power (by helping women increase their confidence and self-esteem), organised physical activity could equally be said to disempower (it can make women feel inadequate, or convince them that their bodies are flawed and in need of re-working). Similarly, whatever empowering properties sport may nurture, these typically celebrate masculinities, tend to devalue other kinds of physical prowess and legitimise aggression. The data in this article includes a typology that classifies 38 recently published examples of sport feminist literature in the context of empowerment. The relationship between sport and empowerment is analysed and evaluated in detail. Articles are classified into one of four broad categories, based on firstly, the author's perspective on sport, and secondly, whether they recognise any contradictions in their position, and how they subsequently deal with these contradictions. For example, some scholars identify social contradictions - physical activity simultaneously means empowering experiences and conforming to social expectations - but they do not provide an adequate discussion of the issues. Careful analysis reveals that the literature does not adequately address these contradictions; it can only be concluded that it is not known if, how, why, or under what conditions, physical activity empowers women.

It appears so obvious, natural and simple. Organised sport and fitness activities make women feel great about themselves and their bodies; they liberate women, give them autonomy and empower them. But what, precisely, is the mechanism of this process or phenomenon? Is it real? Or is it an illusion? Is it universal, or does it depend on the individual woman, or the sport? The assertion that sport empowers women is reinforced by both the popular media and respected scholars.

The media often construe fitness pursuits as empowering. Women's fitness magazines, according to Tina Eskes and her colleagues, describe 'aerobics, weight-lifting and healthy eating habits... as ways of exercising command, control, and mastery over one's body, and consequently, one's life'. Advertisements often make bold assertions such as: 'You don't just shape your body. You shape your life'. Large corporations such as Nike also perpetuate myths that exercise and dieting empower women.

Some feminist scholars recognise the contradictions and set out to explore them. Frequently, however, empowerment is inserted into discussions of women and sport with little explanation or consideration of the counter-arguments. For example, can one conclude that a woman is empowered because she says that physical activity makes her 'feel better about herself'?
It is clear that there are problems with the common equation of sport with empowerment. Indeed, the concept of empowerment is problematic. This article is a critical analysis of the notion that sport empowers women. It is based on an analysis and evaluation of the literature that deals with women, sport and empowerment. I develop a typology of the articles and classify them into one of four categories: Social and Individual Benefits, Sport and the Social System, Sites of Resistance or Potential Empowerment. These categories are based on, firstly, the article's perspective on sport and, secondly, whether the author(s) recognises any contradictions in their position and how they subsequently deal with those contradictions.

While the literature analysed here is by no means comprehensive, it is a representative sample of 38 articles. The four categories encompass the major ideas and themes in the literature, and while not every article that deals with women, sport and empowerment was consulted, scholars still need to address the points raised. The collection of articles was built through database searches and the snowballing effect of consulting bibliographies. The original search on the Sport Discus database used the keywords of empowerment, women, sport, leisure, physical activity and personal benefits. Searches on the database Expanded Academic were also helpful.

There are several limitations of this study. Firstly, my discussion of 'women' implies an homogenous group. Using the category 'woman' for research and theorising purposes, according to Rosemary Deem and Sarah Gilroy, has been questioned by feminist theorists who regard it as an essentialist category and see the concept of gender identity as supporting particular heterosexual stereotypes. The importance of recognising diversity is clearly significant. In this article, the women to whom I refer are overwhelmingly young, Western, white, middle-class and heterosexual.

Secondly, research of this type treads a fine line between conceptualising physical activity as exclusively oppressive for women and celebrating female agency as the capacity of women to resist contemporary images of the ideal female body. In mediating these two positions, I agree with Eskes and her colleagues, who acknowledge that participation in beauty and fitness regimes can be a way to resist conventional norms of gender. By working out, women may feel physically stronger even though they are working out to lose weight. Yet, given that women face enormous pressures daily to appear a certain way, we maintain that focusing on the oppressive nature of beauty practices is still important. The typology and critical analysis of the literature focuses mainly on those discourses, images and ideals that undermine sport and physical activity's potential to empower women.

The following section looks more closely at the concepts of empowerment and power with relation to women, asks what empowerment through sport means, and identifies a number of contradictions that arise when it is asserted that sport empowers. The second section includes the typology and analysis of the literature, and is presented in the four categories of Social and Individual Benefits, Sport and the Social System, Sites of Resistance and Potential Empowerment. Finally, I make some suggestions.
for future research. It becomes apparent that physical activity is neither exclusively empowering nor disempowering, and that framing the outcomes of physical activity in such a dichotomous manner perpetuates the problems that appear when it is asserted that sport empowers.

**Women and Power**

What is empowerment? Jennifer Hargreaves believes that empowerment is a process by which people gain power over their lives, that is, empowerment enables women to do things for themselves in their own interests rather than at the command of others for their benefit. Thus, empowerment also involves the ability to resist pressures to conform to gender-stereotyped notions concerning presentation and behaviour. It also enables women to be more socially assertive. As such, becoming empowered enables women to become more pro-active in terms of what they do with their lives; they become active agents. This could include overcoming the oppressive constraints on women of femininity and cultural normalisation, that is, overcoming 'power-over'. This type of empowerment is often thought of in terms of physicality. David Whitson sees ‘the confident sense of self that comes from being skilled in the use of one's body’ as a form of empowerment.

The concept of empowerment has an obvious association with the essentially-contested concept of power. First, to say that a woman is empowered implies that she has power over her life. To empower' is often defined in terms of 'to enable' or 'to authorise', that is, to seize or to give power. Second, notions of empowerment imply personal power- the ability to influence or control others based on individual characteristics such as physical strength or the ability to argue persuasively. These definitions imply agency and personal power and are tantamount to a woman having 'power-to' in her life. 'Power-to' implies autonomy, capability and potential of an individual. Feminists generally approach power from a 'power-to' perspective. Yet, 'power-to' approaches generally stand at odds with 'power-over,' a more traditional approach to power, that invokes connotations of control, authority and domination.

