

WOMEN & EIGHTS



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Gendered enskilment refers to how gender influences the way we learn to use our bodies, acquire skills, move and how we feel in our bodies (Rana, 2022a). In this zine, we will look at gendered enskilment in weightlifting, inspired by Jasmijn Rana's research on gendered enskilment in recreational running, and gender, religion, and belonging in women-only kickboxing.

The way we learn certain skills are influenced by social and cultural processes within our society. Expectations about femininity and masculinity influence how and why we lift weights, how, when and where we learn it, how we feel when doing it, how we engage with other people, how it lives in your body, and more.

INTRO

DUCTION

Rana (2025) argued that multiple consciousness is built on Du Bois' double consciousness: black people are not only aware of the fact that they are black in a dominant white society, but also understand how white people perceive them in that society. Multiple consciousness takes more into account than just race, such as gender, religion or disability. It is then somewhat applicable to how women can be understood in a dominant male society. Women struggle to identify themselves based on how they perceive themselves instead of how other people see them. Since weightlifting has historically been, and still is, a very male dominated sport, women face these struggles in the gym regularly. Intersectionality is at play here and experiences differ between individuals, but in this zine I will highlight the experiences of women focused on gender differences in the weightlifting community.



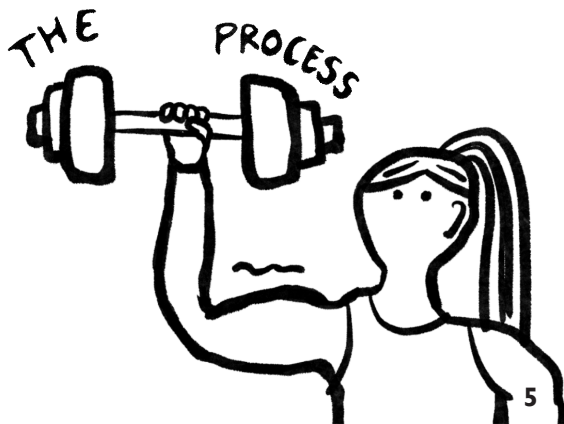
Stereotypes surrounding women in weightlifting shape expectations long before they enter the gym. Women are assumed to lack strength, knowledge, or technical ability, while men are presumed naturally competent, even when their confidence outweighs their skill. Traditional sex roles suggest women should focus on appearance, not power, reinforcing the idea that heavy lifting isn't "for them". These assumptions downplay women's potential and frame their achievements as surprising exceptions. Meanwhile, men often correct or coach women uninvited, reflecting misplaced confidence rooted in gendered expectations. Such stereotypes limit what women feel permitted to attempt, overshadowing how capable and technically skilled they can become.

Women are often taught to approach training through restraint rather than expansion. Instead of being encouraged to pursue strength for their own sake, women learn to move with caution, to choose exercises that keep the body slim, and to avoid anything that might make them 'too muscular' or 'bulky'. Each movement is filtered through beauty standards, often with a focus on growing glutes, keeping the waist small and arms slim. This makes women aware of how their bodies will be seen rather than what they can do. Men, meanwhile, are taught to chase size, risk, and visible power. As women navigate health, safety, aging, or pregnancy and hormonal changes, the emphasis on protecting the body grows.

