Weight Training and the Negotiation of Gender, Agency, and Colonial Constraints: A Grounded Theory Study of Palestinian Women in Strength Sports

رياضة رفع الأثقال ومقاربات النوع الاجتماعي والاستقلالية والقيود الاستعمارية: دراسة نظرية مؤسَّسة عن النساء الفلسطينيات في رياضات القوة

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July 2025

BIRZEIT UNIVERSITY

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The thesis was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master Degree in Gender and Development Studies at the Institute of Women's Studies from the Faculty of Graduate Studies at Birzeit University, Palestine.

Thesis Discussion Date: 5th July 2025

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الملخص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة مشاركة النساء الفلسطينيات في رياضات القوة، مع التركيز على كيفية تأثير المعايير الاجتماعية والسياسية المرتبطة بالنوع الاجتماعي، وتأثير وسائل الإعلام، والواقع الاستعماري على مشاركتهن في رياضات القوة. باستخدام منهجية النظرية المؤسَّسة (Grounded Theory)، تبحث الدراسة في سيطرة النساء على الجسد، والتوقعات المجتمعية المرتبطة بالنوع الاجتماعي، والعقبات الهيكلية التي تشكل تجربتهن. تكشف النتائج أن رياضات القوة تُعدّ مكانًا للتمكين الشخصي ومساحة للتفاوض الاجتماعي المعقد، حيث يتعين على النساء تحقيق توازن بين أهداف اللياقة البدنية والمعايير الثقافية المتجذرة للجمال والأنوثة والآداب الاجتماعية. من خلال المقابلات الموسعة والملاحظات الميدانية، نتجت موضوعات رئيسية تشمل الاعتراف الاجتماعي، ثقافات اللياقة الرقمية، وتأثير الإرث الاستعماري على صورة الجسد. كما تفحص القيود الهيكلية الأوسع المرتبطة بالسياق الاستعماري الاستيطاني، مثل قيود الحركة، عدم الاستقرار الاقتصادي، وصعوبة الوصول إلى مرافق رياضية مناسبة. في حين تعزز تدريبات القوة ثقة النساء بأنفسهن ومرونتهن وإحساسهن بالتمكين، فإن ممارستها لا تزال مقيدة بعدة معايير جمالية سائدة وتوقعات اجتماعية، فضلاً عن صعوبة الوصول إلى مساحات لياقة مرحّبة بالنساء. من خلال تسليط الضوء على هذه الديناميات، تسهم الدراسة في الدراسات النسوية وما بعد الاستعمار حول النساء والجسد والرياضة، مقدمة رؤى دقيقة حول كيفية تقاطع الثقافة البدنية مع النوع الاجتماعي والسلطة والاستعمار. كما تدعو الدراسة إلى زيادة تمثيل النساء الفلسطينيات الرياضيات، وإصلاح السياسات، وتوسيع إمكانية وصول النساء إلى الرياضة، بما يسهم في إثراء البحث الأكاديمي وتوجيه التدخلات العملية في برامج الرياضة الحساسة للنوع الاجتماعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النساء الفلسطينيات، تدريبات القوة، المعايير الاجتماعية، الفاعلية، الاستعمار، صورة الجسد، النظرية النسوية، النظرية المؤسَّسة، الرياضة، تأثير وسائل الإعلام

Abstract

This study examines Palestinian women's participation in weight training, focusing on how socio-political gender norms, media representations, and colonial realities influence their engagement in strength sports. Using a Grounded Theory methodology, the research explores the negotiation of women's bodily agency, societal expectations related to gender, and structural barriers that shape their experiences. Findings reveal that weight training serves as both a site of personal agency and a space of complex social negotiation, where women must balance their fitness goals with culturally ingrained ideals of femininity and social propriety. Through extensive interviews and participant observations, this study identifies key themes including social validation, digital fitness cultures, and the impact of colonial legacies on body image. It also examines broader structural constraints linked to the settler-colonial context, such as mobility restrictions, economic instability, and limited access to appropriate sports facilities. While engagement in weight training promotes women's self-confidence, resilience, and a sense of empowerment, their practice remains constrained by multiple dominant beauty standards, societal expectations, and restricted access to welcoming fitness spaces. By highlighting these dynamics, the research contributes to feminist and postcolonial studies on women, the body, and sports, offering nuanced insights into how physical culture intersects with gender, power, and coloniality. The study further advocates for increased representation, policy reforms, and expanded accessibility for women in sports, aiming to inform both academic discourse and practical interventions in gender-sensitive sports programming.

Keywords: Palestinian women, weight training, gender norms, agency, colonialism, body image, feminist theory, Grounded Theory, sports, media influence

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Weight Training and the Negotiation of Gender, Agency, and Colonial Constraints: A
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Globally, modern bodybuilding experienced rapid expansion from the 1950s onward,
with the establishment of the International Federation of Bodybuilders (IFBB) in 1946 and
the rise of media icons such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Lou Ferrigno in the 1960s and
1970s. The popularization of muscle magazines, televised competitions like Mr. Olympia
(first held in 1965), and later fitness influencers on social media transformed strength training
from a niche pursuit into a mass fitness movement (Britannica; Monaghan, 2001;
GymToStage, 2025).

However, the emergence of a similar bodybuilding trend in Palestine remains
undocumented in academic or institutional records, with limited media coverage addressing
the rise of gym culture and fitness trends among Palestinian youth, highlighting a gap in
research and documentation. This limitation makes it unclear when and how this global
phenomenon specifically took hold locally.

One day a client came to me and said, "I need you to help me build muscles, you
know, nothing too muscular. I don't want to look like a man, I just want to enhance my figure
and have an hourglass figure." I cannot count the times I have heard the same statement
throughout my eight-year career as a female bodybuilder and a personal trainer for women in
Palestine. Weightlifting has always been a sport dominated by men in the Palestinian context,
but recently, many women started merging into the field. These women face a lot of struggles
for choosing a sport which is considered 'manly'. Therefore, I decided to investigate the

reasons women decide to start weightlifting in Palestine, while analysing the challenges they face.

Women's participation in sports has always been questioned and criticized by society, as the gender norms imposed on women only gave them room to be mothers and wives but not athletes. Sport was "traditionally one of the major male preserves and hence of potential significance for the functioning of patriarchal structures" (Dunning, 1994, p. 164, as cited in Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009, p. 2). Women have struggled to enter sports despite "gender stereotyping, and structural and organizational barriers" (Hargreaves, 1994, as cited in Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009, p. 2). However, women have participated in different types of sports for years now, within the constraints of their societies. One of the most controversial sports for women is weight training, including bodybuilding, which challenges traditional gender norms by emphasizing muscle growth and physical strength. The first women's bodybuilding competition was held in 1977 in Ohio, USA (Bell, 2008, as cited in Baghurst et al., 2014, p.5). This was faced with many complications, due to the societal exclusive connection between bodybuilding and masculinity. Sisjord and Kristiansen highlighted these complications as they stated that "the comprehension of female-appropriate sports is closely associated with commonly held perceptions of feminine appearance and perceptions of female agency" (2009, p. 2). In other words, societal attitudes towards feminine appearance have significantly hindered women's involvement in sports.

Thus, understanding the embodiment and body image of female weightlifters offers a compelling narrative of defiance against restrictive gender norms and the pursuit of the athletic body.

Throughout this thesis, I use the term 'weightlifter' to describe Palestinian women who lift heavy weights primarily to build muscle, reshape their bodies, and enhance physical strength and wellbeing. While this practice overlaps with bodybuilding, it does not

necessarily follow formal competitive standards, nor does it align with Olympic-style weight training. The term is used here in a broad, descriptive sense to reflect the participants' actual practices and goals, rather than specific sport classifications.

Palestinian women's involvement in weight training is a relatively recent development, emerging publicly in the last decade, with significant milestones occurring from 2021 onwards. The first nationwide women's weight training training course was organized in Gaza in March 2021 by the Palestinian Weight training Federation in collaboration with Al-Aqsa University, marking a turning point in formal institutional support for female lifters (Olympic Council of Asia, 2021). While exact numbers of Palestinian female weighlifters remain scarce, participation is estimated to be in the dozens, concentrated primarily in Gaza City and Ramallah. For instance, the 2021 training included around 20 women, highlighting the small but significant scale of this movement (Olympic Council of Asia, 2021). Prominent figures such as Subreen Dari, who has represented Palestine in international competitions, remain rare in the largely male-dominated field of weight training. Dari's ability to pursue the sport at a professional level may be attributed, in part, to her dual citizenship and residence in the United States, which likely provided her with greater access to professional coaching, advanced training facilities, and a more supportive athletic environment than would have been available in Palestine.

Women's engagement with weight training in Palestine must be understood within a deeply layered socio-political and cultural context. On one hand, the sport confronts dominant gender norms that frame physical strength and muscularity as masculine, which can result in the social stigmatization of women athletes. On the other hand, female weightlifters also face significant infrastructural and political barriers, particularly in the West Bank, where military checkpoints, limited access to training facilities, and gendered restrictions pose ongoing challenges (Abdelhadi, 2023).

In Gaza, these challenges have intensified due to the ongoing Israeli war that began in October 2023. According to the Palestinian Sports Media Association, 708 Palestinian athletes have been killed by Israeli forces during the war (Anadolu Agency, 2024). Many female athletes have lost access to food, water, and sports infrastructure, as training centers have been bombed or repurposed. Survivors report malnutrition, disease, and permanent injuries, including limb amputations caused by missile attacks. These intersecting forms of political violence and gender oppression mean that for many women, weight training becomes not only a form of physical agency, but also an act of resistance in the face of military occupation and systemic marginalization.

Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate women's emergence in weight training and the struggles the female weightlifters had to face for their choice of sport and their physical muscularity (Baghurst et al., 2014; Boyle, 2005; Guttmann, 1991; Marshall et al. 2018; Shilling and Bunsell, 2009; Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2009). But there are no studies in the Palestinian context that focus on women's experiences in weight training. Moreover, although numerous studies have been undertaken on women's experience of sports generally in the Arab world, there are no studies that focus on the specific issues that face women in weight training. This scholarly silence contributes to the erasure of their narratives and hinders the development of gender-responsive sport policies in Palestine.

The general objective of this research is to investigate the socio-political attitudes and personal attitudes towards Palestinian female weightlifters in relation to the ideal body image, from the point of view of the women themselves. It explores the reasons behind Palestinian women's participation in weight training, female weightlifters' own perception of the ideal body, and the socio-political experiences they face as they pursue weight training. As an active female bodybuilder and personal trainer, myself, I was motivated to undertake this research to investigate the intricate nature of embodiment, corporality and female

weightlifters in the Palestinian context. My eight-year experience within the weight training community not only highlights my passion for this topic, but also provides me with a unique perspective that enables me to explore the body image experiences of Palestinian female weightlifters.

In this research, I investigated the social, cultural, political, and individual challenges of the female weightlifters' body in the underrepresented Palestinian context. I explored the factors that influence the Palestinian female weightlifters' decisions to enter this specific sport despite the social norms that perceive it as a gender inappropriate activity. What is the impact of engaging in weight training on these women? How do they negotiate societal reactions towards their bodies? And how do they respond to these social reactions to their bodies? Finally, this research investigated how Palestinian female athletes' experiences in weight training—and the challenges they encountered—were shaped by and intersected with the colonial structures present in their everyday lives. This study seeks to contribute to encouraging more Palestinian women to practice weight training for the different physiological benefits and enhanced agency that it can provide.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter I firstly present the general literature on gender embodiment and body image that is at the core of this research. I, then, review how this literature relates to women athletes. After that, I specifically review the literature on body image and female bodybuilders. This part of the literature review examines social reactions towards female bodybuilders' bodies, including dismissive social reactions to women bodybuilding as a sport (including women's participation in bodybuilding competitions) as well as towards different muscle groups in women's bodies. This is followed by literature on female bodybuilders' attitudes and perceptions to their own bodies, in relation towards dominant norms of ideal

feminine body image and how they adhere to it or counter it in their own self-perception. I will then examine literature concerning the body image of Muslim and Arab women, comparing those who engage in sports with those who do not, to investigate how culture and religion influence body image. Finally, I will present relevant academic discussion on colonialism's impact on the body and body image, as I link it to the Palestinian female weightlifters' context.

General literature on female embodiment/ body image

Body image is a multi-layered construct encompassing self-perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors towards physical appearance, which is intricately intertwined with individual experiences and societal influences (Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990; Grogan, 2008; Thompson et al., 1999 as cited in Calogero and Thompson, 2010). Calogero and Thompson (2010) emphasize the interactive nature of body image construction, highlighting the role of social pressures, particularly regarding gender differences in body image construction, with women often subjected to more intense and restrictive beauty norms than men.

This gendered disparity stems from the longstanding cultural objectification of women's bodies, which frames physical appearance as a central determinant of female worth and social acceptability (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). According to objectification theory, women are socialized to internalize an outsider's perspective of their bodies, engaging in habitual body monitoring that can lead to body dissatisfaction, shame, and anxiety. These processes are exacerbated by the presence of media representations that portray idealized, often digitally altered, images of thin, toned, and youthful female bodies, which become normative standards for self-evaluation (Tiggemann & Slater, 2004).

Moreover, contemporary beauty standards are not only unattainable for most women but are also deeply racialized and classed. These ideals tend to privilege white, middle-class, able-bodied norms of femininity, thereby excluding many women whose bodies do not

conform to this narrow framework (Crenshaw, 1991; Mears, 2011). Consequently, body image becomes a site of intersectional struggle, particularly for women whose identities exist at the margins of dominant beauty discourses.

Different literature has emphasized the perpetuation of Western beauty ideals that contribute to the internalization of unrealistic standards, leading to psychological distress among women (Calogero et al., 2007; Thompson & Tantleff, 1992; Harrison, 2003 as cited in Calogero and Thompson, 2010). These ideals often emphasize youthfulness, and specific body proportions, creating a narrowly defined standard of beauty that many women strive to attain. Body image, including problems of body image are connected to gendered assumptions about the feminine beauty ideal, the dominant set of beauty standards regarding physical traits that are ingrained in women throughout their lives and from an early age against which they judge their own level of physical attractiveness. Among the various components of the beauty ideal, the ideal feminine body image particularly focuses on body shape, weight and proportion. The historical role of women's bodies as "social and economic currency" reinforces pressure to conform to the feminine ideal of beauty standards (Henley, 1977; Hesse-Biber et al., 2006; Unger & Crawford, 1996 as cited in Calogero and Thompson, 2010, p. 32).

Different scholars have illustrated how the ideal feminine body image is not static but evolves over time and differs across cultural contexts (Bonafini & Pozzilli, 2011). For instance, in Western societies, the dominant standards of female beauty have shifted considerably throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. During the early to mid-twentieth century, fuller, more voluptuous bodies were often idealized, representing fertility and domestic femininity. However, by the latter half of the century, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, a new ideal emerged, privileging slimness as a symbol of self-control, discipline, and modernity (Grogan, 2008; Bordo, 2003).