Approaches to empowerment in the context of 'power-to' stress the benefits of physical activity, which allegedly offer women the ability to resist contemporary pressures to conform to the ideal female body. Empowerment approached from a 'power-over' perspective, however, stresses the power of culture to normalise the likes of body shape, size and youthfulness; these concepts and their associated images coerce many women to conceptualise physical activity and dieting as rituals of obedience.

Power and empowerment are major themes in interviews with women who discuss their experiences of physical activity. Power has traditionally been conceptualised in terms of domination, authority, exploitation and masculinity, that is, 'power-over.' Many feminists recognise that for women, however, power may have more to do with changes in personal identity: being in control, taking pride in their physical achievements, and having a body that can respond to challenges, is capable and able. Such power often
includes physical strength 'as a source of confidence and personal security - the opposite to the vulnerability of patriarchal femininity'. This alternative approach refers more to 'power-to'. Traditional political theorists have focused exclusively on the former conceptualisation of power, ignoring the latter. Feminists highlight some of the problems with these theories: 'it is the male body, and its historically and culturally determined powers and capacities that is taken as the norm or the standard of the individual'.

In contrast to 'power-over', 'power-to' 'refers to ability and capacity, and connotates a kind of freedom'. Feminism emphasises the importance of women (and men) discovering their own 'power-to' in the world. Sport may foster 'power-to' by helping individuals to take control of their lives and bodies. 'Power-to' approaches 'view power as something based not on hierarchy or dominance and subordination but on the capacity to do things, to achieve goals, especially in collaboration with others'.

While it may be encouraging to see power in terms of the capacity to do things and achieve goals, that is, in terms of 'power-to', it should be noted that women do not always have all the freedom to recognise their 'power-to', because it can be undermined by 'power-over'. Women who participate in aerobics classes, for example, may find personal power in building strength and fitness. These positive aspects, though, may be undermined by contradictory messages, such as 'get fit in order to look seductive', rather than 'get fit so that you enjoy life'. Thus, instead of women experiencing their activity as 'power-to', they may feel deficient and inadequate because they are never slim, toned or sexy enough.

What type of empowerment does sport offer women? This discussion suggests that empowerment through sport and physical activity is likely to be a form that impacts on women's bodies and identities, as opposed to that which improves women's position in society by improving their economic position or transforming oppressive working conditions or relationships.

A number of contradictions and paradoxes arise when it is asserted that sport and physical activity empower women. These contradictions are not just involved with the discourses and practices surrounding sport and physical activity, they are also inherent in discourses surrounding the female body. My exploration of the contradictions of physical activity and empowerment illustrates that these are elements of (anonymous) attempts to control the female body. This discussion of the aspects of 'power-over' that undermine women's empowerment is an attempt to provide a framework from which to categorise and evaluate the literature dealing with sport and empowerment.

Three contradictions are particularly prevalent in discussions of women, sport, physical activity and empowerment. First, women may enjoy sport or physical activity because it makes them feel strong and fit, but their worked-on bodies may signify images that are far from powerful. Second, beauty and femininity discourses influence the promotion of women's physical activity. Women's fitness classes, for example, are often promoted as weight loss methods or ways to improve one's looks. Can women celebrate the pure joy of physical movement under such conditions? Third, invisible disciplinary
forces make it appear as though women are self-determining agents, but in fact, this is often little more than an illusion of empowerment. Let us examine these contradictions in more detail.

Women often think that if their bodies are 'beautiful', and if they are disciplined and strong enough to refuse food and to exercise, then they are empowered. The paradox is what some women regard as power. For example, being slender and looking good', which suggests control of the body, simultaneously signifies fragility, defenselessness and lack of power. Nevertheless, many women continue to invest, or waste, huge amounts of time and energy in the futile pursuit of this bodily ideal. This is unhelpful for two reasons. First, they could better use this energy to fight political struggles, advance their careers, improve their spiritual well being and generally enjoy life. Secondly, in the process of dieting, women make themselves smaller and hence take up less physical space in contrast to men. Men's size embodies power, force and authority. This sits in sharp contrast to the physically small body of a woman, and its connotations of fragility, physical weakness, lack of strength and need of protection. This is a no-win situation, because women who are larger than is socially acceptable are ridiculed, ostracised and made to feel inadequate and imperfect.

The media is partly responsible for sending contradictory messages to women about their bodies. Women's magazines, in a sense, imprison women in the pursuit of the stereotypically feminine, heterosexual body. Such magazines tell women that losing weight, dieting or exercising will transform and improve their lives, implying that women who look great will automatically feel great too. Heather Locklear, in an advertisement for the Bally Matrix Fitness Centre, may tell women that if 'you exercise [and] you diet . . . you can do anything you want', but life is rarely this simple. A beautiful or sexy body may win women 'attention and some admiration, but little real respect and rarely any social power'. Sandra Bartky also wonders how, precisely, a slim beautiful woman can be expected to embody power when our society has for centuries 'displayed profound suspicion' toward sexualised bodies.

No woman can escape the constant barrage of messages that alert her to her flawed body. In fact, it is not just the woman's body that is flawed but every individual part. Her buttocks are too round, her thighs have cellulite, and her stomach is 'flabby'. Fitness centres focus on specific parts of the body, such as 'Butts, Abs and Thighs' classes. Such advertising damages women because they come to see their bodies as sites of problems. Additionally, this makes it difficult for women to find pleasure in activity.

The above points highlight the complex and uncertain nature of empowerment. Cultural images and imperatives convince women that to have the ideal female body is to be empowered. The pursuit or development of the ideal female body through exercising or dieting, however, does not necessarily engender empowerment; rather, it can distract women and ensure that they focus on their supposed flaws.

Another contradiction is that activities that mainly attract women, such as aerobics, are often promoted for beauty rather than health. This rarely
happens with men's sport. Although it cannot be known which exercise
women perform for the sake of physical fitness and which in obedience to the
requirements of femininity, and women themselves probably do not know, the
beauty discourse means that women tend to focus critical attention on
their bodies. Many girls fear the growth and maturation of their bodies. Such
negative foci perpetuate the message that women's bodies are the source of
their social, emotional and intellectual inferiority.

