



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## See How She Runs: Feminists Rethink Fitness

Tracy Isaacs, Samantha Brennan

IJFAB: International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics,  
Volume 9, Number 2, Fall 2016, pp. 1-11 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/631096>



# SEE HOW SHE RUNS: FEMINISTS RETHINK FITNESS

TRACY ISAACS AND SAMANTHA BRENNAN

**Keywords:** Feminist approaches to fitness, fitness and equality, fitness and empowerment, inclusive fitness, feminine embodiment, feminine aesthetic

This special issue of *IJFAB* starts from the premise that fitness is a feminist issue, and, more specifically, it is an issue that ought to be of concern to feminists interested in bioethics. While a neglected concept in feminist bioethics, fitness is of key importance to women's health and well-being. Not only that, it is also an area of women's lives that invites unwelcome policing and advice from friends, family members, medical practitioners, and even strangers. People have a difficult time prying apart the idea of fitness from that of weight loss. Most women who embark on a fitness routine have weight loss among their primary goals.

Since late 2011, we and a host of guest authors have been exploring the connections between women's bodies, the medicalization of women's health, and the multimillion dollar fitness industry in our blog *Fit Is a Feminist Issue* (Brennan and Isaacs n.d.). Feminist engagement with women's fitness has typically focused on the oppressive dimensions of dieting and the quest for thinness as an ideal of normative femininity (Bordo 2004; Chernin 1994). More recently, feminists have engaged with the rhetoric of fitness as well (Brabazon 2006), taking up a variety of issues that challenge dominant assumptions in the popular and medical notions of physical fitness. For example, while physical activity itself is positively associated with increases in women's subjective well-being (Ferguson et al. 2012), scholarship and popular and social media

are rife with different versions of the claim that there are significant impediments to women's flourishing associated with fitness talk and the feminist imperative. Here are some of the ways this happens: fat shaming and discrimination against those perceived to be obese (Sutin and Terracciano 2013); poor body image (Hesse-Biber 1997; Van Vonderen and Kinnally 2012); the tyranny of dieting (Tribble and Resch 2003; J. Hirschmann and Munter 2008); the narrow aesthetic ideal of femininity and how antithetical it is to athleticism (Mischke 2015); the sexualization of female athletes, women, and competition (Keller and Moglen 1987); issues about entitlement, inclusion, and exclusion, the way expectations about achievement are gender variable (Griffiths et al. 2013); and the harms of stereotyping (e.g., in the case of women's boxing and football, see Harris 2005; Halbart 1997). Feminists have begun to interrogate the very assumptions about what constitutes "fitness" in the first place. How is fitness connected to ableism and nondisabled privilege? Sport and fitness provide us with microcosms of more general feminist concerns about power, privilege, entitlement, and socialization (Lloyd 1996; Brabazon 2006).

As we thought about and started planning this issue, it became very clear to us that we needed to include women's voices and their personal stories of experiences with physical fitness. For this reason, the issue includes not just scholarly articles but also commentaries and narratives that draw much more directly from the authors' personal experiences. Medical discussions of women's health and fitness often lack the voices of the very people being discussed. The same can be said of abstract analytical work in the field of bioethics. The feminist commitment to providing spaces where women can tell their own stories in their own words influenced the shape of this special issue.

We have identified four broad themes that emerged from a feminist examination of fitness: equality, inclusivity, empowerment, and the aesthetics of feminine embodiment. In what follows, we provide an overview of these themes with a view to showing the rich territory that opens up when we begin to explore fitness through a feminist lens.

## 1. Equality

How does the issue of equality arise in the context of physical fitness? The gap between boys' and girls' physical activity begins in childhood. According to researchers at University College London, half of all U.K. seven-year-olds do not do enough exercise, with girls far less active than boys. Researchers

found that just 38 percent of girls achieved the recommended hour of physical activity each day, compared with 63 percent of boys (Griffiths et al. 2013).

This gender disparity in participation in physical activity continues into adulthood for those men and women who find themselves in opposite sex relationships. Nancy Hirschmann (2010) reports, “According to ... data from an ongoing National Science Foundation study, married women still do two to three times more childcare and housework than men (17–28 hours per week for women, versus 7–10 hours for men). Indeed having a husband apparently *creates* about seven additional weekly hours of housework for women” (emphasis in the original).

The unequal participation of boys and girls, men and women, in sports and physical activity creates political and social inequities that degrade the well-being of women. As a matter of social justice, these inequities ought to be addressed, and an inclusive theory of fitness would address them more effectively. So far, however, no one has offered a comprehensive inclusive approach to fitness.