Bonafini and Pozzilli (2011) describe this shift in beauty norms as reflective of broader societal changes, including increased visibility of women in public and professional spheres, which contributed to the endorsment of thinness as a signifier of success and moral worth. Similarly, representations of the "ideal" female body began to merge thinness with elements of athleticism and sexuality. Marwick (1993) described the emerging beauty ideal in the 1990s as "shapely, slender, and softly curvy," a form that balanced leanness with select curves to meet an increasingly contradictory set of expectations.

This hybrid ideal continues to evolve in contemporary media representations, where the ideal female body is often depicted as thin yet curvaceous, with large breasts and buttocks, a small waist, and toned (but not overly muscular) limbs. The emphasis on toned muscle, as opposed to overtly bulky or masculine physiques, reflects ongoing gendered assumptions that celebrate feminine attractiveness while simultaneously policing women's physical strength. These images are not merely aesthetic; they carry embedded cultural and political meanings about femininity, desirability, and normative health (Gill, 2007; Elias et al., 2017). Such standards are both highly restrictive and difficult to achieve, leading many women to engage in various body-regulating practices, including dieting, cosmetic surgery, and intensive exercise, in pursuit of socially sanctioned beauty.

Although thinness has been celebrated by beauty standards as the feminine ideal over the last few decades, this phenomenon of muscle-ideal internalization complicates contemporary women's body image ideals, extending beyond thinness and curviness to include toned muscles as a desirable attribute (Thompson & Cafri, 2007 as cited in Calogero and Thompson, 2010).   Saenz- Herrero et.al (2019) also show the shifting ideals of femininity, from prehistoric images of robustness to contemporary Western standards of thinness and infantilization, which underscores the historically changing ideals of female body standards discussed above and how these affect women's bodily experience (Sáenz-

Herrero et al., 2019, p. 268). Furthermore, Sáenz-Herrero et al. (2019) note how western standards have created a contemporary feminine body ideal that is impossible to reproduce; the need to attain excessive or even extreme thinness and toned muscles while retaining a large bust. These impossible standards have led to women undertaking body modification through medical interventions, such as through plastic surgeries or steroids. Sáenz-Herrero et al. (2019) suggests that these extreme means used to modifying the female body has meant it has moved from being simply an object of the male gaze into becoming a spectacle —a curated and modified display subjected to constant public scrutiny and consumption. Such interventions can endanger women's physical and psychological health, leading to complications such as infections, hormonal imbalances, body dysmorphia, or even death (Grogan, 2008). Beyond the physical risks, these practices may also compromise women's overall well-being and quality of life, reinforcing cycles of dissatisfaction and self-surveillance. This spectacle, shaped by media, digital culture, and capitalist aesthetics, turns women's bodies into sites of performance and regulation, reinforcing gendered power dynamics and further alienating women from their own embodied experiences.

Cash (2004) expanded the concept of body image to encompass a wide array of psychological experiences related to embodiment, emphasizing that body image is not merely about one's physical appearance, but also deeply connected to self-esteem, identity, and mental health. He conceptualized body image as a multidimensional construct involving perceptual, cognitive, affective, and behavioral components that influence how individuals perceive, evaluate, and act toward their bodies. In doing so, Cash highlighted how body image plays a central role in human development, affecting psychological well-being across the lifespan. For instance, negative body image has been associated with a variety of psychological risks, including depression, eating disorders, low self-worth, and social anxiety (Cash, 2004). Furthermore, Cash's framework emphasizes that body image is adaptable and

shaped by ongoing interactions between individual psychological processes and broader sociocultural forces, including media representations, peer influences, and cultural standards of attractiveness.

Through the lens of gender, Sáenz-Herrero et al. (2019) explored the sociological and anthropological dimensions of the body, emphasizing that the body is not merely a biological entity but also a cultural and social construct that plays a central role in organizing and shaping human interactions. The female body, in particular, becomes a symbolic site through which gender norms and social hierarchies are enacted, policed, and reproduced. Within patriarchal societies, women's bodies are often regulated through dominant beauty standards that reflect broader systems of power and control. These standards dictate how a woman should look, move, and present herself, shaping not only public perceptions but also internalized self-concepts.

Feminist movements have played a significant role in contesting hegemonic beauty standards by problematizing the objectification of women's bodies and calling attention to the socio-political mechanisms that uphold these norms. The second-wave feminist critique, notably by theorists such as Naomi Wolf (1991) and Susan Bordo (2003), exposed the "beauty myth" as a means of social control, arguing that the promotion of impossible beauty ideals functioned to discipline women and divert their energy from public engagement. More recently, intersectional feminism has brought attention to how these ideals disproportionately marginalize Black, Indigenous, and other racialized women, trans and queer individuals, and those with disabilities, thereby expanding the discourse on body image beyond mainstream feminist narratives (Crenshaw, 1991; Lorde, 1984; Garland-Thomson, 2005). Despite the unattainability of these ideals, many women engage in continuous efforts to conform to them, often perceiving their bodies as inadequate or unacceptable. This persistent discrepancy between one's actual body and the culturally idealized body leads to what scholars' term

"body dissatisfaction", a negative subjective evaluation of one's body shape or size. Body dissatisfaction has been consistently linked to a range of negative psychological and physical health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, diminished self-esteem, disordered eating behaviors, and in some cases, self-harm (Grogan, 2008; Tiggemann, 2011).

Moreover, research indicates that body dissatisfaction is significantly more prevalent among women and adolescent girls than among men, which scholars attribute to the greater sociocultural emphasis placed on female appearance (Jones et al., 2004; Calogero & Thompson, 2010). This gender disparity highlights the embeddedness of body image issues within broader structures of gender inequality, where the female body is subject to heightened scrutiny and control. Consequently, women's lived experiences of embodiment are often characterized by surveillance, self-monitoring, and a sense of failure to meet impossible ideals, all of which shape their emotional and psychological well-being.

As a result of trying to meet these unrealistic beauty standards and excessive preoccupation with appearance flaws, Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) emerges causing "emotional suffering and significant disruptions in daily functioning" (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Crerand et al., 2005 as cited in Calogero and Thompson, 2010, p. 19).

In addition to media and cultural narratives, peer interactions and familial messages play a crucial role in shaping body image perceptions. Studies have found that comments from family members, particularly mothers, about weight, body shape, or eating habits are significantly correlated with girls' body dissatisfaction and the onset of disordered eating behaviors (Ata et al., 2007). These messages, often framed as concern or advice, may reinforce the belief that physical appearance is central to a woman's value, thereby contributing to internalized body surveillance and negative self-assessment. Similarly, peer group norms and experiences of body-related teasing, comparison, or even social exclusion

can amplify the internalization of unrealistic beauty ideals and foster a persistent negative body image (Jones, 2004).

The psychological consequences of this dissatisfaction are profound. One of the most prevalent outcomes is the development of disordered eating patterns, including chronic dieting, binge-eating, and excessive exercise, all of which are attempts to reshape the body in accordance with dominant appearance ideals (Stice & Shaw, 2002). Chronic dieting, although normalized in many societies, is associated with increased risk of weight cycling, nutritional deficiencies, and emotional distress. More severe responses include clinical eating disorders such as bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa, both of which have been closely linked to body image disturbance and are disproportionately experienced by adolescent girls and young women (Fairburn & Harrison, 2003).

Bulimia, for instance, is often driven by intense body dissatisfaction and a desire to control weight, manifesting through cycles of binge eating followed by compensatory behaviors such as vomiting or laxative use. The psychological toll of such disorders includes depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, and in extreme cases, suicidal thoughts. Moreover, these behaviors are not simply individual routes but are embedded within broader sociocultural pressures that equate thinness with success, self-discipline, and desirability. As Tiggemann and Slater (2013) note, the failure to conform to appearance ideals is frequently experienced not merely as a personal shortcoming but as a moral failure, which further exacerbates feelings of shame, low self-worth, and isolation.

In conclusion, the literature on body image revealed its multi-dimensional impact, influenced by individual experiences, societal pressures, and cultural ideals. Understanding these complexities is essential for addressing body image issues and how they influence the Palestinian female athletes' choices of body modifications.

Colonialism and the Body

  Various literature analyzed the impact of colonialism on the body and body image. By examining the works of Boehmer (2005), Gentles-Peart (2016), and Mahmood (2005) collectively, it becomes evident that colonialism not only imposes aesthetic and behavioral norms upon women's bodies but also structures the terms through which they can assert agency and redefine their physicality. All three scholars explored how marginalized women's bodies serve as sites of oppression and resistance. However, they approached this issue from different perspectives, offering insights into how colonial legacies shape contemporary understandings of body image and agency.

  Boehmer (2005) examined the transition of colonized women's bodies from being silenced and objectified under colonial regimes to becoming powerful symbols of agency in postcolonial narratives. She argued that "the silenced and wounded body of the colonised is a pervasive figure in colonial and post-colonial discourses" (Boehmer, 2005, p. 127). However, this body undergoes a process of "transfiguration," reclaiming autonomy and disrupting colonial binaries (Boehmer, 2005, p. 131). This transformation highlights how postcolonial bodies do not remain static but instead redefine their presence within and beyond the structures of colonial power.

  In contrast, Gentles-Peart (2016) focused on how white supremacist beauty ideals marginalize Caribbean women, particularly those with "thick" sbodies (p. 200). She emphasized how colonial ideas shaped the way Black women's bodies were seen, often labelling them as "unwomanly" or "monstrous," which led them to face both personal and societal pressures to fit into Eurocentric beauty standards (Gentles-Peart, 2016, p. 199). Unlike Boehmer's (2005) focus on broader postcolonial narratives, Gentles-Peart (2016) offered a more personal, embodied perspective by presenting the lived experiences of Caribbean women. She argued that resistance takes the form of reclaiming cultural aesthetics,

which challenges the pervasive dominance of anti-Black ideologies (Gentles-Peart, 2016, p. 201). This shows how colonialism operates not only through direct physical control but also through long-standing beauty ideals that shape how women experience their bodies. Mahmood (2005) further complicated dominant feminist interpretations of agency, challenging the assumption that resistance is the sole measure of agency. She argued that women's engagement with societal norms is more complex, emphasizing that agency can be enacted not only in opposition to power but also within it. Through her analysis of Egyptian Islamic revival movements, Mahmood (2005) demonstrated how bodily practices, such as veiling and religious piety, were not necessarily acts of subjugation but could be forms of ethical self-cultivation within particular socio-religious contexts. She stated that "agency is not simply the capacity for resistance to social norms but is also the capacity to inhabit and sustain those norms in ways that reconfigure their meaning and material effect" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 15). This perspective expands discussions of bodily autonomy by illustrating how individuals may navigate restrictive structures without necessarily directly rejecting them.

To sum up, although they focus on different aspects, Boehmer (2005), Gentles-Peart (2016), and Mahmood (2005) highlighted that women's bodies are not just passive but rather spaces where power, identity, and resistance constantly intersect and are challenged. Boehmer's (2005) postcolonial lens provided a macro-level understanding of how women's bodies symbolize cultural and political struggle, while Gentles-Peart's (2016) analysis offered a micro-level, embodied view of resistance through everyday acts of defiance against beauty norms. Mahmood (2005), in contrast, provided a framework for understanding agency as something that can be enacted both within and beyond the constraints of dominant structures. Together, these perspectives highlight how marginalized women reclaim agency over their bodies to challenge systems of control in ways that go beyond simple binaries of oppression and resistance.

General literature on body image of women athletes

After understanding the significance and profound impact of body image on women, it is important to understand its intricate influence on women athletes. Greenleaf and Petrie (2013) provided insights into the complex relationship between societal constructs and the body image of women athletes.

According to Greenleaf and Petrie (2013), the athletic body is "subject to social construction and interpretation" as sports place the bodies of the athletes on "display for judgment, evaluation and critique" that are tied to gendered ideals (2013, p. 119). In Western society, gender ideals are mapped onto physical appearance (Grogan, 2008; Lorber & Martin, 2003 as cited in Greenleaf and Petrie, 2013, p.119), with muscularity associated with masculinity and thinner, toned physiques linked to femininity (Greenleaf and Petrie, 2013, p.120). However, these ideals are not static or universal; they vary across cultures and historical contexts, with some societies valuing fuller figures or strength over thinness, revealing that beauty standards are socially and culturally constructed.

Research on body image among athletes reveals significant gendered differences in how male and female athletes experience and negotiate bodily ideals. For male athletes, the demands of athletic performance often align with dominant social ideals of masculinity—muscularity, strength, and physical dominance—thus minimizing conflict between the athletic ideal and the social body ideal (Krane et al., 2004; Greenleaf, 2002). In contrast, female athletes frequently experience a dissonance between the body ideal promoted within their sport—one that prioritizes strength, muscular development, and physical power—and the prevailing societal ideal of femininity, which emphasizes slenderness, softness, and aesthetic appeal (Greenleaf, 2002). Greenleaf (2002) terms this tension the distinction between athletic body image and social body image, noting that female athletes are often

expected to conform to both ideals simultaneously, despite their inherent contradictions. This dual pressure creates unique challenges for women athletes, who must navigate the competing demands of excelling in their sport while also maintaining an appearance that aligns with traditional gender norms (Krane et al., 2001; Choi, 2000). Importantly, not all sports position women in direct opposition to feminine ideals—sports such as gymnastics or figure skating often align with slenderness norms, while others like weight training or rugby emphasize traits that diverge from conventional femininity.

As discussed above, conformity to socially prescribed feminine body ideals are crucial, since it leads to rewards such as social status and access to social and symbolic capital, while deviating from these ideals can result in social stigma (Judge & Cable, 2011; Kwan & Trautner, 2009 as cited in Greenleaf and Petrie, 2013, p. 119). Furthermore, mass media, including magazines and television, play a significant role in perpetuating narrow and often unrealistic body ideals by consistently highlighting and evaluating athletes' bodies. For female athletes, this scrutiny tends to be intensified and gendered; they are often judged not only on their athletic performance but also on their ability to conform to the socially constructed ideal of femininity. As Greenleaf and Petrie (2013, p. 120) argue, this dual pressure exposes female athletes to negative evaluation when their athletic bodies—muscular, strong, or non-conforming—deviate from the thin and traditionally feminine ideal promoted by mainstream media. Moreover, the gender segregated structure of sports reinforces socially prescribed expectations of masculinity and femininity, creating different norms and standards for male and female athletes (Greenleaf and Petrie, 2013, p. 120). This structure not only separates athletes based on sex but also reinforces the idea that certain physical traits and behaviors are appropriate for men and others for women. As Greenleaf and Petrie (2013) explain, male athletes are typically encouraged to embody strength, aggression, and muscularity, which align with dominant ideals of masculinity. In contrast, female athletes are

expected to maintain a balance between physical competence and traditional femininity, leading to pressure to appear both athletic and aesthetically pleasing. In addition, the commercialization of sports and its media representation has elevated athletes' bodies to symbolic representations of the ideal physique—particularly male athletes, whose muscular and powerful bodies are often portrayed as the normative ideal for men (Greenleaf and Petrie, 2013, p. 120). However, female athletes are rarely positioned as embodying the ideal female body. Instead, their athletic physiques often contradict the socially constructed feminine ideal, which emphasizes thinness, softness, and delicacy. As Greenleaf and Petrie (2013) explain, the media tends to respond to this contradiction by hypersexualizing female athletes, focusing on their appearance rather than their performance. This results in their objectification and reinforces the expectation that women—even athletes—must still conform to conventional standards of attractiveness (Greenleaf and Petrie, 2013, p. 120). Feminist movements have long challenged these expectations, critiquing the objectification of women athletes and calling for greater recognition of athleticism over appearance. These interventions have contributed to a growing awareness and critique of beauty standards, even if dominant norms remain entrenched.