Patricia Vertinsky asks how girls and women can celebrate the joy of
physical movement when they are surrounded by media images of slender
toned models and when women's bodies 'are underwritten by a normalising
structure which fears and denigrates fat'. This is more evidence of attempts
to control and discipline the 'unruly' female body. Although it is true that
aerobics and other such activities are for many women enjoyable sociable
activities that help boost their energy and provide opportunities for self-care,
they nonetheless embody 'the complex use of power over women's bodies in
a sophisticated consumer society'. The beauty discourse is framed in terms
of 'power-to' and empowerment, but really, it is another example of 'power-
over', which offers women, at best, an illusion of empowerment.

Women who have slender, socially approved bodies and are aware of
these contradictions may feel frustrated. They may enjoy sport or physical
activity because it makes them feel strong and fit, but their worked-on figures
may maintain certain feminine images that they consider negative. Marion
Langston feels that the positive aspects of her exercise are lost to the political
discourses of femininity and health. She agrees with Susan Bordo that the
empowerment potential of sport and physical activity may be undermined
because women often define their bodies as deficient and in need of
improvement. Both authors expand upon Foucault's notion of 'docile bodies'
in developing the idea that women's minds and bodies are disciplined and
directed toward self-consciousness and self-improvement. Thus, going for a
run or to an aerobics class may appear an empowering experience in the
context of reclaiming the female body, but it simultaneously supports and
maintains the disciplinary power practices that govern our society.

It is no longer even enough to be slender, because 'areas that are soft,
loose or "wiggly" are unacceptable, even on extremely thin bodies'. This
stems from notions of control of the female body - the ideal female body is
'absolutely tight, contained, "bolted down", firm: in other words, a body that is
protected against eruption from within, whose internal processes are under
control'. Bordo connects desire for slenderness to perceptions of the inner
state of the self. The size and shape of the body indicates personal, internal
order, as a 'symbol for the emotional, moral, or spiritual state of the
individual'. Images of unwanted bulges and erupting stomachs that
bombard us through the media are metaphors, Bordo believes, for anxiety
about internal processes out of control.

This discussion of control relates to empowerment. It has been seen
that empowerment for women is conceptualised in terms of self-
determination, agency, and control over their lives, bodies and destiny.
Discourses of exercise and diet are also about control of the body, but this is not empowerment, because as Bartky points out, there is no evidence of self-determination: every woman is required to be feminine. While a host of discourses and images suggest that women voluntarily or naturally choose to pursue femininity, its pursuit is in fact a form of disciplinary power. This disciplinary power is not a formal authority, but is an aspect ‘of a far larger discipline, an oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination’. This is another example of the ‘power-over’ that undermines real empowerment.

This consideration of the contradictions that arise in discussions of empowerment and sport illustrates some of the aspects of ‘power-over’ that operate to undermine women’s ‘power-to’ and empowerment. The discourses surrounding activity and the female body are loaded with paradoxes and contradictions, and are intimately linked with relations of power and control over women’s bodies. Rather than physical activity being simply and unproblematically empowering for women, whatever the potential for empowerment, it exists within the constraints of contemporary society. Although some women may experience their physical activity as empowerment, many do not. Some women can change their bodies to resemble the ideal female body more closely, but for many, this is a never-ending, futile and negative experience.

Increased athleticism has undoubtedly helped increase freedom and equality for some women as well as giving them a greater sense of control over their own bodies. Yet, it would be inaccurate to conclude that the movement of women into elite sport has had a revolutionary effect in terms of challenging conventional stereotypes of femininity. So how does the literature deal with these issues? This question is addressed in the section that classifies the literature on women, sport, physical activity and empowerment. To summarise, empowerment is a problematic concept. The discourses surrounding activity and the female body are paradoxical and are intimately linked to relations of power and control over women’s bodies.

**Empowerment and Sport: A Typology**

This section is based on an analysis of 38 articles classified into one of four categories: *Social and Individual Benefits*, *Sport and the Social System*, *Sites of Resistance* or *Potential Empowerment*. These categories are based on, firstly, the article’s perspective on sport and, secondly, whether the author recognises any contradictions in their position and how they subsequently deal with those contradictions. Articles in the first category, *Social and Individual Benefits*, conceptualise physical activity unproblematically; physical activity brings social and personal benefits: social interaction, excitement, a sense of control over one’s life, body and strength. These articles are categoric: they do not recognise any issues that may contradict their claims. Articles in the second category, *Sport and the Social System*, stress that sport is subordinate to everyday life. Sport may empower some individual women but ultimately women are still subject to societal and cultural forces.
These articles identify social contradictions, where physical activity simultaneously means empowering experiences and conforming to social expectations, but they do not explore this situation in sufficient depth. The third category, *Sites of Resistance*, contains articles that conceptualise sport and leisure as sites of female resistance to male domination. The authors of these articles suggest that this resistance may be empowering and that sport may contribute to a feminist reconceptualisation of power. Most articles in this category note some contradictions or confounding factors to empowerment, but they do not analyse these in any depth. The final category, *Potential Empowerment* contains articles that conceptualise sport as a potential site of empowerment, but whether this potentiality is reached depends on the transformation of sport. These articles stress that the current structure of sport privileges males. Some of these articles suggest that alternative activities such as wilderness sports offer opportunities for empowerment, but they do not consider the contradictions that may be present in such sports.

It should be noted that the following discussion of each category is an attempt to capture the overall theme of the category. It is not a claim that all the points made refer to each individual article, as the scholars in each category reach similar but not identical conclusions. Table 1 provides an overview of each of the four categories, which are discussed in turn below.