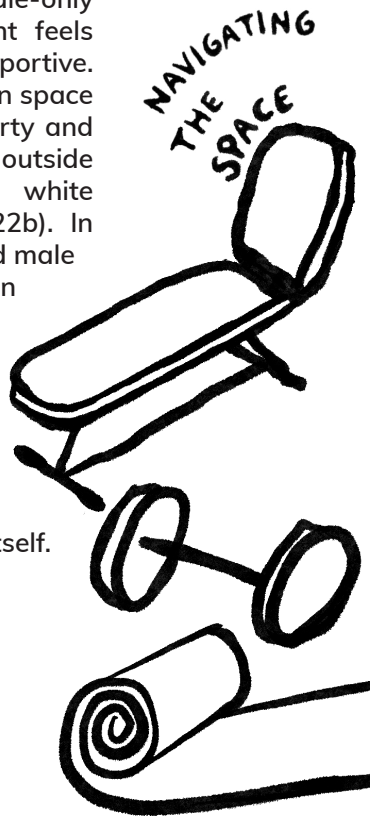


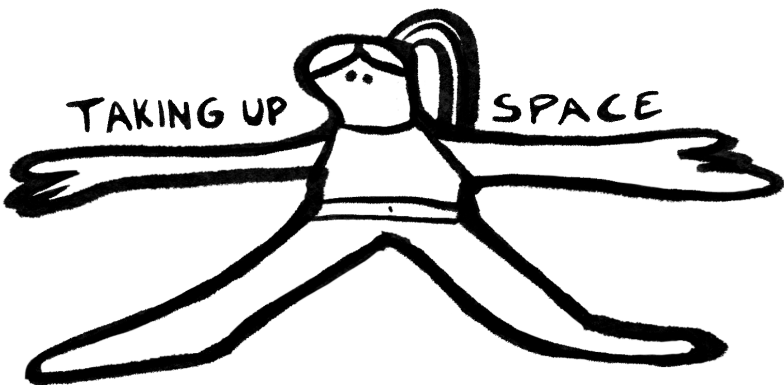
Learning to weightlift is also learning what is believed a woman's body can or cannot do. Women are often taught careful, contained movements, because people underestimate female strength and assume women can't handle power or heavy loads. In women-only gyms, women can craft a partly masculine, partly feminine subjectivity: they learn strength through sport but at the same time uphold a form of "emphasized femininity" consistent with their cultural values (Rana, 2022b).

Often, men feel the need to instruct a woman on how to do a certain exercise, without knowing whether she has the knowledge or not. What women are taught is centered around aesthetics, not about capability, trust, pushing limits and embracing intensity. Boundaries for women seem lower and appear early in the learning process. In the learning process, women are taught a version of weightlifting that builds muscle, but also trains caution into every rep.



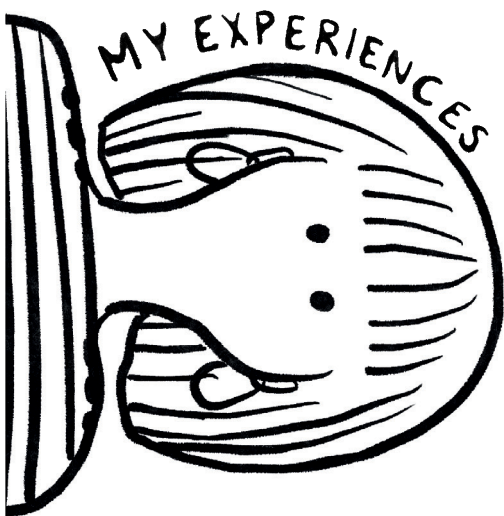
Men outnumber women in weight rooms by extreme margins: sometimes four to one (Norris, 2019). And consequently, many women feel uncomfortable, judged or stared at in these areas. As a result, women often gravitate toward safe spaces like cardio rooms or even female-only gyms, where the environment feels less competitive and more supportive. Women-only gyms give women space to re-imagine what being sporty and feminine can mean, outside mainstream or “hegemonic white femininity” ideals (Rana, 2022b). In regular gyms, where unwanted male attention is so common, women develop heightened spatial awareness: constantly scanning who is nearby, who is watching, and whether they feel safe enough to lift. For many women, ‘navigating the space’ becomes part of the workout itself.





Women are often socialised to take up less space than men, both verbally and physically. This can mean not speaking up, hesitating to set boundaries, and physically minimizing themselves to keep others comfortable, even at the cost of their own needs. Taking up space becomes an act of claiming visibility. Many women make themselves small in the weight room: avoiding heavy equipment typically used by men, keeping quiet, and trying not to attract attention. In male-dominated spaces, the confidence, noise, and expansive presence that men are allowed, or even expected, to display can feel risky or unacceptable for women. Behaviours that are normal for men are not taught to, encouraged in, or often tolerated from women, who are instead taught to be quiet, unobtrusive, and compliant.

I have been going to the gym since I was about 15 years old. When I began, I never opted for weight lifting: I always went straight to the cardio section to run, bike, row or do yoga. This was engrained in my brain: I was taught to always try to lose weight and stay skinny. One time, when I was cooling down on the treadmill, I noticed an older man looking at me. He later came to me and told me how “I should have run a couple more kilometres”. Interesting, since I knew my strengths, limits and what I wanted to achieve that day way better than he did. After that, I started going to that gym less, since the encounter had made me so uncomfortable. I felt judged and looked at in a way that a 16 year old girl should not have been.



When I went to university, my exercises and view on the gym started to change. My training got more focused on strength building and resistance rather than weight loss, aesthetics and physical fitness. I went to a women-only gym, and got a female personal trainer, which both factored into me gaining more confidence in my exercises. But what surprised me, is how much of the lower body area was being used in comparison to the free weights and the upper body machines. So, even though it was a women-only gym, the women were still doing exercises that got them closer to looking like the beauty standard, which was (at the time, and still is) very focused on glute growth and an hourglass figure.

My personal trainer laid the focus on lower body exercises as well. What struck me is how when I was doing a chest exercise, she told me how this particular exercises was good for me since it would prevent my boobs from sagging in the future. This was quite shocking to me, since my goal was not even to stop my boobs from sagging: it was to be strong and healthy.

Even now, I feel uncomfortable going to the gym alone. I now go to a regular gym, which is heavily dominated by men. Because of that, I often go with female friends, go for exercises that do not catch people's attention too much and I almost never try new things. Despite my fears and insecurities, I keep showing up for myself, but also to try to make a change with other women in weightlifting.

SOURCE?

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