To sum up, as women athletes' bodies are objectified for entertainment and pleasure rather than for athletic performance, gender and beauty stereotypes are reinforced to undermine the accomplishments of female athletes. The next section, specifically, discusses literature on social reactions towards the bodies of female bodybuilders, which leads the way to comprehending the factors that influence the choices of body modifications and sport of Palestinian women athletes.

Bodybuilding as a Male-Defined Sport

Historical Overview

Bodybuilding, as a structured sport, originated in the late 19th century with Eugen Sandow, often credited as the "father of modern bodybuilding." Sandow's promotion of the muscular physique as both an aesthetic and physical ideal culminated in the first major bodybuilding competition at London's Royal Albert Hall in 1901 (Wikipedia, 2024). Over time, bodybuilding evolved into a professionalized sport with the founding of the International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness (IFBB) in 1946, which institutionalized global competitions and codified judging criteria.

Core Activities and Athletic Goals

The central goal of bodybuilding is the hypertrophic development of skeletal muscles to achieve maximum muscular size, symmetry, and definition (Brown, 1999). Competitive bodybuilders undergo intense resistance training and adhere to strict dietary regimes, emphasizing low body fat and high muscular visibility. Judging is based not only on muscle mass, but also on proportionality between body parts, stage presence, and the ability to pose effectively (Greenleaf & Petrie, 2013, p. 120).

Bodybuilders target specific muscle groups through isolated and compound exercises. For male competitors, this often involves an upper body focus—chest (pectorals), shoulders (deltoids), arms (biceps/triceps), and back (latissimus dorsi)—in line with culturally supported ideals of power, dominance, and masculinity (Brown, 1999). The lower body— quadriceps (the front muscles of the legs), hamstrings (the back muscles of the legs), calves, and glutes (the buttocks)— is also developed, but tends to receive less cultural emphasis compared to the symbolic dominance of a muscular torso (Greenleaf & Petrie, 2013, p. 120).

Masculinity and Norms in Bodybuilding

Bodybuilding has historically been constructed as a male-defined sport, with its ideals deeply rooted in normative conceptions of masculinity. Brown (1999) argues that male bodybuilders often engage in bodily practices that reaffirm traditional gender roles through muscular bulk and exaggerated upper body strength. These embodied performances are not only athletic but also cultural, reinforcing the association of male bodies with strength, aggression, and self-discipline. Greenleaf and Petrie (2013) further highlight how male athletes' bodies are often celebrated in mainstream media as exemplars of the ideal male physique, unlike their female counterparts who face scrutiny for diverging from the feminine body ideal (p. 120).

While bodybuilding has historically been shaped by male-defined ideals—emphasizing upper-body hypertrophy, size, and bulk—female bodybuilders navigate a distinct set of expectations that both mirror and resist these norms. Although the training principles of resistance and progressive overload are similar across genders, women are often encouraged to focus on developing lean muscle tone, to maintain a more feminine silhouette (Bodyweight Training Arena, 2024). This reflects broader societal pressures that constrain female muscularity within acceptable gendered limits. Unlike male bodybuilders, whose success is often measured by extreme muscularity and dominance, women in bodybuilding must face the paradox of achieving athletic strength while conforming to societal ideals of beauty and femininity. Thus, the female bodybuilding physique is judged not only against athletic standards but also through a gendered lens that often penalizes deviation from heteronormative ideals. This dual expectation reinforces the unequal framework in which the sport remains rooted in male norms, even as more women enter the field and reshape its boundaries.

Social Reactions Towards Female Bodybuilders' Bodies

The literature notes various social reactions towards the bodies of the female bodybuilders, which I will categorize according to three dimensions: general negative social reactions to women's bodybuilding as an appropriate activity for women; critical social perceptions of different muscle groups on women's bodies, and the sport-specific norms in competitive women's bodybuilding (that in contrast to men's competitive bodybuilding norms) opposes muscle bulk on women bodybuilders – and in fact penalizes women with muscular bodies.

Social Reactions to Women's Bodybuilding as Gender Appropriate

The bodies of the female bodybuilders are generally socially criticized by men and women (Boyle, 2005; Marshall et al., 2019; Shilling & Bunsell, 2009; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009). Shilling and Bunsell (2009), and Boyle (2005) examined how female bodybuilders are considered as outlaws, because their body muscularity breaks the gender norms of the feminine body imposed by society. For instance, Shilling and Bunsell (2009) claimed that the look of a muscular woman interrupts "most people's sense of normality in relation to gender and sexuality" (2009, p. 146). They also link social disapproval of female bodybuilders' bodies to the physicality of the sport, stating … "in terms of the physical strain, noise and sweat involved in this activity, female bodybuilders are engaging in work removed from conventionally feminine activities that have more in common with heavy manual labour characteristics of traditional working-class male industrial jobs" (2009, pp. 146-147). In addition, female bodybuilders are considered "outrageous by 'normals' because they refuse the "relatively passive roles, customs, body techniques and appearance associated with Western perceptions of femininity (de Beauvoir, 1993[1949], as cited in Shilling & Bunsell, 2009, p. 148). Similarly, Boyle (2005) observed people's stigmatization of female bodybuilders as homosexuals explaining that society's "expressions of discomfort about

muscular women's gender identity necessarily [led] to the questioning of their sexuality"
(2005, p. 138).

Sisjord and Kristiansen (2009) affirm the societal challenges female bodybuilders face, noting that their muscular physiques often deviate from traditional feminine ideals, leading to social rejection or marginalization. This societal perception underscores the tension between muscularity and conventional femininity. However, drawing on Grogan et al. (2004), they highlight that within the subculture of bodybuilding, muscularity has become normalized and even celebrated. Grogan et al. (2004) found that women immersed in bodybuilding communities often perceive muscularity as a standard, challenging mainstream beauty norms. This internalization of muscular ideals within the subculture provides a supportive environment that contrasts with broader societal views. Thus, while female bodybuilders may encounter societal resistance due to prevailing gender norms, they simultaneously find acceptance and validation within their subcultural communities. This duality illustrates the complex interplay between societal standards and subcultural norms, where muscularity is both contested and embraced depending on the context.

While the general societal reaction towards female bodybuilders bodies is negative, Gutmann (1991) and Marshall et al. (2019) found that women are more critical of female bodybuilders than are men. For example, Guttmann (1991) drew on different studies on female bodybuilders, as he presented the history of women in sports, to show that although the majority of men's and women's perceptions are negative towards the bodies of female bodybuilders, men's reactions were relatively more positive. Marshal explained this through Riley's concept of the "female gaze", that women when viewing each other do so competitively in light of the male gaze (Riley, 2016 in Marshall, 2019, p.99)), and suggested "these social comparisons among women on social media may be understood as operating through a competition-oriented 'female gaze'" (2019, p. 99). Marshal et al. believed that

women use this gaze to "evaluate and judge one another according to the extent to which they meet society's normative feminine bodily ideals", which means they reproduce the male gaze, and also police each other in relation to it due to "the pressure to meet feminine bodily standards" (2019, p. 99). In short, female bodybuilders' bodies generally receive negative reactions from their societies because of their muscularity, with women generally more negative towards female bodybuilders, as they have appropriated and assumed the normative male gaze, more than the men themselves have done.

Social Norms Regarding Male versus Female Muscularity

The other area of this literature focused on adverse reactions to Muscle Groups in Women's Bodies. Female bodybuilders are encouraged by society to present their muscular bodies in an "ornamented", "sexual" and "passive" ways to fit the "(hetero)normative feminine" body (Marshall et al., 2019). Thus, Baghurst et al. (2014) and Marshall et al. (2019) argued that female bodybuilders size of muscles and choice of muscle group's bulking (as is the norm for male bodybuilders) are critically surveilled by their societies. Women's bodies, while allowed to have muscles, have to maintain a feminine look, which is achieved by either lean body muscles (Baghurst et al., 2014), or only bulky lower body muscles (Marshall et al., 2019). For example, as Baghurst et al. (2014) argued that although women are allowed by society to have muscles, they are limited from achieving a certain size of muscle, which makes "bodybuilding and the pursuit of muscularity" contradictory to the "cultural expectation" (2014, p. 5). Marshall et al. (2019) found that female bodybuilders are often criticized when they share images showcasing their muscular upper bodies—such as broad shoulders, defined arms, or visible chest muscles—while they receive more positive feedback when posting images that emphasize their lower bodies, like toned legs or glutes (p. 107). This difference in response reflects prevailing gender norms about how the female body "should" look. In mainstream beauty standards, muscularity in women is often only

considered attractive when it accentuates curves typically associated with femininity (such as the hips and thighs), while muscular upper bodies are seen as too "masculine" or deviating from traditional ideals. Thus, the online reception of these images illustrates the social expectation that even athletic women should conform to gendered body aesthetics—strong, but not too strong, and especially not in ways that threaten the cultural image of femininity. Marshall et al. referred this variance of reaction to the culturally constructed functionality of the upper body in comparison to the lower body (2019, p. 108). Upper-body muscularity is typically associated with functional strength—such as broad shoulders, prominent biceps, and defined upper back muscles—which are culturally coded as masculine traits due to their connection with labor, power, and physical dominance (Marshall et al., 2019, p. 108). In contrast, muscular lower bodies—particularly strong thighs and prominent glutes—are more culturally acceptable for women because they align with sexualized beauty standards that emphasize curvaceousness and fertility. As Marshall et al. (2019) explain, toned or muscular buttocks and legs are often celebrated in contemporary media and fitness culture as part of the idealized "hourglass" figure, which remains rooted in traditional, heteronormative ideals of femininity (p. 108). In sum, according to gendered body ideals, women's bodies are allowed to have small lean upper body muscles, but muscle bulk can only be on women's lower bodies in order to have a feminine stereotypical body that is accepted by society.

Gendered Body Norms – The Feminine Ideal in Female Bodybuilding

The adverse stance towards women's muscle size and type is paralleled by oppositional reactions against women's muscular bodies in bodybuilding competitions. Female bodybuilders also suffer from the sport-specific feminine body ideals and expectations within the bodybuilding community which demands them to embody a version of the stereotypical feminine ornamented body (Baghurst et al., 2014; Sisjord & Kristiansen,

2009). While muscle bulk is a central criterion for success in male bodybuilding—where larger, more defined musculature signifies discipline, dominance, and peak athletic performance—the standards for female bodybuilders have historically been redefined and constrained by prevailing gender norms. Once women were permitted to compete in bodybuilding, the male-defined ideal of extreme hypertrophy was not simply extended to female competitors; rather, it was recalibrated to fit within the confines of traditional femininity. This redefinition produced a contradictory ideal for female bodybuilders: they are expected to exhibit muscular development to demonstrate athletic legitimacy, yet not to the extent that it undermines societal expectations of femininity. The "ideal femininity" promoted in this context favors a lean, toned body with moderate muscle definition—particularly in the lower body, such as sculpted legs and glutes—while discouraging visible bulk in the upper body, such as thick arms, wide shoulders, or a heavily muscled chest (Marshall et al., 2019, p. 108). In essence, women are required to build strength and aesthetic form simultaneously, but only in a way that enhances traditionally feminine curves and avoids crossing into what is culturally perceived as masculine territory. This produces a double bind for female bodybuilders: to succeed in the sport, they must develop strength and muscle, but to be socially accepted, they must remain visibly feminine creating an almost impossible standard that does not exist for male counterparts (Grogan et al., 2004).

Sisjord and Kristiansen (2009), and Baghurst (2014) argued that female bodybuilders are under pressure to present the ideal femininity in bodybuilding competitions. For instance, "women participating in bodybuilding competitions [were] expected to appear acceptably 'feminine' by having a 'feminine shape', maintaining breast tissue or having breast implants, having a visible waist" (Grogan et al., 2004, as cited in Sisjord and Kristiansen 2009, p. 8). Baghurst et al. (2014) confirm that the judging criteria for female bodybuilding have been strategically altered to ensure that competitors present not just muscular development, but

also the socially constructed ideal of femininity. As they explain, changes made at the beginning of the millennium emphasized facial appearance and overall symmetry, shifting the focus away from purely muscular achievement to more aesthetic and traditionally feminine features (The Sandwich, 2001, as cited in Baghurst et al., 2014, p. 5). Unlike their male counterparts—who are judged primarily on muscle mass, definition, and proportionality— female bodybuilders are also evaluated on facial beauty, which aligns the sport more closely with beauty pageants than with performance-based competition. The inclusion of facial aesthetics positions women's bodybuilding within a gendered framework where the female athlete is expected to retain delicate or conventionally attractive facial features, regardless of the muscularity required for the sport.

Furthermore, the emphasis on symmetry in women's bodybuilding is likewise shaped by gendered expectations. While symmetry in male bodybuilding typically refers to balanced muscle development across the body (e.g., proportionate chest-to-arm ratio, or right-to-left balance), for female bodybuilders, symmetry often implies the maintenance of a feminine silhouette—particularly the hourglass figure. This includes a narrow waist, rounded glutes, and shapely legs, which reflect the same ideals promoted in mainstream beauty contests. The result is a set of judging criteria that compels female bodybuilders to train and present their bodies in ways that satisfy both the sport's demands and prevailing cultural norms of femininity—ideals that are rarely, if ever, imposed on male bodybuilders.

In other words, women in bodybuilding are expected to reconcile two conflicting ideals: the general societal ideal of the female body and the ideal female bodybuilder physique as defined by the sport's institutions—both of which are shaped by dominant, male-oriented perspectives. The societal ideal female body, often constructed through media, fashion, and beauty industries, privileges thinness with soft curves, moderate tone, a narrow waist, visible but not overly defined abdominal muscles, and emphasized features such as full

breasts and rounded buttocks—embodying what is traditionally perceived as sexual attractiveness and physical delicacy. In contrast, within the context of bodybuilding competitions, women are expected to exhibit a controlled and visibly muscular physique, but crucially, one that still preserves "feminine" qualities. As Baghurst et al. (2014) explain, these expectations are institutionalized through judging criteria that place significant weight on not only muscle tone and symmetry but also facial beauty and overall aesthetic appearance—criteria not equally applied to male bodybuilders (The Sandwich, 2001, as cited in Baghurst et al., 2014, p. 5).

This contradiction is most visible in the structure of female bodybuilding competition categories, which explicitly embed femininity into their judging standards. For example, categories such as "Bikini" and "Figure" emphasize a lean, toned body with slight muscle visibility, a small waist, and a curvaceous but non-bulky silhouette. Judges in these categories look for "full round glutes," "a small amount of shoulder development," and overall "feminine presentation," including hair, makeup, and even walking style (Lipstick Lifters, n.d.). Even in more muscular categories such as "Women's Physique," the rules stress the importance of avoiding "excessive bulk" and maintaining a "feminine shape." The one category that most closely mirrors the traditional male bodybuilding ideal—"Women's Bodybuilding"—focuses on significant muscle size and definition; however, as noted by Lipstick Lifters (n.d.), this is the least popular division, with many women avoiding it precisely because of the negative social perception of heavily muscled female bodies.