**TABLE 1: Categories of Sport Feminist Literature**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Perspective on physical activity and sport</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sport confers social and individual benefits</td>
<td>Physical activity is important, valuable and largely unproblematic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport depends on the broader social system</td>
<td>Sport gives women a chance to experience completeness and competence; can give women a chance to re-evaluate norms for the female body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport is a site of resistance</td>
<td>Physical activity is an opportunity for women to experience their bodies as strong and powerful, and free from male domination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport offers potential opportunities for empowerment</td>
<td>Sport and exercise can be empowering, but only under certain conditions. Women must embrace alternative values and sports</td>
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</table>

Some authors appear in more than one category. Betsy Wearing for example, appears in category one, *Social and Individual Benefits*, and in category three, *Sites of Resistance*. Shona Thompson also appears more than once, once in category three, *Sites of Resistance*, and twice in category four, *Potential Empowerment*. How might this situation be explained and/or reconciled? Firstly, despite their differences, some common threads run through the four categories. Each category attempts to show that physical activity and sport benefits women, and frames these benefits in terms of control, personal power, confidence and competence. Each category takes a slightly different angle on the potential of physical activity to empower women and sets out to explore or outline this potential. Secondly, the dates of
publication for the articles vary by as much as ten years and it is not unreasonable to expect that an author's views would change over time. Lastly, differences may be accounted for by the fact that the authors wrote their articles for different audiences.

**Social and Individual Benefits**

Articles in this group generally support sport and physical activity. Although some authors may note contradictions, they imply that physical activity is largely unproblematic. Sport is regarded as an important institution that confers such benefits as social interaction, excitement, strength and a sense of control over one's life and body. Two articles on the impact and benefits of physical activity for girls and women encapsulate this category. Linda Neilson maintains that physical activity produces biological and academic advantages in terms of improved grades at school. She says that physical exercise can increase self-confidence and improve self-esteem, and that 'a female's feelings about her body undeniably affect her mental confidence and moods'. Furthermore, 'athletics can enhance a female's feelings of personal power and control over her life. . . sports can help females feel more personally responsible and powerful in non-athletic situations'. Echoing these sentiments, Eva-Carin Lindgren assumes that participation in sport or regular physical activity leads to better health and well-being. She suggests that 'physical fitness can build body image, self-confidence and self-esteem'.

Neither Neilson nor Lindgren nor other authors in Social and Individual Benefits interrogate their evidence or consider counter-evidence. Statements such as 'you feel better after physical activity' appear as facts. While noting that many women are concerned about their bodies, Lindgren does not consider how physical activity may confirm or rebuke these feelings.

**A Leisure of One's Own,** by Karla Henderson and her colleagues, captures the political logic inherent in this category. Discussing sports and fitness, the authors believe that sports and fitness activities liberate women because they defy the cultural stereotype of women as passive and weak. Thus, they conclude that 'the value of fitness and sport for all people must be continually emphasised'. Furthermore, outdoor recreation can often help women find a new feeling of groundedness as they perceive new strengths and stability. They often find they have more physical and inner strength than they thought. The new skills from the outdoors can provide women with opportunities for personal challenge and increased self-confidence.

Other articles reinforce Henderson's sentiments. In an article celebrating the increasing numbers of women taking up rugby, Lisa Sabbage proposes that physically active women threaten society's power structures. Unfortunately she does not reflect on the imperatives of femininity that all women, rugby players or not, are subject to and judged.

Statements such as 'an understanding of women's leisure can help in understanding choices and oppression in other areas of women's lives', 'as women gain strength and confidence in the outdoors, they are able to experience strength and confidence in other areas of their lives', and
leisure involvement for women may be a means of liberation from restrictive
gender roles and, thus, a means for empowerment, may be partially correct
for some women, in some contexts. If a woman chooses to join a soccer team
to broaden her social horizons and then starts weight training with the team,
she may 'see sport as a means of achieving confidence, relaxation,
enjoyment and a powerful body'. But these positive constructs rely on other
factors such as support from significant others and the availability of
resources to pursue the activities.

Nonetheless, the contentions above have little legitimacy, because the
authors neglect to examine the counter-evidence, that is, that physical activity
is equally disempowering. These articles encapsulate the idea that leisure
experience can be self-enabling, raising the self-esteem of women and so it
may give the individual woman some power, but as discussed, this is not
necessarily the case. Physical activity may in fact cause feelings of
worthlessness and unhappiness if women engage in active pursuits purely for
beauty benefits. If, as Henderson suggests, the experience of leisure is one
of the life spaces in which people develop self-definitions, then it is surely
possible that this identity may not be positive if physical activity experiences,
as a part of leisure, are negative.

Sport and the Social System
The essence of the category Sport and the Social System is that sport may
offer women empowering personal experiences, but these experiences are
still part of a larger culture and society which values and endorses
heterosexual beauty. That is, regardless of different and fluid identities, many
women continue to be affected by the social and economic structures of the
societies in which they live. The broad theme running through these articles
is that sport can be empowering, but that some contradictions are present.
With respect to empowerment, sport can give women a chance to experience
‘completeness and competence’, offers ways to avoid conventional female
framing, and can allow women to re-evaluate their own norms for the female
body. While identifying some paradoxes, the articles nonetheless remain
limited because the authors rarely examine possible resolutions. Rather,
Sport and the Social System expresses a frustration with the current socio-
political situation that affects women. Capturing this frustration, Langston
writes that ‘what in essence appears to be a very empowering experience
with a feminist ideal of reclaiming my body, is also propping up the
disciplinary power practices that govern our society’. Similarly, Martha Bell
notes that physically active women have ‘experiences of resistance to norms
of passivity and dependence, but also the confusion of finding oneself
colluding in the construction of a socially acceptable identity’. While
acknowledging that ‘women’s physicality and participation in sport offer the
space for potentially oppositional or transgressive practices and a site for
progressive body politics because they challenge the passivity inscribed on
‘women’s bodies’. Cheryl Cole stresses that this is in the context of
discourses of the body and exercise that manage gender relations. Here Cole
concerns with Bordo and Bartky: the female body is docile, malleable and impressionable, and is subject to rituals that produce ‘a normalised self-presentation and feminine identity’. These three scholars emphasise the ‘power-over’ that undermines potential empowerment.