A 2013 study by the government of Canada (Statistics Canada 2013) reports that Canadians are less active in sport than they were in previous iterations of the same study and that participation rates have declined across age and gender, but that women continue to participate at much lower rates than men in every age bracket. Gender is not the only variable at play.

There are several ways to engage the problem of unequal participation in sports, including community initiatives, subsidies for sports, access to equipment and facilities, and so on. The research demonstrates (1) that people care about sports and (2) that, as soon as they have enough time and money, they prioritize sports. As a society, we should be actively encouraging programs that support families in achieving their goals. Women place a high value on creating social bonds through sport (Markula 2005), so this should figure into strategies for public policy formation.

In short, gender inequality on the level of participation in sport and physical activity matters because (1) active lifestyles are good for women’s well-being; (2) it’s good for children to see their mothers as physically active and competent; and (3) it’s good for women’s agency for them to experience themselves as embodied and competent.

In this issue, Anita Harman’s and Sylvia Burrow’s contributions engage with the theme of equality. Harman’s article, “Exercising Moral Authority:

The Power of Guilt in Health and Fitness Discourses,” addresses the ways in which fitness discourses invoking guilt have a disproportionate impact on women’s lives, creating a specific and gendered type of harm. In “Trampled Autonomy: Women, Athleticism, and Health,” Burrow unpacks the relationship between what she argues are the masculinized values of athleticism and the gender inequality facing women athletes. She makes the case that, because athletic values are so associated with masculinity, women in sport face a double bind that compromises their autonomy and creates barriers, prejudice, and bias against them.

## 2. Inclusivity

Inclusivity and exclusivity are recurring themes in feminist research in general and feminist philosophy in particular. Feminist scholars have long argued that sexist and discriminatory practices leave women out of a wide range of domains, from top level positions in government and business to academic research and employment in a variety of disciplines (Gilligan 1982; Haslanger 2008; Keller and Moglen 1987) to the ranks of the highest paid and most widely recognized artists, authors, entertainers, news anchors, and film stars. This exclusion finds its way into sport and fitness culture, not just at the level of elite sport (though it certainly exists at that level), but also in the everyday expectations and messaging around women’s participation in physical activity. For example, we have all heard the insult that someone “throws like a girl” and its implicit judgment that girls quite simply are incapable of throwing a ball properly (Young 1980). Fitness spaces such as gyms are male dominated in obvious and subtler ways. Women who work out in the weight room with free weights are considered exceptions to the rule. Their “place” is thought to be fitness classes such as Zumba and BodyPump.

But gender is not the only line along which we see exclusion. Intersectional analysis is a fundamental component of good feminist scholarship (Cho et al. 2013; Crenshaw 1991; Garry 2011). Intersectionality is “the idea that various forms of oppression interact with one another in multiple complex ways” (Garry 2011, 827). People are not just men or women. Class, race, disability, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, and religion also interact in ways that may promote exclusions and privileges. In our work on fitness culture and the way it is represented in the media, we have observed a systemic absence of

people over thirty, whether they are male or female. Most of those represented in fitness media are nondisabled, white men in their twenties and thirties (Isaacs 2013b).

The lack of diversity in fitness media and culture has a negative social impact on well-being. It has been well-documented that when people do not see themselves represented or when specific domains are represented as being the purview of only certain kinds of people, those who do not see themselves as belonging do not choose those pursuits, or, if they do, they feel unwelcome and intimidated (Chilly Collective 1995). This phenomenon is harmful with respect to fitness in general because, based on what we are exposed to in the media and online, it seems that only those who already appear to be “fit” (and we have more to say about fitness as an aesthetic) are welcome to participate. As our population ages, it is essential that we not promote the idea that fitness is only for the young. Research shows that, contrary to the popular idea that we slow down and become frailer as we age, it may actually be the case that we become frailer because we slow down and train less (Reynolds 2012). While we cannot stop aging completely, it appears that, well into our fifties, sixties, and even seventies, aging is more a lifestyle choice than anything else. We can retain healthy lean muscle mass if we keep active (Wroblewski et al. 2011). This is an important message for an aging population. People from all generations will benefit from a more inclusive understanding of fitness.

Disability stands in a special relationship to fitness. Some think that fitness discourse is inherently ableist, citing Darwinian origins of the very idea of fitness and eugenicist connotations that suggest only able-bodied individuals are “fit” (Darwin [1859] 1988). We have already begun to discuss fitness and ableism in the more popular setting of *Fit Is a Feminist Issue*, our blog on fitness, feminism, and aging. More disabled people (who are not the elite athletes we see in events such as the Paralympics) need to be represented in everyday fitness settings. In addition, fitness spaces need to be attentive to the distinction between special accommodations, on the one hand, which require individuals with special needs to make special requests, and accessibility, on the other hand, which structures spaces for maximum access and therefore inclusivity. Discussions of this approach appear in the context of scholarship on universal design (Steinfeld and Maisel 2012).