Thus, female competitors are caught between two ideals: on the one hand, societal norms push them to maintain soft, sexualized femininity; on the other hand, the bodybuilding world requires physical strength and muscularity—but only to the extent that it does not challenge conventional femininity. This forced compromise means that female bodybuilders are constantly judged not just for their athletic performance, but for how well they can

embody a narrowly defined and highly gendered aesthetic—one that often contradicts the core physical demands of their sport.

In conclusion, female bodybuilders are perceived negatively by society because both their bodies and practice of bodybuilding challenge general norms about the feminine ideal. They receive general dismissive social reactions, rejecting their muscular bodies that do not conform to the ideal feminine body image and are considered a sign of masculinity or homosexuality. Women are generally more critical of the female bodybuilders' bodies, due to internalizing the male gaze and projecting it onto themselves as well as other women's bodies. Female bodybuilders also receive general adverse social reactions to different muscle groups, since they are surveilled and encouraged by society to have lean, small upper body muscles and moderately bulky lower body muscles—particularly glutes and thighs—to emphasize socially accepted femininity. In addition, female bodybuilders have to contend with the sport's specific norms of the ideal feminine bodybuilding body – within the institutional sport itself. Competitive female bodybuilding norms are also shaped by wider gender body ideals, imposing on women bodybuilders a version of the broader feminine ideal within a bodybuilder's physique—specifically demanding ornamented looks (including make-up, styled hair, and tanned skin), a slim waist, breast augmentation, and a muscle structure that is toned and defined, but not excessively bulky, in order to preserve a "feminine" appearance.

Female Bodybuilders' Attitude towards Ideal Feminine Body Image

The literature on Female bodybuilders' attitudes towards the general social ideal feminine body image shows that a range of reactions between total rejection and defiance of the ideal feminine body to various degrees of identifying with the social norm. This section focuses on these two types of reactions to the social norm among women bodybuilders: rejection or acceptance and re-production of it.

Challenging the Social Ideal

Some female bodybuilders challenge the dominant norms about the feminine body as they show pride and confidence in their muscular bodies. Bagurst et al. (2014) and Marshall et al. (2019) found that bodybuilding can make female bodybuilders feel empowered and confident to exhibit their muscular bodies which can play a role in promoting the gradual social acceptance of muscular female bodies. According to these writers, women may choose bodybuilding as an "act of archetypical rebellion from which they [find] empowerment" (Heywood, 1998; Wesley, 2001, as cited in Baghurst et al., 2014, p. 6). Through analyzing some profiles of female bodybuilders on Instagram, Marshall et al. (2019) argued that female bodybuilders are actively challenging the hetero(normative) feminine body with their muscles. These women defy the ideal feminine body image, which means rejecting the stigma of weakness and fragility identified with the feminine body, by developing strong muscular bodies that redefine femininity in opposition to the duality of weakness and femininity (Marshall et al., 2019). Similarly, Baghurst et al. (2014) studied the different reasons behind female bodybuilders' choice of sport despite the stigmatization of muscular female bodies and concluded that while women choose to become bodybuilders for multiple reasons, high among them was finding "self-esteem and empowerment" (2014). These women's pride in their muscular bodies highlights the influence of their sport on their positive sense of self. Many studies suggest that the "acquisition of muscle" increases women's self-confidence "through feelings of power, control, health, and sexiness" (Fisher, 1997; Grogan, Evans, Wright, & Hunter, 2004; Monaghan, Bloor& Dobash, 1998, as cited in Baghurst et al., 2014, p. 6). Moreover, Baghurst et al. focused on the role that female bodybuilders play in the progress of the societal acceptance for the muscular female bodies as they proudly assert and exhibit (at competitions and through media) their muscular bodies (2014, p.8). In summary, these studies found that female bodybuilders defy the conventional

feminine body ideal by positively asserting and taking pride in their muscular physiques, and that this further contributes to changing social perceptions towards ideal feminine body images – creating a gradual societal acceptance of muscular female bodies.

Bodybuilders and Adherence to the Ideal Feminine Body Image

In contrast to the positive view in the literature above, other literature focusses on how female bodybuilders continue to adhere to aspects of the socially ideal feminine body image. While Bagurst et al. (2014) and Marshall et al. (2019) argued that female bodybuilders challenge the ideal feminine body image, Boyle (2005) and Marshall (2019), in another section of their article, focused on the negative self-perceptions of female bodybuilders, and how they reproduce dominant stereotypes of feminine bodies at the same time as participating in the sport. These authors confirmed that not only society negatively monitors women bodybuilders, but these women also practice negative self-surveillance as a result of their internalization of the socially ideal body image (Boyle, 2005; Marshall, 2019). For instance, Marshal et al. (2019) argued that some female bodybuilders internalize the ideal feminine body image of big lower parts, a slim waist and lean muscles. Thus, these women focus on bulking their lower body muscles while being self-conscious about the fats they gain on their abdomen during bulking (Marshall et. Al, 2019). Boyle confirmed that female bodybuilders "while not simply passive dupes of a patriarchal institution, can be as deeply invested in reproducing normative sex, gender and sexual identities as the bodybuilding gatekeepers who enforce them" (2005, p. 136). While drawing on interviews with competitive female bodybuilders, Boyle (2005) focused on how these women deal with the ideal female bodybuilder, and the normative femininity in bodybuilding competitions. The results revealed that his participants make "sexist stereotyping of hypermuscular women", while considering the African- American female bodybuilders more masculine than white female bodybuilders (Boyle, 2005, p. 139). The authors concluded that female bodybuilders

may internalize and reappropriate the socially ideal feminine body image (Boyle, 2005; Marshall et all., 2019) which results in their surveillance of other female bodybuilders (Boyle, 2005). In brief, female bodybuilders can and often do align themselves with the socially ideal feminine body image by adopting the socially ideal body and monitoring other female bodybuilders' muscular physiques.

In conclusion, women's involvement in bodybuilding is riddled with challenges. They face societal backlash for deviating from the conventional feminine physique with their muscularity. Criticism varies in relation to different muscle groups and occurs during bodybuilding competitions, as well, if they don't conform to the social or female bodybuilder feminine ideals. Female bodybuilders react differently to their own muscularity and that of their peers. Despite the hurdles, other literature shows that participating in bodybuilding can increase self-confidence, a sense of agency, and a challenge to the socially ideal feminine form. Nonetheless, some female bodybuilders internalize societal standards and impose them on themselves and others. While the literature extensively covers various aspects of female bodybuilding, there remains a need for future research on the evolving construction of fitness models' bodies as the new ideal. Unlike traditional female bodybuilders, fitness models represent a more socially acceptable, commercially marketable version of muscular femininity. Their bodies are typically lean, well-defined, and toned—but not overly muscular or bulky—striking a balance between athleticism and the conventional feminine aesthetic. This emerging ideal often excludes the more extreme muscular development seen in competitive bodybuilding and instead promotes a body that is strong yet still aligns with mainstream beauty standards. As such, fitness models are increasingly positioned as the ideal body type for active women, blending elements of health, sex appeal, and disciplined aesthetics.

Literature on Arabic and Muslim Female Bodybuilders

Sports in the Arab World continues to be dominated by males' sports, images and competitions, which explains the lack of literature that tackled the body image of Arab women in sports, including those in bodybuilding. The literature on Arab and/or Muslim women in sports predominantly focuses on three main themes: structural and cultural limitations, media representation, and agency through sport. Firstly, researchers highlight how religious, cultural, and political factors often restrict women's participation in sports. These limitations can include lack of access to facilities, societal norms that discourage female physical visibility, and concerns over modesty and gender segregation, which all contribute to lower participation rates among Arab and Muslim women. Secondly, the literature critiques how Arab and Muslim female athletes are portrayed in media, where representations are often shaped by orientalist or stereotypical lenses. Women are frequently either hyper-visible in narratives of resistance and exceptionality or rendered invisible, reinforcing dominant assumptions about passivity or oppression. Lastly, scholars explore how sports can serve as a site of agency, offering women the chance to challenge restrictive gender roles, build self-esteem, and gain public visibility. In this way, sports participation becomes not just a physical act, but a political and social tool for renegotiating identity and reclaiming space within male-dominated public spheres. Accordingly, the following literature review engages with these three dimensions to contextualize the participation of Arab and Muslim women in sport.

Within the literature, religion, dress codes, and traditional customs are often discussed as both constraints and potential sources of agency for Arab and/or Muslim women in sport. On one hand, these factors can function as restrictive forces—limiting women's participation due to expectations around modesty, gender segregation, and community norms that prioritize domestic roles over public visibility. For example, dress codes requiring women to

wear modest clothing or the hijab have historically been used to exclude them from certain competitive spaces, particularly when such attire conflicts with international sports regulations. Similarly, religious interpretations and cultural traditions are sometimes invoked to justify limiting women's physical mobility or presence in public sports arenas.

However, the literature also emphasizes how these same elements can be reinterpreted as empowering challenges rather than fixed barriers. Some Muslim female athletes actively choose to wear the hijab or modest sportswear as a form of self-expression, religious commitment, and cultural pride, asserting their right to participate on their own terms. In doing so, they challenge the binary framing of tradition versus modernity and carve out new spaces of agency within the constraints of their social and religious contexts. Thus, dress codes and religious customs do not uniformly restrict participation but can become part of a broader negotiation of identity, resistance, and agency in the athletic domain.

Sports as a Male Domain: Constraint and an Empowering Challenge

The majority of the literature about Arab women in sports discussed women's participation in sports as a series of gendered limitations and constraints since it continues to be considered a male domain (Rahbani, 2010; Mostafa, 2018; Krais, 2019). Sports, in the conservative Arab societies, are 'a shameful profession' for ladies", while they are "preserved for men" (Rahbani, 2010, p. 14). This is due to the masculine characteristics associated with sports that impacts women's access to and   participation in sports. For instance, Krais argues that sports "demands physical strength and endurance" which is counter to stereotypical femininity (2019, pp. 204-205). Mostafa (2018) conducted a discourse analysis of both Arab and Western media coverage of Arab women athletes during the 2016 Rio Olympics, focusing particularly on how their participation challenged dominant gender norms. She found that the Egyptian female weightlifter, Sara Ahmed, who became the first Arab woman to win an Olympic medal in weight training, was frequently described using language that

emphasized her strength, resilience, and determination—qualities traditionally associated with masculinity. In both Arab and Western outlets, she was portrayed as a figure of female empowerment, with headlines and articles highlighting how her success in a male-dominated sport disrupted stereotypical expectations of Arab and Muslim women as passive or physically limited. For instance, media narratives celebrated her ability to succeed in a "masculine" sporting domain while remaining visibly Muslim and proudly Egyptian, thus embodying a form of empowerment that both defied patriarchal norms and challenged orientalist tropes. Mostafa (2018) offers a nuanced perspective on Arab women athletes' media representation, moving beyond the commonly highlighted obstacles to reveal a positive redefinition of Arab femininity through sport. She argues that sport functions as a powerful site for the (re)production of dominant knowledge about gendered practices (p. 66), and in the case of the Egyptian female weightlifter Sara Ahmed, media coverage reflects familial support that challenges societal stereotypes about women's physicality and roles (p. 64). The imagery associated with Ahmed, including "the weights, the weight training belt, the bronze medal, and the Rio 2016 souvenir figurine logo," actively contradicts the "traditional image of women with traditional feminine accessories" (p. 59). Mostafa highlights that "the fact that Ahmed is carrying tremendous weight overrules any stereotypical idea of female frailty" (p. 58), illustrating how Ahmed's athletic achievements and media portrayal contribute to redefining Arab femininity in ways that empower and challenge prevailing norms. This positive framing offers an important counterpoint to the prevalent focus on obstacles and limitations faced by Arab women in sports, underscoring the complex and dynamic ways gender and cultural identities are negotiated through athletic participation.

Dress Codes, Religion and Traditional Customs: Restrictive or Empowering

Dress Codes and traditional customs of the conservative Arab societies are another obstacle that limits Arab women's practice of sports (Rahbani, 2010; Mostafa, 2018; Krais, 2019; Nader & Azez, 2019). Different authors have addressed the relation of dress codes to Arab women's participation in sports from different aspects. On the one hand, Rahbani (2010), drawing on Al-Jazeera English's documentary about the preparation of Arab women athletes for the 2008 Olympics, argues that opposition to their sports clothing—because it "contradicts cultural norms and religious beliefs"—posed significant barriers that hindered these athletes from fully entering the world of competitive sports (p. 14). Similarly, female athletes, according to Krais, were limited in sports competitions because of "the question of appropriate female dress codes and women's appearance in front of a mixed sex audience" (2019, p. 209). Successful female athletes' fathers in late colonial Algeria opposed their daughters' appearance in public to compete professionally (Krais, 2019, p. 209), and their participation in sports was also opposed by male Islamic reformists (Krais, 2019, p. 208). On the other hand, Mostafa argues that in the context of the 2016 Olympics, the Egyptian female weightlifter's headscarf reflected her "Muslim identity that does not contradict with her athletic gift and love of the game" (2018, p. 59). She also emphasized the weightlifter's agency, that resulted from wearing a headscarf, as she argued that she did not "project her power through stereotypical attire that reveals much of her skin, but rather through professional exhibition of her athletic abilities" (2018, p. 59). Muslim Arab female athletes in Olympic competition were praised by their society for competing in sports while holding on to their religious beliefs, which was manifested in their clothing of "full-length bodysuits" (Mostafa, 2018, p. 52). In comparison, Nader and Azez, in their study aimed to find the reasons behind the reluctance of women to practice sports in universities and colleges in Iraqi Kurdistan and found that customs and traditions of conservative Arab/ Kurdish society

restrained women's practice of sports (2019). They conclude that University/ College women in these contexts do not practice in sports, because of the social norms against women in sports, as well as the women's fear of breaking the customs and traditions. In addition, these social /gender constraints are reflected in the lack of sports infrastructure for females: such as the lack of sport equipment, closed halls and government investment (Nader & Azez, 2019, p. 186).

From a general perspective on religions impact on women's participation in sports, Wilhelm et al. (2020) examined the relationship between religious affiliation, body image, and engagement in sports among Muslim, Christian, and atheist women in Germany. The findings indicate that in Germany, Muslim women exhibit lower levels of engagement in sports compared to Christian and atheist women. Surprisingly, hijab-wearing Muslim women report higher levels of body appreciation than their bare-headed counterparts, as well as Christian and atheist women. This suggests that wearing hijab may play a protective role in strengthening body image among Muslim women (Wilhelm et al., 2020, p. 9). However, the study also revealed that the difference in body appreciation between hijab wearing and non-hijab wearing   Muslim women in Germany is not statistically significant, raising questions about the direct influence of wearing the hijab on body image (Wilhelm et al., 2020, p. 9).