Notwithstanding that they occasionally express dissatisfaction with the contradictions that women face, more often the authors in Sport and the Social System ignore them, devoting most space to exploring the liberatory possibilities of sport. The potential of physical activity to help women reconnect with their being and bodies is a recurring theme. For example, ‘women’s attempts to be active . . . reflect their attempts to renegotiate and reframe their perceptions of self’. S. Copland Arnold discusses the potential of wilderness experiences to help women reconnect with their physical bodies. She says that a wilderness experience can enable women to ‘re-evaluate and reformulate their own norms for the female body’. Women have the potential to gain control over their lives through physical experiences, according to Gilroy, ‘which leads [them] to becoming more aware of the potentialities of [their] bodies’. Arnold agrees with Karla Henderson and Deborah Bialeschki’s simplistic statement that ‘as women gain strength and confidence in the outdoors, they are able to experience strength and confidence in other areas of their lives’. Arnold attempts to qualify this statement: ‘exercise alone probably does not improve body image’, rather ‘positive changes in body image are more likely to occur when the exercise improves fitness or skill level’, and when exercise ‘is initiated from a desire to honour and develop the body rather than in a quest for the cultural ideal’. Other authors find little evidence of women readily converting this physical power to social power. Wilderness sports can contribute to women’s feelings of empowerment, says Bell, although to her credit she notes that ‘contradictory experiences of gendered body culture’ could mean a woman instructor who ‘discover[s] pleasure in feeling strong’ also ‘feels frustrated or anxious about her lack of relative strength’.

Another article looks at the ways that activity empowers ‘exceptional’ or special women, who were mostly feminist and lesbian, through physical strength, achieving personal challenges and so on. The fact that bodily concerns were still present seems to warrant a more substantial discussion about the barriers to empowerment that exist even for this vanguard of supposedly special women.

Some of the authors in this group recognise that sport can disempower. Gilroy says we must look at the experiences of a woman within specific exercise or sporting contexts. An aerobics instructor who focuses on ‘problem areas’ or tells participants that they need to do extra sit-ups to remove their ‘tummies’ is not cultivating enjoyment in movement and may be undermining self-esteem. Some authors recognise that involvement in exercise can be unpleasurable and disempowering, but do not explore how or why. Some women are empowered ‘whilst others seem to become even more entrenched in their powerlessness’ for reasons identified earlier. If a woman feels she has failed at physical activity or has not attained the ideal body, then the activity may only reinforce her existing feelings of bodily deficiency.
Sites of Resistance

Articles in this category consider sport and physical activity important and beneficial for women because they have 'the potential to contribute to a feminist reconceptualisation of power'. A common theme is that sport can be a space where women resist commonly-held notions of female inferiority. It is through sport involvement, for example, that women come to know their bodies free of patriarchal definitions and control and cultivate a sense of self-respect for their physical capacities.77

Catherine MacKinnon and Nancy Theberge capture this idea. MacKinnon believes that being strong and physically self-possessed (as a result of participation in sport for example) can enable women to experience their bodies for uses and meanings other than communicating their availability to men, and 'can transform what being a woman means'.78 Advancing similar ideas, Theberge believes that 'the potential for sport to act as an agent of women’s liberation, rather than their oppression, stems mainly from the opportunity that sporting activity affords women to experience their bodies as strong and powerful and free from male domination'.79 She does not ponder, however, on the fact that not all women achieve feelings of increased bodily power from participating in physical activity, and that many women’s sports are controlled by men. Other scholars echo MacKinnon’s and Theberge’s thoughts: James Riordan believes that sport promotes feelings of self-determination and bodily liberation for women. He says that these have contributed to 'mounting confidence and self-respect by women in society at large' and are 'challenging the set of cultural and traditional attitudes about women’s position and role in society'.80 'Women's sport's experiences transcend issues of gender role', according to Margaret Talbot. Furthermore, 'women who play sport, whether in spite of, defiance of, ignorance of, or with apologies to social preconceptions of the female role, are making a statement which can help to redefine both femininity and sport'.82 Another belief is that 'women’s increased participation in their own sporting and leisure interests can be a challenge' to 'powerful patriarchal-based gender relations which have women servicing male interests and male hegemonic power in sport'.83 Similarly, Wearing asserts that 'leisure can be perceived as a potential site for the construction of feminine identities which resist male definitions and control'.84 She says that ‘leisure is a sphere where some resistance is possible for girls to challenge traditional stereotypes’, for example through sport’s ‘potential for a sense of personal achievement and physical prowess’.85 She believes that this resistance can appear at the microsocial and macrosocial levels, and suggests that leisure in patriarchal society can be a site of resistance to male domination.86 The evidence from Wearing’s interviews, however, does not convey the impression that girls resist male domination by participating in sport. Only one woman interviewed by Wearing appeared to play sport as a means to resist ‘what society tells women they should be’.87 While this woman has been able to 'move beyond traditional stereotypes and create a subjectivity which is forceful yet sensitive and shows a high degree of autonomy', the other, younger girls interviewed
by Wearing had not had the chance to do this, possibly because they were relatively young (all under twenty years old).  

These scholars generally assume, as does Theberge, that 'at the personal level, despite the fact that sport in Western society has been dominated by men and masculinity, the experience has been liberating for some women'. Although they acknowledge that sport can oppress and degrade women, this merely confirms the cultural struggle being waged in sport. Thus, these articles warn against seeing sport solely as negative and as promoting male values that are 'associated with aggression, power and dominance'. They say that 'this can make feminists turn away from sport while ignoring the creative possibilities in the experience'. These are valid points. They imply that there may be some confounding factors to empowerment for women. Unfortunately, the researchers do not analyse these factors in detail, or explore what, precisely, what makes sport oppressive or degrading for women.