We contend, then, that a more inclusive representation of the fitness industry and culture will have a positive impact on the social good, increasing well-being by promoting physical activity to a broader range of people.

Moirra Howes's and Kathryn J. Norlock's contributions to the special issue engage with the idea of a more inclusive approach to fitness. In "Fitness, Well-Being, and Preparation for Death," Howes notes that the typical messages we receive about fitness have a negative impact on well-being. She calls for a broader, more inclusive set of fitness goals that explicitly prepare us for major life events: aging, disability, reproduction, and death. In her personal narrative, "Doctor's Orders: Menopause, Weight Change, and Feminism," Norlock applies a feminist lens to her experience of "menopausal weight gain" as a life-long, "naturally thin" nonexerciser. Her story shows how doctors' advice to aging women to "exercise more" fails to take into account important issues of autonomy and shifting identity facing postmenopausal women.

### 3. Empowerment

Mariah Burton Nelson (1994) argues that, as women become empowered in public life and in sport, men cling strongly to football as one of the last bastions of male only sports. She makes the further claim (1998) that doing well in competitive sports can be a rewarding and empowering experience for women. Not only that: shifting our attention from the aesthetics of the body to the way our bodies can perform can have a positive effect on self-image and body image (Snyder and Kivlin 1975).

For the past several decades, thinness has been a central feature of the ideal feminine body type. Women especially were encouraged to diet and exercise for weight loss and discouraged from lifting heavy weights at the gym. But a new trend, promoted on the popular blogs *Go Kaleo* (Rogers n.d.) and *Lift Like a Girl* (Shanks n.d.), and through popular fitness programs such as Cross-Fit, seeks to empower women through strength training with heavy weights (Rogers 2013). This approach moves away from dieting, which has been shown time and time again to result in weight gain (Kausman 2005; Tribole and Resch 2003; J. Hirschmann and Munter 2008). Where dieting is characterized by deprivation and restriction, participation in intense and demanding activity, including lifting heavy weights, requires people to fuel their bodies appropriately and adequately with high quality food in sufficient amounts. This approach leads to feelings of empowerment and strength, quite different from the impact of severely restricted diets (Rogers 2013).

When individuals feel empowered physically, this feeling of confidence moves into other areas of their lives. A more active population is a more empowered population. Feminist thinking about fitness links the exclusion of women from physical activity to the exclusion of women from public life more generally.

The theme of empowerment through martial arts training is taken up in this issue by Ann J. Cahill and Grayson Hunt in their argument in favor of women's self-defense training. Hunt and Cahill argue for an explicitly feminist approach to women's self-defense, one that seeks to empower women and train us out of the feminine bodily habits that are part of socialization in rape culture. Ula Klein tells her story of finding empowerment acquiring physical skill in a supportive community in her narrative, "Beyond the Fishnets: Female Empowerment through Roller Derby." Rebecca Kukla recounts the way she found her physically active and capable self after a lifetime of thinking she hated exercise in "Gender Identity, Gendered Spaces, and Figuring Out What You Love." It's also a narrative of getting past gender stereotypes and the alienation she found in yoga and Pilates, of coming home to activities and pursuits that we've historically gendered as male, namely, powerlifting and boxing. In "Core Workout: A Feminist Critique of Definitions, Hyperfemininity, and the Medicalization of Fitness," Pam R. Sailors, Sarah Teetzel, and Charlene Weaving argue that fitness activities need a "do-it-yourself" component if they are to enhance women's agency. Their contribution explores the tension between the normative, external components of women's fitness and the pursuit of athletic goals by women for their own sake.

#### 4. Aesthetics and feminine embodiment

As noted above, the feminine body ideal in Western culture prizes thinness. A significant tension exists between athletic values and aesthetic values in women's pursuit of fitness. With this emphasis on thinness, many women are perpetually attempting to lose weight as one of their top "fitness" goals. Fitness itself is often taken to be an aesthetic goal as women are encouraged to "look fit," which invariably means being thin.

One domain that demonstrates the tension between the aesthetic and the athletic is the domain of the fitness competition. This is a category of body-building in which women are judged not on how fast they can run or how



much they can lift, but instead exclusively on how their bodies match up to the aesthetic ideal.