The study also explored attitudes towards body size and shape, indicating that while most women desire a thin body, cultural background may play a role in shaping body ideals (Wilhelm et al., 2020, p. 10). For example, German Muslim women exhibit lower levels of drive for leanness compared to German Christian and atheist women (Wilhelm et al., 2020, p. 10). However, the findings also suggested that Muslim women may not strive for a lean body due to societal attitudes towards their engagement in sports, which could influence their perceptions of body ideals (Wilhelm et al., 2020, p. 10). Interestingly, there are no significant differences in drive for muscularity among Muslim, Christian, and atheist women, indicating

that the desire for a muscular body is not influenced by religious affiliation (Wilhelm et al., 2020, p. 10).

From a different perspective, Samie (2013) employed a postcolonial feminist framework to surpass simplistic representations of Muslim women in sport, particularly focusing on British Muslim Pakistani women basketball players. By shifting the focus away from the Islamic dress and religious identity, the study seeks to uncover the nuanced relationship these women have with their bodies and identities (2013). The research illuminates how these women navigate various discourses surrounding femininity, particularly the idealized notion of 'hetero-sexy' femininity, both on and off the basketball court (Samie, 2013, p. 257). Through their engagement in basketball, these women actively shape their identities and challenge stereotypes, utilizing their bodies as a means of expression and self-assertion (Samie, 2013).

However, while the study revealed the empowerment and reclamation of agency among these women through their basketball, it also highlighted the complexities and contradictions inherent in their self/body management (Samie, 2013). Despite subverting Orientalist narratives of passive Muslim women, the emphasis on hetero-sexy self/bodywork perpetuates neo-colonial dynamics and reinforces Eurocentric ideals of femininity (Samie, 2013, p. 266). Thus, while basketball serves as a space for these women to assert their identities and challenge traditional norms, it also puts them in a discourse of self-manipulation and conformity, reflecting broader power dynamics and gendered expectations within society.

In a more local study on Palestinian women, Abu Alwafa and Badrasawi (2023) explore the intricate relationship between body image, lifestyle factors, social pressures, and social media use among Palestinian female university students. Their study underscored the multifaceted nature of body image that is influenced by various factors such as biology,

psychology, history, individual experiences, cultural norms, and societal influences (2023). Theirs is the only study in the Palestinian context that includes – women's participation in exercise or sports as a possible variable – and its relation to body image satisfaction. Abu Alwafa and Badrasawi (2023) found that among Palestinian female university students, engaging in regular physical activity—such as exercise or sports—was positively associated with greater body appreciation. In contrast, several factors were linked to lower body appreciation, including having a higher Body Mass Index (BMI), which refers to a numerical value derived from a person's weight and height that is often used to categorize individuals as underweight, normal weight, overweight, or obese. Additionally, behaviors such as frequently following models and celebrities on social media, adopting their nutritional advice, feeling pressure from family and friends regarding appearance, having a history of dieting, and spending extended hours on mobile phones each day were all negatively associated with how positively women felt about their bodies. The authors suggest that these influences, particularly those mediated through social media and interpersonal pressure, may reinforce unattainable beauty ideals that undermine women's self-perception. However, as mentioned above, this was the only study on women's body image in Palestine that made any link (and a minor one) to the issue of exercise/ sport.

To sum up, the literature on Arab and/or Muslim women in sport displayed the complexities surrounding their participation, through examining the influence of gendered dress codes, as well as gender cultural and religious norms. The challenges faced by Arab women athletes include opposition based on appropriate norms around clothing as well as societal perceptions of sports as "unfeminine". Despite these obstacles, some women find agency and empowerment through their athletic endeavours, as exemplified by the Egyptian weightlifter who embraces her Muslim identity while excelling in her sport. Similarly, studies on Palestinian and British Muslim women reveal the intricate interplay between body image,

lifestyle factors, and societal pressures, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of women's experiences in sports and how they negotiate contending norms (athletic versus social) in the practice of their sport. However, while sports offer a platform for self-expression and identity formation, it can also perpetuate neo-colonial gender dynamics and reinforce Eurocentric ideals of femininity, highlighting the complex relationship between agency and conformity within the realm of Arab and Muslim women's sports.

Bodybuilding in Palestine

Historical Context

The roots of bodybuilding in Palestine can be traced back to the early 20th century, particularly in urban centers like Jaffa and Haifa. By the 1940s, weight training and bodybuilding clubs had been established, serving as important spaces for youth physical culture. Palestinian athletes such as Ali Talaba gained recognition in regional competitions, illustrating that bodybuilding had not only arrived in the region, but also been localized within Palestinian social and political contexts (Sayigh, 2011).

Contemporary Developments

Today, bodybuilding continues to grow in Palestine despite sociopolitical challenges. The Palestinian Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness now oversees official competitions, training events, and athlete development. In 2022, it hosted the Palestine Bodybuilding and Classic Championship, reflecting the sport's increasing formalization and popularity (IFBB, 2022). The federation also signed a memorandum of cooperation with Al-Istiqlal University, signaling institutional support for bodybuilding at a national level. These developments demonstrate that bodybuilding in Palestine is not only a site of physical training but also a form of national visibility and pride.

This overview of bodybuilding's emergence and institutionalization in Palestine sets the ground for examining how this sport intersects with gender norms and body politics in the

lives of Palestinian women. While bodybuilding is historically male-dominated and often associated with masculinist discourses, the participation of women in this field introduces new dimensions of resistance and negotiation. The following chapters respond to the thesis' question by exploring how Palestinian female athletes navigate these spaces, challenge conventional body ideals, and construct empowered identities within the sociocultural and political constraints of their context.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Statement of the Problem

Despite the wealth of literature on female athletes worldwide and in the Arab world, female bodybuilders in the West, and body image in general or in relation to colonialism, there is a notable absence of research examining these experiences in the Palestinian context, especially concerning weight training. In fact, there is a total absence of data on female bodybuilding and weight training in Palestine. Moreover, the literature on female body image in Palestine does not focus on its relationship to sports (but primarily in relation to eating disorders or colonialism). This study aimed to bring into view the female weight training community in Palestine that is completely invisible in the academic literature on the sport, and absent from the small number of studies on women and sport in Palestine. This invisibility of women weightlifters and bodybuilders also means that they are not recognized by the Palestinian sports federations and associations, nor there are any competitions available for female weightlifters in Palestine. The general objective of this research is to investigate the narratives and experiences of Palestinian female weightlifters regarding socio-political and personal attitudes towards their bodies and self-image, and how these are shaped within the Palestinian cultural, political, and social context, from the point of view of the

women themselves. It explores the reasons behind Palestinian women's participation in weight training, female weightlifters' own perception of the ideal body, and the socio-political experiences they face as they pursue weight training. In addition, it addresses the factors that influence the Palestinian female weightlifters' decisions to enter this specific sport despite the social norms that perceive it as a gender inappropriate activity.

This study also highlights the impact of marital status and aspirations, and profession, on the women's experiences in weight training. How do family expectations and social contexts affect their choices to enter weight training? How do family preferences and wider norms and reactions affect their training routines and bodily goals in weight training? In what ways does social media content aimed at women in the weight training community affect their experience of the sport, as well as shape their preferred body and athletic goals? Finally, the research addresses how their pursuit or experience of this sport is influenced by the colonial context of Palestine

Hypotheses

This research is based on the hypotheses that socio-political gender norms in the Palestinian society negatively affect women's participation in weight training, as it limits their capacity of developing in the sport, and it affects their perceptions of beauty and the ideal body, which later affects their choices of muscle training.

Main Research Questions

- How do norms around women's ideal body images in the Palestinian context shape women's participation in and experience of weight training? These include the following sub-questions:

- What is the Palestinian society's dominant ideal of female body image how does it affect women's participation in weight training? What roles do family, community, and

religious beliefs play in shaping the body image perceptions and experiences of Palestinian female weightlifters?

- What other ideals of female body image outside the local cultural context might inform Palestinian women weightlifters' pursuit of muscle building? What are the main factors influencing body image perceptions among Palestinian female weightlifters?

- In what ways do marital aspirations, pressures, or marital status influence women's decision to begin or continue weight training, particularly in relation to dominant gender norms and body image ideals?

- How does the level of education or profession affect Palestinian women's engagement with weight training and shape their experiences in this male-dominated space?

- What are the Palestinian female weightlifters' attitudes towards their own body image in pursuing muscle building as well as in relation to dominant expectations and norms around female ideal body image? How do Palestinian female weightlifters perceive and experience their own body image within the cultural, political, and social context of Palestine?

- How do Palestinian female weightlifters engage with and interpret media representations of female weightlifters, and how do these representations impact their own body image perceptions?

- What strategies and tactics do women weightlifters develop to negotiate between the social expectations around what should be their ideal feminine bodies and their desire to pursue weight training?

- How do women relate their pursuit of weight training to different aspects of the Palestinian colonial experience, if at all?

Research Design: grounded theory methodology

Grounded theory is a methodology for "developing theory that is grounded in data which is systematically gathered and analysed" (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, 273). It involves "generating theory and doing social research [as] two parts of the same process" (Glaser, 1978, 2). According to this methodology, theory can be produced primarily from the data, or from existing grounded theories, if they can be investigated, elaborated, and reformed "as incoming data are meticulously played against them" (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, 273). This theory approach is the most appropriate for the purpose of my essay, as my main objective from this essay is to undertake the first study focused on Palestinian female weightlifters' experiences, which is non-existent at the current time.

Research Methods

In this study, a multi-method approach will be employed to comprehensively explore the complex dynamics of Palestinian female weightlifters' body image. The methodology incorporates observation, interviews, and ethnographic research. Each method was selected to offer unique insights into the lived experiences, perceptions, and social contexts surrounding Palestinian female bodybuilders' body image.

Firstly, observation was utilized to immerse the researcher in the natural settings and social interactions of the female weightlifters. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), observation allows researchers to grasp the nuances of social behaviours and practices within authentic settings. By observing training sessions and social gatherings, the study seeks to understand how body image is constructed and negotiated within the Palestinian female weight training subculture.

Secondly, interviews were conducted to directly engage with the female weightlifters and examine their personal experiences and perspectives regarding body image. Interviews enable researchers to examine the interpretations participants give to their experiences,

offering thorough and detailed understandings of subjective phenomena (Creswell, 2013). Through interviews, the study aims to uncover the factors influencing body image perceptions within the Palestinian female weight training community.

Furthermore, ethnographic research will be employed to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural norms, values, and practices shaping the Palestinian female weightlifters' body image perceptions. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2019), ethnography entails extended engagement with the studied community, fostering an insider's viewpoint and comprehensive knowledge of cultural dynamics. Through participant observation and immersion in the Palestinian female weight training community, the study aims to reveal the sociocultural influences on the body image construction. While participant observation refers specifically to the practice of observing and recording interactions and behaviors on site, ethnography as a broader method includes this practice alongside in-depth cultural interpretation. Given my own long-term and active involvement in the Palestinian weight training community, this insider status strengthens the ethnographic depth of the research.

By integrating these diverse methodologies, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of Palestinian female weightlifters' body image, taking into account individual experiences, social interactions, and cultural and political contexts.

Study Sample

This study used a purposive sample comprised of 30 Palestinian women who are actively engaged in weight training and participated in in-depth interviews. The women were identified through a snowball sample procedure based on outreach I undertook through three gyms where women practice weight training: two women-only gyms in Bethlehem and one mixed gender gym in Ramallah.

As such, geographically, the sample participants were from the Bethlehem, Hebron, and Ramallah areas. The women from Hebron and Bethlehem trained in gyms located in Bethlehem, while those from Ramallah exercised in Ramallah-based gyms. This geographical distribution reflected diverse socio-spatial contexts, although a majority of the women were from the cities, ten of them were from villages and seven from refugee camps.

 Demographically, the women's ages were between the 20 and 35; with about an equal one third of them aged 20 to 25; a third aged 25 to 30 and a third aged 30-35 years of age. Although they came from diverse social backgrounds, they were overall highly educated: all had completed university education - with four women additionally having MA degrees. Their educational specializations were varied with a cluster of them carrying degrees related to health (pharmacy, lab technician, dentistry, nursing, nutrition); others carrying law or architecture degrees; and a few with administrative degrees (accounting, business administration). Their employment backgrounds varied with the majority (23) employed at the time of the research compared to 7 who were unemployed. Their occupations were very varied; some women were employed in the professions (law, architecture) while quite a few were employed in middle range services (teacher, pharmacist, nurse etc..), and a number were employed or self-employed in areas of the local beauty industry (as saleswoman, nail or hair stylist). Only one of them was employed as an exercise instructor.

The participants also varied in marital status: although the majority were single or engaged (20) ten of the women were married (with one divorcee). Despite these differences, they shared a common engagement with social media, with all of them regularly following fitness influencers and online fitness communities.

A crucial criterion for selection was that each participant had been actively engaged in weight training for at least one year, ensuring that they had substantial experience and insights into societal perceptions regarding their training practices. The women in the sample

had been engaged in the sport for a range of one and nine years – with the overall average number of years of participation being four years.

Sample strategies in the field

The selection of participants in Bethlehem was carried out through direct outreach to the two gyms where I had personal connections with staff members. This approach facilitated access to the women while they were in the environment of weight training and also meant that I avoided interviewing them in their work contexts which might have been disruptive or made them uncomfortable to discuss sensitive issues related to the research. As will be seen below, although I physically met and communicated with all of the participants initially in a gym setting – they preferred that in-depth interview be undertaken in their "free time" i.e., outside the gym or their workplace. I obtained formal permission from the management of these two women only gyms to conduct observations and contact participants.

In Ramallah, however, I did not have formal permission from the manager-owners of the mixed-gender gym. Instead, I relied on informal recruitment methods to connect with participants. Through my personal networks in the weight training world, I identified women who regularly trained at the facility. To ensure a smooth participant selection process, I sought help from experienced female trainees who introduced me to other potential participants. Unlike in Bethlehem, where head coaches assisted in identifying participants, the selection in Ramallah was based on word of mouth and personal outreach.

To maintain consistency in participant criteria across both locations, I focused on selecting women who had been consistently training for over a year. Once potential participants were identified, I personally contacted each one to explain the study's purpose and invite them to take part in the observation and interviews. This approach ensured that all participants had relevant experience while also respecting the dynamics of each gym environment.

Ethnographic Observation at the Gym

Before conducting the interviews, I first observed the participants in their training environments to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. All participants agreed to be observed as part of the study, allowing me to witness firsthand the physical and social dynamics shaping their interactions, training routines, and overall engagement with sports. These observations provided crucial context for interpreting participants' narratives and informed the development of my interview questions, ensuring that they addressed key themes emerging from real-life practice.

Following my participant observation in the work out context, participants also consented to take part in in-depth interviews to further explore their perspectives. All responded positively to the invitation, provided that the interviews were conducted during their free time – i.e. outside the gym or workplace. To ensure privacy and create a comfortable environment for open discussions, most interviews were conducted via Zoom. These sessions were recorded for reference, and I took notes whenever possible. Additionally, four interviews were conducted through WhatsApp voice calls, where recording was not available. In these cases, I took detailed notes throughout the conversation to ensure accuracy. The participants were cooperative and patient, and I ensured that all interviews were scheduled at a time when they were in a quiet and comfortable setting, usually in a private room at their homes. This careful planning and execution allowed for insightful and meaningful discussions that enriched the study's findings.