**Potential Empowerment**

This category suggests that sport and exercise can empower, but only under certain conditions. Susan Birrell and Diana Richter assert that 'neither sport nor society, as presently constituted, serves women's needs particularly well'. Moreover, they believe that 'there is a contradiction between feminism and sport'. Many of the articles in this category suggest then, that women must embrace alternative values, and alternative sports, so that there is more potential for them to become empowered by their participation. Some believe that 'sport is currently structured in ways that maintain the capital and gender relations on which the continued privilege of male participation depends'. Jan Cameron stresses that 'reclaiming control has to be seen as a critical dimension of empowerment of women, both in sport and through sport'. She says that merely increasing the number of female participants in sport will not help women feel more in control or less marginalised. Rather, 'hegemonic cultural practices' within sports must change. These authors stress that 'a combination of allowing individual definitions of one's sporting experiences and the relative ease in accommodating other social roles must be an important consideration for women's sport'.

Birrell and Richter refer to the case of a women's summer recreational Softball league in two neighbouring towns in North America to illustrate that sport can be 'transformed from a mechanism for the preservation and reproduction of male values to a celebration of feminist alternatives'. They advocate such a transformation as a 'two step process of feminist analysis and action: deconstruction and reconstruction'. These feminist softball players were critical 'of dominant American sporting traditions' and how sport has failed to satisfy women's leisure needs. They identified what they felt was wrong with sport in its current form, and then, 'as an ongoing process of invention,' reconstructed their own feminist version of softball, thus enabling them to get the most out of their own sporting participation. Aspects of traditional sport that concerned these softball players included an
overemphasis on winning, hierarchical power relationships, elitism based on skill, exclusivity represented by sexism, racism, classism, ageism, heterosexism and sexism, and an ethic of risk. Their feminist reconceptualisation of softball involved recognising and altering these negative aspects of traditional sport, by emphasising fun, dressing in costume, and encouraging fans to cheer for both teams. This example illustrates that hegemony is never complete.

Although the case is a good example of change brought about by collective action, this experience may not necessarily translate to all women and all sports, and may be specific to certain women who have access to such activities. Additionally, there may still be paradoxes involved in these alternative activities; some women may still have body image concerns in this environment, or may feel that their bodies are on display. Unfortunately, these authors do not explore the possible barriers to empowerment that exist in alternative activities or value systems.

Activities such as aerobics that are promoted largely for women provide, according to Whitson, 'new opportunities for adult women to experience physical empowerment, as well as opportunities for support and friendship like those that have always been available to men'. He says 'surely it is important that millions of women, who, in the sporting culture of earlier periods, would not have taken part in vigorous and challenging physical activities, now want to do so'. These points are plausible, but Whitson’s arguments are limited by his assertion that all alternative activities model and legitimise ‘different ways of being female and male and different ways of 'doing' femininity and masculinity' and that they 'encourage femininity and masculinity to be embodied in a variety of shapes and ways'. I would argue that of all the supposedly 'alternative’ activities that Whitson identifies (such as aerobics, dance, yoga and wilderness experiences), aerobics, in particular, does not provide women with a different way of 'doing' femininity; rather, it should also be seen as part of the cultural imperative that coerces all women to pursue the cultural feminine bodily ideal. Furthermore, this feminine ideal values a very specific type of female body: young, slim and toned. These imperatives actually allow little room for variations. This aspect of Whitson’s argument would carry more legitimacy if he considered some of the reasons why women participate in certain types of activities and the implications of such activities for women. Nor, it bears commenting on, does Whitson offer empirical evidence to back up his claims.

From the discussion of the many paradoxes involved in physical activity, it is clear that a change in the value systems of physical activity and sport is desirable. It cannot be assumed that alternative activities will necessarily overcome the problems with traditional sport. These alternative activities are still operating within specific social contexts that dictate how to 'do' femininity and masculinity, and that value 'particular ways of being male or female over other ways'; they may be just as contradictory for women as traditional sports have been and remain.
Discussion

While a good proportion of articles categorised in the typology of the literature identify some contradictions or barriers to empowerment for women, they rarely explicitly explore the mechanisms that disempower physically active women. This is vital, as a measure of good scholarship is analysis of the counter-evidence. Future scholarship needs to consider those women who are not physically active in sport or exercise, and those who do participate but for whom the experience has been less than fulfilling. More attention is needed in addressing the specific factors that may disempower, or hinder, women, for example, upsetting or negative childhood experiences, invisible disciplinary forces that coerce women to pursue heterosexual femininity, discourses of health and beauty, the issues surrounding the actual physical activity that women participate in, and society’s perceptions of unfit/inactive women. By exploring these potentially disempowering aspects of physical activity, researchers should see that it is not necessarily helpful to tell women that they must get active. Alerting women to the complexity of meanings associated with physical activity may help empower them by allowing them to decide for themselves what activity they do, where they do it (if at all), and most importantly, why they are doing it. Vertinsky suggests that:

as women define their health and activity needs and problems as they themselves experience them, within the totality of their families and communities, they may then choose to become more active decision makers about the role of healthful physical activity in their own lives.106

As noted earlier, the paradoxes surrounding physical activity for women ‘seem at once empowering and deeply conservative’.107 I have discussed in depth the fact that while women may feel great because their bodies feel strong, they are also conforming to the pursuit of femininity, and not actually embodying power.108 Jorge Arditi maintains that this paradox ‘forces us to contextualise and problematise the very concepts of empowerment and disempowerment’.109 But the evidence presented here is that these concepts are not often adequately scrutinised.