Aesthetic goals may encourage women to become active, but they are just as likely to undermine women's self-respect and self-esteem and discourage them from continuing to pursue physical fitness once the fit body ideal is found to be unattainable (Markula 2001). The fit body that we see in "fitspiration" or "fitspo" imagery is also young and thin and beautiful. Many women find it demoralizing to work hard and not "see" visible results in the way their bodies look. Thus, inspiration and motivation can turn to demoralization and disillusionment over time.

In this issue, Michelle Parrinello-Cason and Audrey Yap each offer a perspective on the feminine aesthetic and embodiment. In "Choose Your Battles: Agonism and Identity in Narratives of Feminist Fitnesses," Parrinello-Cason examines three contemporary fitness campaigns, each directed at women. She distinguishes between antagonistic and cooperative approaches to fitness. Antagonistic approaches position women as at war with their bodies, whereas cooperative approaches reject the idea of being at battle with the body and eschew externally imposed societal standards of feminine beauty. In "(Hip) Throwing Like a Girl: Martial Arts and Norms of Feminine Body Comportment," Yap argues that the normative standards of feminine bodily comportment can pose a barrier to women's success as martial artists.

The focus of "See How She Runs: Feminists Rethink Fitness" on feminist issues in fitness helps to advance *IJFAB's* commitment to including the social and cultural dimensions of health in its understanding of bioethics. People sometimes challenge the idea that fitness could be an issue worthy of feminist attention. As we have noted on *Fit Is a Feminist Issue*, our blog:

Domestic violence and violence against women more generally, lack of representation of women, let alone a diversity of women, in positions of influence and power, global poverty and its disproportionate impact on women, the restricted options available to women where employment is concerned, all sorts of issues regarding differences of privilege and oppression among and between women—all of these issues arguably strike more deeply than sport and fitness. (Isaacs 2013a)

We have no desire to claim that feminist issues in fitness are the only feminist issues worth discussing. It would be absurd to deny that other pressing feminist issues exist. Nevertheless, to the extent that a feminist consideration of fitness takes up issues of equality, inclusivity, empowerment, and the

feminine aesthetic and embodiment, we can see that the impact on women's lives of dominant discourses, practices, assumptions, and attitudes is not trivial. Consider "See How She Runs" and the contributions in it as an invitation to think seriously and critically about fitness as a feminist issue.

## References

- Bordo, Susan. 2004. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Brabazon, Tara. 2006. "Fitness Is a Feminist Issue." *Australian Feminist Studies* 21 (49): 65–83. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08164640500470651>
- Brennan, Samantha, and Tracy Isaacs. n.d. *Fit Is a Feminist Issue*. <http://fitisafeministissue.com>
- Chernin, Kim. 1994. *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating, and Identity*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Chilly Collective, ed. 1995. *Breaking Anonymity: The Chilly Climate for Women Faculty*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press.
- Cho, Sumi, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall. 2013. "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis." *Signs* 38 (4): 785–810. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/669608>
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1241–99. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Darwin, Charles. (1859) 1988. *On the Origin of Species*. London: Pickering.
- Ferguson, Leah J., Kent C. Kowalski, Diane E. Mack, Philip M. Wilson, and Peter R. E. Crocker. 2012. "Women's Health-Enhancing Physical Activity and Eudaimonic Well-Being." *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 83 (3): 451–63. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2012.10599880>. Medline:22978195
- Garry, Ann. 2011. "Intersectionality, Metaphor, and the Multiplicity of Gender." *Hypatia* 26 (4): 826–50. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01194.x>
- Gilligan, Carol. 1982. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Griffiths, Lucy J., Mario Cortina-Borja, Francesco Sera, et al. 2013. "How Active Are Our Children? Findings from the Millennium Cohort Study." *BMJ Open* 3 (8): e002893. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2013-002893>. Medline:23965931
- Halbart, Christy. 1997. "Tough Enough, Woman Enough: Stereotypes, Discrimination, and Impression Management among Women Professional Boxers." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 21 (1): 7–36. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/019372397021001002>
- Harris, John. 2005. "The Image Problem in Women's Football." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 29 (2): 184–97. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0193723504273120>
- Haslanger, Sally. 2008. "Changing the Ideology and Culture of Philosophy: Not by Reason (Alone)." *Hypatia* 23 (2): 210–23. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2008.tb01195.x>