Observation Context and Methodology

Prior to conducting my observations, I obtained permission from gym owners and coaches to proceed with the study at the Women-only Max Fitness and Turbo Gyms in Bethlehem. The observations took place in the gyms where the participants trained, allowing

me to gain first-hand insight into their interactions, training environments, and the gender dynamics within these spaces. My role was primarily that of a non-participatory observer, meaning I did not engage in training myself but focused on closely examining the participants' behaviors, interactions with others, and the general atmosphere within the gyms.

Before beginning the observations, I also approached the women I intended to observe and informed them about the purpose and scope of my research. I clearly explained that I am a researcher, as well as a bodybuilder and certified personal trainer with years of experience in weight training. This disclosure helped build trust and mutual understanding, and I received their verbal consent to observe their training sessions.

During these observations, I took detailed field notes on various aspects, including how the women conducted their training routines, their body language, and how they navigated the gym space. I also paid attention to the presence or absence of encouragement from gym staff, as well as any instances of discomfort or hesitancy among the participants. Since Max Fitness and Turbo Gym are women-only spaces, my focus in these locations was on the interactions among female trainees, their engagement with weight training, and the overall atmosphere fostered by the gym environment. However, in Ultra Gym—where women trained during mixed-gender hours—I also observed how they navigated the space in relation to male trainees and whether external reactions, whether supportive or critical, influenced their routines, behavior and experience.

In the gender-mixed Ultra Gym, I conducted my observations while performing my own workout. This approach allowed me to experience the gym's atmosphere firsthand while also identifying potential participants. I then approached women who stood out due to their prominent muscle development and asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview and observation. I explained the purpose and goals of my study, ensuring informed consent before proceeding. Similar to what I did at the women-only gyms, I told these

women that I am a weightlifter and certified personal trainer, and that I have been lifting weights for many years, which helped build trust and mutual understanding.

Since direct notetaking during observation sessions could be intrusive, I would mentally register notes and later document them in a structured manner immediately after leaving the gym. This allowed me to capture the context accurately without disrupting the natural flow of activities. In instances where I could write discreetly, I used my phone to take key notes in real time, ensuring that significant details were recorded.

Conducting observations before the interviews provided valuable insights that could not be fully captured through interviews alone. By first witnessing participants' lived experiences in real-time, I was able to contextualize their narratives more effectively, enhancing the depth of analysis in this study.

Interview Context and Structure

The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for both guided questions and open-ended discussions. This method ensured that participants could freely express their thoughts and experiences while keeping the conversation aligned with the research objectives. Given the sensitivity of topics related to gender and body image, I maintained a conversational and non-judgmental tone, allowing participants to share personal experiences in a comfortable setting. I also reassured the women that only their first names will be listed in this study to protect their privacy. Most interviews lasted between 40 minutes to an hour, depending on the participant's willingness to elaborate on their responses.

The main topics covered in the interviews

- Motivation for Weight training: Participants were asked what initially inspired them to engage in weight training and whether societal perceptions influenced their decision.

- Gendered Body Image Perceptions: I inquired about their personal views on body image, how their engagement in weight training had shaped their perception of their own bodies, and whether they had encountered external judgment or criticism.

- Social Media Influence: Participants shared their engagement with fitness influencers, their exposure to body image ideals on social media, and whether this influenced their self-perception or training habits.

- Family and Societal Reactions: I asked how their families and broader social circles reacted to their weight training practice and whether they had faced encouragement or resistance.

- Challenges and Agency: Participants were asked to talk about obstacles they encountered in their fitness journey, including societal stigma, gym accessibility, or personal struggles, and how they overcame these challenges.

The flexible nature of the interviews allowed participants to elaborate on experiences they found most relevant, providing rich and nuanced insights into their engagement with weight training within Palestinian society.

The three Gym settings

This study was conducted in three gyms across different locations, selected based on their accessibility, popularity among female athletes, and the variety of training environments they provide. These gyms represent different socio-geographical contexts, allowing for a broader understanding of how Palestinian female athletes experience and navigate gendered body image in sports Thus differences between each gym are important dimension of the research setting, as well as provide different insights into various aspects of the research questions.

Max Fitness is a well-established women-only gym located in Bethlehem, opposite Deheisheh refugee camp. Its strategic location makes it accessible to women from various

villages and refugee camps surrounding Bethlehem, particularly before the recent escalation of movement restrictions due to the ongoing war/ genocide in Gaza. Many of these areas lack dedicated gyms for women, making Max Fitness the nearest and most accessible option. Women from refugee camps, villages, and the city center go to this gym, and it also serves women from nearby areas in Hebron, such as Beit Ummar and Al-Arroub refugee camp, which are closer to Bethlehem than to the city center of Hebron. As can be seen from the sample – of the 15 women I interviewed who train at Max fitness only one of them was from Bethlehem City – while the rest were from refugee camps or surrounding villages.

This gym is one of the most popular in the Bethlehem area due to its fully dedicated women-only section, which operates throughout the day from 6:00 AM to 10:00 PM. It has a notably high number of female weightlifters, as it is relatively large and well-equipped with machines and weight training facilities. Additionally, Max Fitness features a separate section for men, making it a suitable option for families and couples who prefer a gym where men and women can exercise in segregated spaces. Given its significance and popularity, 15 out of the 30 participants in this study train at this gym. I conducted approximately 15 hours of observation over four weeks at Max Fitness, focusing on participants' interactions, training routines, and overall gym culture.

Turbo Gym, Beit Sahour

Turbo Gym, located in the heart of Beit Sahour, was originally a gym with separate shifts for men and women but later transitioned into a women-only gym – suggesting the growth in interest of women in exercise and fitness in dedicated gym facilities. However, it still operates for women on designated shifts, with morning hours from 8:00 AM to 11:30 AM and evening hours from 4:00 PM to 9:00 PM. While it does not have as many regular members as Max Fitness, due to competition from nearby gyms that offer extended operating hours, it maintains a loyal customer base, particularly among female weightlifters. The gym

is well-equipped with weight training machines and is known for its supportive staff, who encourage clients to remain committed to their fitness routines.

The gym's location in Beit Sahour, an area with a large population that has a reputation for social open-ness in Bethlehem, contributes to the presence of many mixed-gender gyms in the area. However, Turbo Gym remains competitive as its exclusively a women-only gym, which provides a more comfortable environment for women who prefer not to train in mixed spaces. Eleven of the sample participants worked out at Turbo- gym, and the vast majority were women with urban versus rural or camp backgrounds. I spent approximately 8 hours over two weeks conducting observations at Turbo Gym, examining how participants navigate the space and interact with their surroundings.

Ultra Gym, Ramallah

Ultra Gym is located in Mazaya Mall in Surda, Ramallah. Unlike the previous two gyms, it operates as a mixed-gender facility for most of the day, with only a few morning hours reserved for women. For this study, I conducted observations during the mixed-gender hours to examine how women engage with weight training in a mixed-gender setting.

Ultra Gym is one of the most well-known gyms in Ramallah, known particularly for its advanced weight training equipment and strategic location, which makes it accessible to women from both the city and surrounding villages. It also offers a variety of fitness classes and a women-only sauna which attracts female clients. However, due to the ongoing war and the increasing dangers posed by checkpoints, I was only able to interview and observe four women at this gym, as traveling from Bethlehem to Ramallah has become significantly more difficult and time-consuming. I conducted 5 hours of observation over two days at Ultra Gym, focusing on the experiences of women training in a mixed-gender environment.

Justification for Selecting These Locations

These three gyms were chosen to provide a diverse representation of training environments, ensuring a well-rounded analysis of Palestinian female athletes' experiences with body image and weight training. Max Fitness was selected for its significance as a primary gym for women in Bethlehem and nearby Hebron villages and refugee camps. Turbo Gym was included to explore the dynamics of a women-only in an urban setting. Ultra Gym was chosen to examine how female athletes navigate a mixed-gender training environment in Ramallah.

By incorporating gyms from Deheisheh Camp, Beit Sahour, and Ramallah, each with unique characteristics and clients, this study captures a broader spectrum of gendered experiences in weight training, contributing to a deeper understanding of the challenges and perceptions surrounding female athleticism in Palestine. See Table 1 below for participants demographics.

Table 1: Participants demographics

No.	Name	Age	Region	Community type	Marital status	Education	Employment	# of years weight training	Gym
South (Bethlehem Gyms)									
1	Yasmeen	35	Bethlehem	City	Single	Master's degree	Laboratory technician	5	Max Fitness
2	Haneen	30	Bethlehem	Refugee Camp	Single	Bachelor's degree	Architect	6	Max Fitness
3	Duaa	31	Bethlehem	Village	Single	Bachelor's degree	Accountant	5	Max Fitness
4	Maha	29	Bethlehem	Refugee Camp	Married	Bachelor's degree	Architect	7	Max Fitness
5	Niveen	24	Bethlehem	Refugee Camp	Married	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	3	Max Fitness

6	Suad	27	Bethlehem	City	Single	Master's degree	Gym trainer	8	Turbo Gym
7	Sabreen	27	Bethlehem	City	Engaged	Bachelor's degree	Tutor	5	Turbo Gym
8	Lana	21	Bethlehem	Village	Single	Bachelor's degree	Student	1	Max Fitness
9	Hanan	33	Bethlehem	Refugee Camp	Married	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	4	Turbo Gym
10	Sara	34	Bethlehem	Refugee Camp	Married	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	1	Max Fitness
11	Dunia	30	Bethlehem	City	Married	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	1	Turbo Gym
12	Ruba	32	Bethlehem	Village	Married	Bachelor's degree	Hair stylist	4	Max Fitness
13	Dalia	27	Hebron	Village	Single	Bachelor's degree	Nail technician	3	Max Fitness
14	Tamara	28	Bethlehem	City	Engaged	Master's degree	Lawyer	1	Turbo Gym
15	Nida'	32	Hebron	Refugee Camp	Married	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	2	Max Fitness
16	Manar	27	Bethlehem	City	Single	Master's degree	Nurse	2	Turbo Gym
17	Raneen	20	Bethlehem	Village	Single	Bachelor's degree	Student	1	Turbo Gym
18	Arwa	34	Bethlehem	City	Married	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	8	Turbo Gym
19	Amnah	33	Bethlehem	Village	Married	Diploma degree	Salesperson	9	Max Fitness

20	Sajeda	27	Bethlehem	City	Single	Bachelor's degree	Teacher	2	Turbo Gym
21	Ibtihal	25	Bethlehem	Village	Married	Diploma degree	Chef	1	Max Fitness
22	Amina	24	Bethlehem	City	Engaged	Diploma degree	Nutritionist	2	Turbo Gym
23	Salam	26	Bethlehem	Village	Single	Diploma degree	Pharmacist	5	Max Fitness
24	Nima	21	Bethlehem	Refugee Camp	Single	Bachelor's degree	Student	3	Max Fitness
25	Duha	22	Bethlehem	City	Single	Bachelor's degree	Student	4	Turbo Gym
26	Shorouq	24	Bethlehem	Village	Engaged	Bachelor's degree	Dentist	1	Max Fitness
Middle: Ramallah Gyms									
27	Saja	30	Ramallah	village	Single	Bachelor's degree	Dentist	6	Ultra Gym
28	Alaa	22	Ramallah	City	Single	Bachelor's degree	Student	2	Ultra Gym
29	Noor	25	Ramallah	City	Divorced	Bachelor's degree	Owns an online shop	3	Ultra Gym
30	Leen	26	Ramallah	City	Married	Bachelor's degree	Project coordinator	5	Ultra Gym

Chapter 4: Research Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study, organized into thematic sections that emerged from both field observations and in-depth interviews with Palestinian female weightlifters. The aim is to provide a nuanced understanding of the women's experiences in relation to their bodies, training practices, and the broader social, cultural, and political forces that shape their engagement in weight training.

Using a Grounded Theory approach, the data were analyzed through a systematic process of coding. I used Otter.ai to transcribe all of the Zoom calls I had with the interviewees, which consist of most of the interviews. Only four interviews were conducted via WhatsApp, during which I took careful notes on paper, as I could not record the calls. I then typed these notes and combined them with the Otter transcripts into a single document, which served as the basis for coding. I first conducted open coding by carefully reading each transcript and identifying significant statements, actions, or expressions. These codes were then grouped into broader categories during the axial coding phase, allowing for connections to be made across different participants' narratives. Throughout the process, constant comparison was used—each new piece of data was continually compared with previously coded data to refine categories, explore variations, and ensure the emerging themes reflected the diversity and depth of the participants' lived experiences. This method enabled the gradual development of coherent themes that grounded the analysis in the realities shared by the women themselves.

The first two sections of this chapter—The Gym Context: Mixed Gender or Women-Only Dynamics and Training Preferences and Influences of Feminine Body Ideals—are grounded in participant observation conducted in various gym settings. These sections

explore how gendered spatial arrangements and embodied practices in the gym environment reflect and reinforce dominant norms surrounding femininity, modesty, and physical training.

The remaining sections are based on data derived from semi-structured interviews. These begin with the participants' Background and Initial Motivations to Enter Weight training Training and the Social and Familial Reactions to the Women's Entry into Weight training, offering insight into the personal and relational dynamics that influence their athletic choices. This is followed by an analysis of The Ideal Female Body in the Palestinian Society, which considers how normative beauty standards intersect with local cultural and gendered expectations.

The chapter further examines Social Media's Influences on Body Image and Weight training and Heightened Awareness to the Feminine Body Ideals and Its Alignment or Challenge to Beauty Standards, reflecting the dual role of digital platforms as both oppressive and empowering. The section on The Impact of Social Commentary elaborates on how external judgments shape the women's experiences, which is expanded in Social Media Effects, exploring the subthemes of *trying to conform*, *frustration and skepticism*, and *agency by social media*.

A specific gap in representation is addressed in Palestinian Women Weightlifters on social media: A Lack of Role Models, followed by a critical discussion on how participants actively engage in Negotiating Social and Cultural Expectations. These negotiations are contextualized within Weight training and the Palestinian Colonial Context, which situates the body and sport within broader structures of political occupation and resistance. The chapter concludes with Agency and Future Aspirations, illuminating the transformative potential of weight training in participants' lives and how they envision their futures within and beyond the sport.

The Gym Context: Mixed Gender or Women-Only Dynamics

This section presents the findings from observations conducted in three different gyms: two women only gyms in Bethlehem, Max Fitness and Turbo Gym, and one mixed-gender gym in Ramallah, Ultra Gym. These observations provide insight into how gym environments and social dynamics shape women's experiences in weight training. By analyzing both women-only and mixed-gender workout spaces, this section highlights the differences in atmosphere, accessibility, and the ways in which social and cultural factors influence women's engagement in fitness.