The typology also raised the issue of ‘alternative’ activities where force and domination are not important. But similar contradictions are also inherent here.110 For example, many scholars celebrate the potential of wilderness sports.111 Yet, even in this context researchers find women who are overly body conscious, that is, they see their body in a negative light, they are not happy with their physical appearance or they talk about their ‘flab.’ Some articles discuss ‘special’ women, notably those who are lesbians or feminists. It is sometimes implied that cultural forces affect these women differently. This may well be true. Jan Wright and Alison Dewar examined a group of women, who were feminists, mostly lesbian, and aged between thirty and seventy. According to the authors, these women ‘have freed themselves from these compunctions by their age, but also their subjectivities, their positioning
in relation to feminist discourses and material conditions. This comment points to the complex issues surrounding empowerment. It should not be assumed, however, that these women are completely unaffected by notions of the ideal feminine body. Research must explicitly explore the ways that such women may both resist and submit to these cultural and societal forces. Nonetheless, some intellectuals recognise that 'special' women are still affected by contradictory discourses. Indeed, 'discourses linking health with moral imperatives about exercise, body shape and weight are not totally absent . . . living in a western society it is unlikely that such discourses would be totally absent from the women’s thinking about their bodies.' It should be acknowledged that a women’s 'sense of embodiment is woven complexly, as sensory and sensual experiences are linked with body shape, with controlling weight and with health - the interweaving of the sensory and the social'.

While some authors provide evidence for their claims, many do not. Scholars should provide empirical evidence to support their claims. This may include noting a study that talked to women, or observed women, otherwise their positions are merely theories. Some researchers gave details from their own studies, but then drew conclusions unsupported by their examples. Gilroy finds little evidence of women actually transferring skills to other areas of their lives.

Some articles that consider contradictions assume that there are set feminine and masculine characteristics. This may have the effect of perpetuating both women's contradictory experiences of physical activity and myths of gender role conflict in sport. One scholar suggests, for example, that 'there is some evidence that women who engage in physical sporting activities do find the space between the contradictory discourses on athleticism and femininity to integrate the positive aspects of male and female identity', that is, confidence, appreciativeness, firmness and gentleness. Accepting that athleticism and femininity are contradictory is problematic, as Theberge explains: 'research that examines whether women in sport experience conflict due to cultural prescriptions against their participation in a masculine activity accepts both the notion of sex-appropriate behaviour and the power of proponents of these ideas to limit women's behaviour'.

Finally, few articles suggest any resolutions for the contradictions that they identify. It is vital that resolutions are explored, or the literature offers little that is positive for women. The issues raised above provide suggestions for future research: Scholars should explore how and why exercise disempowers and empowers; present evidence of how women may transfer skills learnt from physical activity to other areas of their lives; provide more evidence from women’s lived experiences for claims that are made about the empowering potential of physical activity; if looking at ‘special’ or nontraditional women, explore the potentially differential ways that societal forces affect them; interrogate vague comments such as 'I feel better after I exercise'; begin to seek some resolutions for the paradoxes of empowerment. These suggestions may mean that empowerment is analysed and evaluated more effectively. The contradictions may be more adequately interrogated.
and accommodated, and the potentialities of physical activity for women may be explored in different and advantageous ways.

Some authors have contemplated strategies to increase women’s agency and self-determination. What insights do they offer? Hegemonic cultural practices within sports must change, according to Cameron. In order for women to overcome the contradictory nature of their physical activity, Langston suggests that they should apply their own meanings to their participation. A woman who participates in a commercial aerobics class may focus on enjoying the sensuality of the movement, rather than her stomach or her thighs. A female runner can run on bush tracks and delight in the birdsong and the sunrise rather than focusing exclusively on losing weight. A similar attempt is made by Annemarie Jutel ‘to posit exercise and diet in a liberatory, rather than an oppressive context’. And,

by understanding the subtle ways in which exercise and dietary control can be oppressive - associations of virtue with slenderness, belief in duty to beauty, understanding health in aesthetic terms - [women] can also recognise the potential for resistance. [Their] exercise experience can be liberating when [they] recognise that [they] can judge [their] fitness by other means than the bathroom scale, that how [they] look does not reflect how [they] feel, or how healthy [they are], and that [they] can choose, rather than be guilt driven to, [their] exercise activities.

If women are given the power to define their experiences, values and reasons for participating, or as Jutel puts it ‘to share and experience’, then this is an important step towards empowerment, and of course, such empowerment is what allows the exercise/diet experience to be a positive rather than an oppressive one’. Jutel is referring to empowerment as a form of ‘power-to’ and a means to overcome oppressive normalising forces and ‘power-over’. At this point, dichotomies have arisen: normalisation, oppression and disempowerment, versus liberation, resistance and empowerment.

Physical Activity: Empowerment Versus Empowerment?
Resistance refers to women overcoming or disregarding cultural norms, images and imperatives that coerce women to pursue the ideal female body. This could be seen as ‘power-to’ or empowerment. Cultural normalisation refers to the power of ideals of body shape, size and youthfulness that convince women to participate in rituals such as exercise and dieting. Normalisation is synonymous with oppression or disempowerment. This dichotomy is simplistic, for two reasons. First, while exercise may not oppress, it is not necessarily empowering. Indeed, discussion of the concept of empowerment above shows that physical activity cannot be simply classified as either empowering or oppressive; similarly, a woman cannot be classified as either empowered or disempowered. In some contexts, physical
activity can induce feelings of control, strength and freedom from feeling like a sexual object. But in others, it can make the same women feel inadequate or as if they are on display as sexual objects.

Second, the resistance versus normalisation dichotomy is simplistic because no woman (or indeed, any individual) is completely empowered. No woman is totally immune from the pressures and ideology that surround exercise and fitness. This dichotomy, according to Jean Grimshaw, runs the risk of implicitly reinstating ideas of a 'natural' body with which a woman might have an entirely comfortable and unmediated relation. Furthermore, there can be no guarantees that any practice is free from normalising pressures; no assumption of ideological 'purity' in any motivation; no clear dividing lines between what is internally or externally imposed. And no bodily practice, in all of its manifestations, can be understood wholly in terms of subjection or capitulation to normalising pressures.