- Hesse-Biber, Sharlene. 1997. *Am I Thin Enough Yet? The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hirschmann, Jane R., and Carol H. Munter. 2008. *Overcoming Overeating: How to Break the Diet/Binge Cycle and Live a Healthier, More Satisfying Life*. Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo.
- Hirschmann, Nancy J. 2010. "Mothers Who Care Too Much." *Boston Review*, July 1. <http://bostonreview.net/forum/mothers-who-care-too-much>
- Isaacs, Tracy. 2013a. "Fitness as a Feminist Issue." *Fit Is a Feminist Issue*, June 4. <https://fitisafeministissue.com/2013/06/04/fitness-as-a-feminist-issue/>
- . 2013b. "Fitness, Inclusion, and Intersectionality." *Fit Is a Feminist Issue*, May 30. <https://fitisafeministissue.com/2013/05/30/fitness-inclusion-and-intersectionality/>
- Kausman, Rick. 2005. *If Not Dieting, Then What?* Crows Nest, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Keller, Evelyn Fox, and Helene Moglen. 1987. "Competition and Feminism: Conflicts for Academic Women." *Signs* 12 (3): 493–511. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/494341>
- Lloyd, Moya. 1996. "Feminism, Aerobics and the Politics of the Body." *Body & Society* 2 (2): 79–98. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1357034X96002002005>
- Markula, Pirkko. 2001. "Beyond the Perfect Body: Women's Body Image Distortion in Fitness Magazine Discourse." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 25 (2): 158–79. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0193723501252004>
- , ed. 2005. *Feminist Sport Studies: Sharing Experiences of Joy and Pain*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Mischke, Kelsey J. 2015. "The Muscular Female Athlete: Negotiating Conflicting Identities and Bodies." *Journal of Undergraduate Research at Minnesota State University* 15 (6): 1–27.
- Nelson, Mariah Burton. 1994. *The Stronger Women Get, the More Men Love Football: Sexism and the American Culture of Sports*. New York: Harcourt.
- . 1998. *Embracing Victory: Life Lessons in Competition and Compassion*. Toronto: Harper Collins Canada.
- Reynolds, Gretchen. 2012. *The First 20 Minutes: Surprising Science Reveals How We Can Exercise Better, Train Smarter, Live Longer*. New York: Hudson Street.
- Rogers, Amber. 2013. *Taking up Space: A Guide to Escaping the Diet Maze*. Go Kaleo. <https://gokaleo.com/store/taking-up-space/>
- . n.d. *Go Kaleo*. <http://gokaleo.com>
- Shanks, Nia. n.d. *Lift Like a Girl*. <http://www.niashanks.com>
- Snyder, E. E., and J. E. Kivlin. 1975. "Women Athletes and Aspects of Psychological Well-Being and Body Image." *Research Quarterly* 46 (2): 191–99. Medline:1056067
- Statistics Canada. 2013. "Directly Measured Physical Activity of Adults, 2012 and 2013." Ottawa: Statistics Canada. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-625-x/2015001/article/14135-eng.htm>
- Steinfeld, Edward, and Jordana Maisel. 2012. *Universal Design: Creating Inclusive Environments*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

- Sutin, Angelina R., and Antonio Terracciano. 2013. "Perceived Weight Discrimination and Obesity." *PLoS One* 8 (7): e70048. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0070048>. Medline:23894586
- Tribole, Evelyn, and Elyse Resch. 2003. *Intuitive Eating: A Revolutionary Program That Works*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.
- Van Vonderen, Kristen E., and William Kinnally. 2012. "Media Effects on Body Image: Examining Media Exposure in the Broader Context of Internal and Other Social Factors." *American Communication Journal* 14 (2): 41–57.
- Wroblewski, Andrew P., Francesca Amati, Mark A. Smiley, Bret Goodpaster, and Vonda Wright. 2011. "Chronic Exercise Preserves Lean Muscle Mass in Masters Athletes." *Physician and Sportsmedicine* 39 (3): 172–78. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3810/psm.2011.09.1933>. Medline:22030953
- Young, Iris Marion. 1980. "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality." *Human Studies* 3 (2): 137–56. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF02331805>. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20008753>

### Contributor Information

**Samantha Brennan** is a professor of women's studies and feminist research and a member of the Rotman Institute of Philosophy at Western University, London, Canada. Brennan also blogs about feminism and fitness with Tracy Isaacs at *Fit Is a Feminist Issue*. Find out more about Brennan's work at <http://samjaneb.tumblr.com/>.

**Tracy Isaacs** is a professor of philosophy and women's studies and feminist research at Western University, London, Canada. She is author of *Moral Responsibility in Collective Contexts* (2011) and, with Samantha Brennan, of the forthcoming *Fit Is a Feminist Issue* (2017).