The findings are divided into two main sections. The first section, "Gym Atmosphere and Spatial Dynamics," examines the overall environment in each gym, including the level of comfort and freedom women feel while training. This section also explores how gym layouts, equipment availability, and interactions among gym members contribute to shaping women's experiences. The second section, "Training Preferences and Influences of Beauty Norms," investigates how beauty standards and societal expectations impact the way the studied women approached weight training training. It also sheds light on the influence of social media, gym trainers, and peer encouragement on training preferences and workout intensity

Observations revealed distinct differences in training environments, interactions, and accessibility between the women-only gyms and the mixed-gender gym. The atmospheres in these spaces influenced not only how women engaged with their workouts but also how they dressed, the equipment they used, and their overall level of comfort in training settings.

In the women-only gyms, Max Fitness and Turbo, there was a strong sense of comfort and community among female trainees. Women felt at ease using free weights, resistance machines, and performing high intensity exercises without concerns about external judgment, as opposed to being limited to using more "feminine appropriate" workout equipment (cardio and resistance machine). Many participants in these gyms wore tight athletic wear, such as

leggings and compression tops, which contrasted with the more modest gym attire typically worn by most women in mixed-gender spaces. This clothing choice not only reflected the comfort and privacy provided by women-only environments but also aligned with dominant beauty standards that encourage the display of a toned, curvaceous figure. As Bunsell (2013) explains, female athletes often adopt "ornamented" appearances—tight clothing, styled hair, and makeup—as a way to reconcile muscularity with socially accepted forms of femininity. The emphasis on tight, form-fitting clothing in these gyms functioned as a visual affirmation of adherence to feminine norms, particularly the pronounced slim waist and lower body curves. The presence of only female coaches further contributed to the supportive atmosphere, allowing trainees to feel more comfortable seeking guidance and assistance with their workouts.

In terms of women's workouts, there was a notable emphasis on lower body training–particularly exercises targeting the glutes and legs–which matches Bunsell (2013), Marshall et al. (2019), and Boyle's (2005) argument that dominant beauty norms promote a body shape for women that accentuates a toned or curvaceous lower body while discouraging visible upper body muscularity, which is often associated with masculinity. . In contrast, upper body training was often avoided, unless it was medically necessary for addressing issues such as back pain or posture. This training preference closely reflects what has been documented in the literature.

On the other hand, the mixed-gender gym, Ultra Gym, had a noticeably different atmosphere. Women were more restricted in their workout choices and their presence in certain areas of the gym. The free weight section was largely dominated by men, leading many women to primarily use cardio machines and resistance machines instead. This highlights how gender norms and dynamics in fitness spaces influence workout habits; in the context of mixed gender gyms – the norms around muscles and masculinity (i.e. weights)

exclude women from as women may feel intimidated or uncomfortable entering male dominated sections of the gym.

Clothing choices in the mixed-gender gym also reflected a high sense of modesty. Many female trainees were observed wearing looser clothing, such as oversized t-shirts and sweatpants, or tying a training jacket around their waists to cover their bottoms. This was in contrast to the more form fitting attire seen in women only gyms, indicating how social expectations shape women's comfort levels in mixed spaces.

Another noteworthy observation was the frequent gaze of male gym trainees toward female trainees. Many women appeared aware of being the object of the male gaze at close proximity – which clearly affected their choice of clothing – as well as their training routines (i.e. undertaking less masculine coded workouts such as cardio- focused machinery versus high impact and weights) The gym was noticeably busier with men in the evening, prompting many women I talked to, to avoid those hours. Instead, they strategically planned their workouts during off-peak times, such as mid-afternoon, in an attempt to feel less limited in their choices by the male dominated environment.

In short, these observations highlight the significant impact of the gender make-up of gym environments on women's fitness experiences. Women-only gyms provide a more comfortable and inclusive "female athletic" atmosphere, where women are free from the direct male gaze. With the presence of men at the gym, women experience a heightened sense of gendered norms around their dress, behavior, and body by being surveilled directly by the male gaze. In men's absence, although women have internalized many of the wider gender norms around the feminine ideal body – they have a space that is freer from these normative gender pressures and are able to engage in "non-feminine" workouts, as well as dress according to the global norms for female weight trainers – rather than according to local norms of female modesty. Mixed-gender gyms impose limitations on women's exercise

choices due to factors such as male dominance in weight training spaces, gender norms about female modesty, and the social dynamics of being observed by men.

Training Preferences and Influences of Feminine Body Ideals

Across all three gyms, there was a consistent emphasis by women on lower-body workouts including squat variations, hip thrusts, and glute isolation exercises were among the most commonly performed movements. Additionally, abdominal exercises such as crunches and sit-ups were incorporated into most workout routines. This training preference reflects the influence of feminine beauty ideals that prioritize a toned lower body (including toned thighs and buttocks) as well as a slim waist and flat belly aligning with prevailing training trends seen in media and social platforms aimed at achieving an ideal feminine figure.

A notable observation was the widespread avoidance of intensive upper-body training, particularly those focused on the back, chest, and arms. Many women hesitated to lift heavy weights for these muscle groups, fearing excessive muscular development that might challenge conventional beauty norms. This aversion was especially evident in the women-only gyms, where participants were more likely to engage in high-repetition, low-weight exercises that aims to tone the body rather than strength-focused training that aims to build muscle.

Another key factor shaping training preferences was the significant reliance on social media for workout guidance. Many women interviewed said they followed exercise routines from Instagram and YouTube, often inspired by both Arab and international female fitness influencers who embodied the socially desirable hourglass figure—emphasizing a curvy lower body, a slim waist, and toned but not overly muscular arms. These influencers played a crucial role in shaping workout choices, as women sought to replicate their physiques rather than focus solely on strength goals. Among the most commonly followed accounts

were **fit.bayann**, a Palestinian fitness coach who focuses on glute and leg training while maintaining a visibly feminine aesthetic, and **Filippa Fransson**, a Swedish fitness influencer known for her structured lower-body routines and emphasis on curvaceous yet lean physiques.

The observational findings strongly support the hypothesis that socio-political gender norms in Palestinian society shape women's participation in weight training. The differences between the women only gyms in Bethlehem and the mixed-gender gym in Ramallah reveal how the presence of men significantly impacts women's training behaviors, confidence, and exercise choices. These observations align with broader discussions on gendered spaces and the ways in which societal expectations influence women's physical activities.

Firstly, the fact that women in Bethlehem's women only gyms trained freely and engaged more with free-weight exercises suggests that when external social pressures are less, women feel encouraged to lift heavier weights and develop their strength. This supports the idea that the absence of male presence reduces anxiety over conforming to traditional feminine norms. In contrast, the mixed-gender gym in Ramallah demonstrated how the visibility of men led to a notable shift in women's training preferences, with many opting for cardio and machine exercises rather than free weights. This avoidance may stem from discomfort, fear of judgment, or internalized gender-related expectations regarding appropriate female body appearance.

Another critical factor is the impact of the male gaze. The fact that some women were hesitant in the mixed-gender gym to train in certain areas, particularly the free weight section, suggests that the presence of men creates limitations for women's exercise freedom. The act of lifting heavy weights, which is often socially associated with masculinity, may discourage women from engaging in strenuous workouts due to concerns about their image. Many female gym attendees in Ramallah adapted their clothing choices to appear more modest in

the presence of men, highlighting another way in which gendered expectations shape behavior in fitness spaces.

Furthermore, the emphasis on lower body workouts across all of the three gyms underscores the influence of socially constructed beauty norms. The prioritization of glute, leg, and abdominal exercises, along with the avoidance of upper body training, reflects how fitness goals are often defined by aesthetics rather than functional aspirations.

These findings illustrate how deeply rooted gender norms influence women's participation in weight training. The differences observed between women only and mixed-gender gyms highlight the ongoing compromise between personal fitness goals and external societal pressures. Addressing these barriers requires not only creating inclusive fitness spaces but also challenging traditional gender norms that restrict women's ability to fully engage in weight training without fear of judgment or discomfort.

Secondly, another key finding that supports the research hypotheses is the way gendered beauty ideals shape the way Palestinian women engage with weight training. The preference for glute and leg focused exercises, along with abdominal muscle exercises, while avoiding heavy upper body training, aligns with societal expectations that emphasize a curvy lower body and a slender, non-muscular upper body. This selective approach to strength training reflects the broader influence of cultural beauty norms that dictate which body parts should be emphasized, and which should remain less developed.

The hesitance to train upper body muscles suggests an internalized belief that muscularity is unfeminine, reinforcing Mahmood's (2005) argument that women navigate social norms in ways that simultaneously challenge and conform to them. Rather than rejecting weight training altogether, Palestinian women selectively engage in exercises that align with conventional beauty standards while avoiding those that might challenge societal

perceptions of femininity. This negotiation demonstrates that even within fitness spaces, women must submit to external expectations and adapt their workout choices accordingly.

Thirdly, observations also demonstrated the significant influence of social media on Palestinian women's fitness aspirations and training choices. Many women follow Instagram fitness influencers as models for the ideal physique, highlighting the globalization of beauty standards that merge local expectations with Western fitness ideals. This reliance on online fitness influencers suggests that while Palestinian women are influenced by local gender norms, they are also impacted by broader, global ideals of beauty that promote a highly specific and curated version of the female body.

Adopting the position of an observer, rather than an active participant, shifted my perception of the gym environment in significant ways. In the past, I would typically train with headphones on, focused solely on my workout and relatively detached from the surrounding dynamics. However, stepping into the gym as a researcher alarmed me to a variety of social cues, spatial arrangements, and gendered behaviors that I had previously overlooked. My dual position—as both a weightlifter and a researcher—allowed me to recognize shared struggles with body image, especially the tension between striving for the socially ideal feminine body and resisting it through visible muscle development. I could also empathize with women who dressed more conservatively in mixed gyms, only to express more bodily ease and comfort in women-only spaces. That said, I noted differences as well: unlike many women in mixed gyms who avoided the free weights section or hesitated to lift very heavy weights in male-dominated zones, I have rarely felt intimidated in such spaces. This divergence highlighted the nuanced ways Palestinian women negotiate gym spaces, especially in relation to gendered expectations and embodied expressions of strength.

The next sections, addresses these initial findings of my participant observation research in the three gym spaces through the in-depth interviews with the women engaged in

weight training. How do the women themselves narrate the experience of training in female-only versus male dominated gym spaces? What body ideals and aspirations do they articulate and how do these connect with their choice of workout routines? What are the sources of their body ideals, to what extent are these shaped by local norms around ideal female bodies and/or global images through social media – or both? To what extent through participation in weight training do they challenge these local norms of feminine body ideals as well as those associated with global beauty ideals? Clearly, from the observational research – women both challenge local norms by participating in the "masculine" sport of weight training, at the same time, with their focus on lower body exercises linked to achieving the "ideal" feminine form – they also reproduce normative ideals of the female body in their practice of the sport. Only through listening to the women's own narratives is it possible to understand how they navigate these contradictions and challenges.

The following sections will focus on findings from the in-depth interviews – starting with the background and motivations that led these women to engage in weight training. This includes their personal reasons, such as physical transformation, strength building, and mental wellbeing, as well as the broader societal influences that shaped their decisions. Understanding their initial motivations is crucial to contextualizing their journeys and the challenges they faced along the way.

The discussion then moves to issues of women's ideal body image. Many of the participants shared experiences of navigating societal expectations regarding femininity, beauty, and body standards. This section examines how weight training has impacted their self-perception of the ideal feminine body and how they respond to external judgments or criticisms.

The role of media and external influences is then explored, shedding light on how social media, fitness culture, and international trends have shaped Palestinian women's body

image ideals as well as their overall engagement with weight training. This section also considers the impact of role models and online communities in fostering a sense of belonging and inspiration among female weightlifters.

Next, the study explores how women negotiate social and cultural expectations while pursuing weight training. Given the traditional norms surrounding gender roles in Palestinian society, this section highlights the strategies women employ to balance their passion for strength training with familial, social, and cultural obligations.

Another critical aspect examined is weight training within the Palestinian colonial context. This section explores how occupation, war, and restricted access to resources have influenced women's ability to pursue weight training and maintain consistent training routines. It considers the resilience and determination required to engage in sports within such a challenging environment.

Finally, the discussion then tackles agency and future aspirations. The women interviewed shared their reflections on how weight training has contributed to their sense of agency, self-confidence, and independence. This section also explores their ambitions, whether in professional sports, coaching, or advocating for more inclusive fitness spaces for Palestinian women. Throughout I will link with the main findings that emerged from the observational data I collected in the gym spaces.

Background and Initial Motivations to Enter Weight Training

Participants' motivations for beginning weight training were multifaceted and often fluid, shaped by personal desires, social pressures, and shifting relationships with their bodies. While initial motivations varied, three broad yet interrelated themes emerged: desire for physical transformation, aspiration for strength-building, and pursuit of mental and emotional wellbeing. These categories were not mutually exclusive; many participants

articulated overlapping or evolving motivations, illustrating that women's engagement in weight training cannot be reduced to singular intentions.

Physical Transformation: From Thinness to Curves.

Contrary to old dominant Western discourses that associate femininity with thinness, and similar to the current Western feminine ideal body, the narratives of Palestinian women weightlifters revealed a locally situated ideal that prioritizes curviness, firmness, and proportionality over mere slimness. Sixteen participants—half of the sample—reported starting weight training due to dissatisfaction with their physical appearance. For many, their decision to train was prompted by familial or societal criticisms, particularly those targeting thin, uncurvy bodies.

Yasmeen (35), who has been lifting for over five years, shared, "*I started weight training because I was very skinny and bullied. I wanted to build curves like the ones I saw on social media.*" Her narrative illustrates the dual influence of social media and local norms in shaping body ideals. Although social media platforms often promote Western beauty standards, Yasmeen's experience reflects how these platforms are also saturated with representations of curvy, fit female bodies that resonate with regional ideals of femininity. These ideals were reinforced within participants' social circles, particularly among women concerned with marriageability and body aesthetics.

Sajeda (27) and Duha (22), both unmarried women from Bethlehem, recounted how female relatives commented negatively on their slim bodies. Duha shared, "*My aunt once said, 'You look like a stick, how will you ever find a husband?' That stayed with me.*" Such comments reveal how familial expectations regarding women's physical appearance, especially in relation to marriage prospects, can operate as a form of gendered social control, compelling women to pursue bodily transformation.

Among married or engaged participants, body dissatisfaction was often tied to post-marital or postpartum changes. Several women, including Niveen who's married with two kids, described feeling pressure, whether from spouses, extended family, or societal norms, to lose weight, tone their bodies, or maintain a certain appearance. While some initially joined gyms for general fitness or weight loss; like Suad who later became a gym trainer, they later gravitated toward weight training as it offered more targeted, transformative effects.

Building Strength and Functional Capacity

A second key motivation was the desire to become stronger—physically, functionally, and symbolically. Several participants described entering weight training not primarily for aesthetics but to overcome a sense of physical weakness or fragility. In some cases, this was driven by the demands of their professional lives; in others, it stemmed from broader aspirations for autonomy and resilience.