A good example of the simplicity of the resistance versus normalisation dichotomy is that many feminists and women who identify as lesbian go to the gym or exercise classes. Such women, who may 'consciously and constantly resist heteronormative pressures and oppressive paradigms of the young and thin female body' in other aspects of their lives, 'nevertheless give priority to exercise'. It is doubtful that this phenomenon can be understood from the vantage point of resistance/normalisation. No woman can be perceived as 'autonomous' Grimshaw stresses, 'in the sense that she could be wholly immune from the more malign kinds of pressures and ideology which frequently surround [exercise and fitness] practices'. Nevertheless, 'the kinds of motivation often assumed in feminist critiques - such as a heteronormative ideal of being 'attractive' to men, for instance, or a desire to preserve an appearance of youthfulness - cannot in fact give an adequate or exhaustive account of these practices'.

How then will the problems associated with the notion of empowerment through physical activity be overcome? Is a re-definition of empowerment needed? Does the prevalence of contradictions indicate that the wrong questions have been asked? Is the problem here the application of a male concept to females? It may be a case of discarding such binary oppositions as disempowerment/empowerment and dominated female body/unrepressed male body. The answers to these questions are not clear.

So 'how can female agency and choice be understood in ways that neither see women merely as "dupes" of a patriarchal order nor, in postmodern vein, see choice or pleasure merely as the free play of unconstrained desire?' The concept of empowerment may not be as relevant if the questions about physical activity are reframed, and theorised in terms of the effects and benefits of bodily movement and exercise on one's life as a whole.
NOTES:


9. Walter Gallie (1955) is the originator of the notion of 'contested concepts.' He believed that the complexities and the contested character of the concept of power should be acknowledged. But rather than singling out notoriously difficult concepts such as power as having a special status, he thought that sociological inquiry might be better served simply by a recognition of the way in which many concepts in sociology tend to carry value loadings. Gallie stressed that power is not
necessarily irresolvably contested. In contrast, Steven Lukes (1974) suggested that the value issues surrounding the concept of power will never be resolved in empirical terms or, indeed, ever satisfactorily resolved.


12. Proponents of 'power-over' stress the complex nature of empowerment through sport. For example, cultural images and imperatives convince women that their bodies are flawed and deficient, and coerce them to participate in physical activity. The goal here is not to enjoy the outdoors or the movement *per se*, but to lose weight, or become more toned, that is, to embody the feminine ideal more closely. However, this 'power-over' appears to many women 'power-to,' and in this sense actually undermines the empowering potential of physical activity.


15. Henderson *et. al.*, *A Leisure of One’s Own*, p. 15.


17. Deem and Gilroy, 'Physical activity, life-long learning and empowerment'.


21. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*

22. 'Looking great' here refers to the ideal female body - slim, small and appropriately-toned.


24. As defined by cultural and social images of the ideal female body.


26. Bartky, 'Foucault, femininity and the modernisation of patriarchal power,' p. 73.

27. Haravon, 'Exercises in empowerment'.


29. P. Vertinsky, "'Run, Jane, run': Central tensions in the current debate about enhancing women's health through exercise,' *Women and Health*, vol.27, no. 4, 1998, pp. 81-111.


31. Vertinsky, 'Run, Jane, run,' p. 86.

32. Vertinsky, 'Run, Jane, run,' p. 88.

33. Vertinsky, 'Run, Jane, run,' p. 89.

34. Langston, 'Pregnancy and power'.

35. Langston, 'Pregnancy and power'.

36. Langston, 'Pregnancy and power'; Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*


42. Bartky, 'Foucault, femininity, and the modernisation of patriarchal power,' p. 75.


48. Neilson, Putting away the pom-poms,' p. 291.


50. Henderson et al., *A Leisure of One's Own*.


53. Sabbage, Playing the field'.


57. Deem & Gilroy, Physical activity, life-long learning and empowerment,' p. 91.

58. Wearing & Wearing, 'All in a day's leisure,' p. 111.


60. Deem and Gilroy, Physical activity, life-long learning and empowerment', p. 90.


62. Langston, 'Pregnancy and power,' p. 22.


65. C. Cole, 'Resisting the canon,' p. 15.


70. Arnold, Transforming body image through women's wilderness experiences,' p. 46.
79. N. Theberge, Toward a feminist alternative to sport as a male preserve,' *Quest*, vol. 37, 1985, p. 201.
82. Talbot, 'Beating them at our own game?', p. 103.
83. Thompson, Thank the ladies for the plates', p. 141.
84. Wearing, 'Leisure and women's identity', p. 335.
86. Wearing, 'Leisure and women's identity', p. 337.
89. Theberge, 'Sport and women's empowerment,' p. 390.
90. Theberge, 'Sport and women's empowerment,' p. 391.
91. Theberge, 'Sport and women's empowerment,' p. 391.
93. Birrell & Richter, 'Is a diamond forever?' p. 408.
94. Thompson, 'Playing around the family,' p. 134.
96. Cameron, 'Blazers and black tie dinners,' p. 40.
98. Birrell & Richter, 'Is a diamond forever?' p. 408.
100. Birrell & Richter, 'Is a diamond forever?' p. 397.


106. Vertinsky, 'Run, Jane, run,' p. 98.


108. Bartky, 'Foucault, femininity, and the modernisation of patriarchal power'.


110. Whitson, 'Sport in the social construction of masculinity,' p. 23.

111. See for example, Bell, 'Empowerment, competency and coercion,' and Arnold, Transforming body image'.

112. Wright and Dewar, 'On pleasure and pain': Women speak out about physical activity,' p. 93.

113. Wright and Dewar, 'On pleasure and pain,' p. 93.

114. Wright and Dewar, 'On pleasure and pain,' p. 94.

115. Wearing, 'Leisure and women's identity in late adolescence'; A Leisure of One's Own.

116. Gilroy, 'Working on the body'.


118. Theberge, Toward a feminist alternative to sport as a male preserve', p. 198.

119. Cameron, 'Blazers and black tie dinners'.

120. Langston, 'Pregnancy and power'.

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125. Grimshaw, 'Working out with Merleau-Ponty,' p. 100.

126. Grimshaw, 'Working out with Merleau-Ponty,' p. 100.


129. Arthurs and Grimshaw, *Women's Bodies*, p. 11.

130. Arthurs and Grimshaw, *Women's Bodies*, p. 11.