Haneen (30, unmarried), an architect, reflected, "*My body was very fragile, and I wanted to become stronger, but then I also saw that as I grew stronger, my body became more toned and curvy*." Haneen's quote captures the interconnectedness of strength and aesthetics, what began as a pursuit of strength evolved into body shaping, and vice versa. For her, physical agency did not oppose femininity but rather redefined it. Similarly, Leen (26, Ramallah), a project coordinator, noted, "*Sitting at a desk all day made me feel weak and stiff. I needed something to make me feel alive again*." Her entry into weight training was not only about improving posture or energy levels but also about reclaiming her physical agency in a sedentary work life.

Two university students, Nima and Raneem, explained that they started weight training after stopping football training during their studies. Both had athletic pasts and sought to reconnect with their physical capabilities. "*I missed feeling

strong," Nima explained. "*I used to play football, and lifting gave me that same feeling of power and control.*" For these women, weight training represented a return to embodied confidence, rooted in pre-existing athletic identities.

Mental and Emotional Wellbeing: Lifting as Therapy

Mental and emotional resilience emerged as a critical theme across many interviews. Four women explicitly cited emotional stress, burnout, or personal trauma as their primary reason for beginning weight training. Over time, this motivation often merged with the pursuit of strength and physical transformation, illustrating the therapeutic potential of strength training. Noor (25, Ramallah), began weight training after her divorce, saying "*Lifting weights changed my life; it helps me deal with everything.*" Her experience underscores the role of weight training as a form of post-traumatic growth. Rather than focusing solely on outward appearance, Noor's journey reveals how weight training can become a psychosocial strategy for healing and self-renewal.

Manar, a nurse frequently assigned long and unpredictable shifts, turned to weight training to counterbalance the emotional toll of her profession, commenting "*I work 16-hour shifts sometimes. Lifting is the only thing that helps me feel like I'm doing something for myself.*" Manar's narrative points to the restorative value of strength training in contexts of emotional labor and care work, where women are often expected to give continuously without relief.

Evolving Motivations: From Aesthetics to Agency

For many women, motivations were not fixed. Participants like *Amnah* (33, from a Bethlehem village), who had been lifting for nine years, began with aesthetic goals but later developed a genuine appreciation for the practice itself: *"At first I just wanted to look better.*

But now, lifting is who I am. It changed how I see myself." Suad (28), a gym trainer, echoed this shift "*I started to get in shape, but now I love feeling strong, and showing other women what they can do."* These stories reveal a powerful transformation: what begins as conformity to external standards often evolves into a reclamation of strength and identity, particularly when women become role models for others.

In sum, the motivations that led Palestinian women to begin weight training are complex and contextually rooted, shaped by local gender norms, personal aspirations, and socio-economic realities. While many participants initially sought physical transformation in response to societal pressures, others were driven by a desire to reclaim physical strength or cope with emotional burdens. Over time, these motivations often intersected and evolved, demonstrating that weight training for women in Palestine is not merely a fitness choice but a form of embodied resistance, agency, and transformation. It challenges prevailing ideas about femininity, strength, and mental resilience, making the gym not only a site of physical activity but also of self-assertion and change, which will be illustrated in the following sections.

Social and Familial Reactions to the Women's Entry into Weight Training

Many participants said they received encouragement from their families and social circles regarding their decision to engage in weight training. For example, some women reported that their mothers or gym partners played a crucial role in supporting their entry into the sport. Duaa, a 31-year-old single woman, shared, "*My mom was supportive, but some of my friends thought weight training would make me look like a man.*" This suggests that while women may find support within their immediate families, social norms against female muscularity are also strong.

Other women cited facing criticism and resistance from male family members regarding their decision to engage in weight training. Resistance to women's weight training often stemmed from male family members and romantic partners, reflecting deeply rooted gender norms. Niveen 24 from a Bethlehem area Refugee Camp stated, "*I haven't told my father or brothers because I know they wouldn't approve*." She further explained that when her husband discovered her choice of exercise, he responded, "*Do you want to become a man? Your biceps say that you can punch better than the strongest man in the world*." Such statements illustrate how the feminine body ideal is carried and imposed by men, including intimate partners on their wives and girlfriends. Rather than just a general social norm – we see in Niveen's case – how her husband felt threatened at the way weight training challenges traditional notions of femininity and how clearly muscles are assumed to be a male attribute.

The tension between personal agency and societal expectations is particularly evident among married women who struggle to balance their fitness goals with their partners' perceptions of feminine attractiveness. This might be why some married female weightlifters expressed a desire to undertake plastic surgery in order to further conform to conventional beauty standards expressed by their husbands. Niveen, Maha, and Hanan, all married, admitted to considering undertaking cosmetic procedures, highlighting how societal pressure influences not only their fitness choices but also their broader perceptions of body image. This paradox underscores the complexity of women's engagement in weight training; while it can be a source of confidence and strength, it can also lead to increased self-scrutiny and self-judgement of their bodies.

Moreover, the contrast between support and resistance in women's experiences suggests that acceptance of female weight training remains conditional and selective. Women who receive familial or social support often do so within a limited framework that still prioritizes traditional femininity – i.e. that they should pursue weight training only in order to

achieve a better "feminine" body – potentially limiting their choices within the sport. In contrast, those who encounter familial opposition must navigate their fitness journeys in secrecy or compromise their personal goals to avoid conflict. As Salam, a 26-year-old single woman, described, "*I train early in the morning before going to work, because my brothers don't know that I actually go to the gym. They just won't allow me to do that. They say that I can only exercise at home.*" This dual reality demonstrates that while weight training serves as a potential tool for agency, it simultaneously exposes women to increased social pressures, forcing them to constantly negotiate between self-realization and societal approval.

It also reveals the complex ways Palestinian women negotiate familial control over their mobility and bodily autonomy, even when they are employed and publicly visible. Although Salam is a pharmacist, her brothers prohibit her from going to the gym, despite it being a women-only facility. Their objection is not to physical activity itself, but to her presence in non-work public spaces that are not seen as essential or morally "appropriate." This reveals how mobility is not granted freely but selectively permitted, often tied to notions of duty, family honor, or social surveillance. Her strategy of training early in the morning, before work and without her brothers' knowledge, reflects a form of careful negotiation rather than defiance.

It is also important to acknowledge that serious engagement with weight training — particularly for those aspiring toward bodybuilding— requires access to gym machines and heavy weights that are not typically available at home. Thus, for this participant, attending the gym is not merely a matter of preference but a necessity for pursuing her physical and personal goals. Her narrative illustrates how aspirations for bodily strength and autonomy are shaped, challenged, and constrained by the gendered regulation of space and movement, even when other forms of public participation, like professional work, are permitted.

The Ideal Female Body in the Palestinian Society

As can be seen in the previous discussions about familial (selective) support or opposition to the women's participation in bodybuilding, assumptions (carried by both men and women) regarding feminine body ideals were central. Through the interviews it became clear that they had experienced these assumptions as reflecting a contemporary Palestinian construction of the ideal feminine body. Participants consistently described a narrowly defined and culturally ingrained ideal of femininity in Palestinian society, which emphasizes a curvy lower body, a small waist, and a toned but non-muscular upper body. While both Western and Palestinian ideals value a curvy figure, the Palestinian standard appears more conservative—rejecting visible upper-body muscle, which is often associated with masculinity. In contrast, Western beauty norms increasingly celebrate visibly muscular and highly toned physiques as markers of femininity and discipline. These culturally specific preferences significantly influence how women approach fitness, particularly weight training, shaping both their exercise choices and the muscle groups they prioritize in their training routines.

Alaa, a 22-year-old university student from Ramallah who had been weight training for two years, expressed that while she was personally interested in strength building alongside transformation to a curvier body, societal expectations still played a significant role in shaping her fitness goals. She explained, "*People like skinny bodies here that do not show prominent quad muscles but still have lifted big glutes, a small waist, slender arms, narrow shoulders, and a big bust.*" Her description reflects the broader cultural preference for a sculpted yet traditionally feminine figure; one that is toned but does not display excessive muscularity, particularly in the upper body. This preference aligns with certain Western

ideals that also value a curvy yet toned figure, though the emphasis on minimizing visible muscle definition, particularly in the upper body, which appears more pronounced in the Palestinian context.

Similarly, Noor, 25 also from Ramallah who has been weight training for three years, highlighted the same issue of social acceptance of muscularity in women's lower body while emphasizing a resistance to visible upper body definition. She stated, "*It's alright to have a big lower body, even very attractive, but a woman should never have a bulky upper body. Toned muscles are fine, but the stomach must be flat, and prominent abs are not encouraged.*" Her statement underscores the selective nature of body ideals, where a degree of physical strength and athleticism are acceptable, but only when they align with traditional images of femininity. This ideal echo globalized beauty trends, such as the 'Kardashian' aesthetic, which also glorifies a pronounced lower body, though in the Palestinian context, this is often paired with stricter boundaries around upper-body muscularity and visible abs.

Sabreen, 27 years old, from Bethlehem who has been weight training for around five years, reinforced this perception, further detailing the specific expectations surrounding body shape. She described the ideal as "*curvy, with a lifted butt but not very wide hips, a small waist, and proportionate breasts."* This indicates that even within the preference for curves, there are precise standards regarding proportions and balance.

Overall, these interviews reveal how deeply rooted beauty standards shape Palestinian women's fitness goals, often limiting their freedom to pursue certain forms of physical strength and athleticism.

Social Media's Influences on Body Image

As mentioned in the opening section on the observations I undertook in the 3 gyms, women in both types of gyms followed social media workout programs suggests a growing

preference for body shaping goals that are largely connected to the aesthetic ideals promoted online. In what ways are on-line images of ideal feminine bodies – similar or different to the ideal in Palestinian society expressed by the women in the previous section? To what extent do the training routines (focused on lower body and not upper body) that I saw most women in the 3 gyms undertaking fit into body ideals set by contemporary Palestinian culture versus on-line women focused training media platforms? Simply put – the two ideals – seem to largely overlap – such that women are given a message both by their social context and by on-line weight training platforms that they need to achieve a single ideal. The emphasis on lower body workouts and avoidance of upper body training is not unique to Palestinian women but is rather part of a widespread trend influenced by both local cultural expectations and global media representations of femininity.

The emphasis in the women's description of the local norm; of sculpting a toned lower body while maintaining a slender waist mirrors the body types frequently displayed on social media platforms aimed at women. Many fitness influencers showcase workout routines that prioritize glute building exercises such as squats, hip thrusts, and lunges, reinforcing the notion that these movements are essential for achieving the desired – curvy physique.

Furthermore, social media not only shapes workout preferences but also affects women's self-perception and confidence in gym spaces. The often-edited images of fitness influencers set unrealistic expectations for body transformation, leading many women to measure their progress against digitally enhanced physiques. This can create pressure to adhere to specific workout routines and body aesthetics, sometimes at the expense of personal fitness goals or overall wellbeing.

All of the participants said they followed fitness influencers, which significantly shaped their fitness goals and training habits. Many participants looked up to Western and Middle Eastern fitness influencers as sources of inspiration, often seeking guidance on

workout routines, nutrition, and body aesthetics. However, the influence of social media was complex, as it both motivated and pressured women to achieve particular body standards. The varying reactions of the women to beauty and body ideals and their related workout routines in social media will be further explored below.

Weight Training and Heightened Awareness to the Feminine Body Ideals

The interviews revealed that while weight training empowered women by increasing their physical strength and confidence, it also made them extremely self-aware of the gaps between their bodies and the ideal female standards promoted by everyday interactions in their social world, as well as by the norms promoted in the social media they follow. Many participants expressed a sense of struggle, as their evolving physiques, shaped through strength training, did not always align with the cultural and mediatized ideals imposed upon them. Despite progress towards some aspects of the ideal, some women felt pressured to pursue additional means, such as extreme dieting or plastic surgery to attain the "perfect" body.

Maha admitted to feeling dissatisfied despite her fitness efforts, stating, "*I think that I still need a lot of work done to achieve that perfect body. I might even consider plastic surgery to get the results I want because it is exhausting to achieve such a body naturally.*" This feeling reflects the unrealistic nature of normative feminine body ideals, which often demand physical features that are difficult, or even impossible, to achieve only through exercise. Another participant shared a similar concern, "*I think my lower body looks good, but I cannot grow breasts by working out, so I'll just have to accept them or get some surgical work done.*" Her statement underscores how fitness, while often pursued as a liberating practice, can generate frustration as the participant realizes that it cannot alter all aspects of the body in ways that align with internalized standards of femininity. This can lead

to feelings of inadequacy, self-surveillance, and a perceived failure to embody the culturally constructed ideal.

Duaa, who has been weight training for over five years, further illustrated this struggle by highlighting the challenge of fat distribution and the trade-offs involved in sculpting one's body. She explained, "*I still have some tummy fat that I need to get rid of, but losing it means going on a calorie deficit, which will also mean losing fat from my bottom, and I cannot handle that. So, I guess I'll just have to accept the tummy fat.*" Her struggle is an example of the paradox many women face, trying to balance the contradictory goals of fitness with feminine body ideals that often impose impossible to achieve physical characteristics.

These responses indicate that weight training is not always viewed as an alternative to surgical body modification but is sometimes pursued alongside surgical bodywork to achieve the impossible idealized shape. The emphasis on a specific body type suggests that even as women gain strength and confidence through exercise, they still find themselves trapped by societal expectations that continue to define their bodily appearance.

The Impact of Social Commentary

Social commentary as we saw earlier often played a role in motivating women to initially enter weight training. But once women's bodies start to change due to their participation in weight training, social commentary does not stop. Weight training exposes the participants to a wide range of societal feedback, both positive and negative, which in turn shapes their perceptions of their weight training bodies in complex ways. Many women found that no matter how their bodies changed, societal criticism remained constant; the content of commentary may change but it still came in the form of negative assessments of their bodies. This constant social judgement of their bodies reinforced women's body insecurities, affected their self-image and influenced their approach to fitness.

Maha, who has been weight training for around seven years, illustrated this struggle by explaining how social standards are impossible to satisfy, "*As a teenager, I was constantly criticized for being fat. Then, when I lost weight, they criticized me for being too skinny. Now that I lift weights, people say I'm masculine and manly.*" Her experience highlights the impossible nature of beauty standards, which often place women in an unwinnable position, where any deviation from the ideal body draws judgment. The pressure to conform leaves little room for personal satisfaction, making it difficult for women to fully embrace the physical transformation they achieve through hard work at the gym.

Haneen also described how body image insecurities were deeply influenced by family dynamics. She recalled, "*I was bullied at school for being very skinny and flat. Even my mom used to body shame me for my small breasts. I think I will never feel confident about them, but at least I have built thick legs at the gym.*" Her experience reveals how parental attitudes can reinforce societal expectations, shaping self-perception from an early age. Although she found agency in building muscle, her remaining insecurities suggest that fitness alone cannot erase years of internalized criticism.

Ultimately, these experiences demonstrate how women's body perceptions are always shaped by external feedback, whether from family, friends, or the wider society. Even when women turn to fitness as a means of autonomy, they remain influenced by social reactions that promote normative standards that dictates the ideal female body.

Social Media Impacts

This section explores how media exposure and external influences shape the Palestinian women's experiences and perceptions of weight training. Interviews revealed that social media, fitness influencers, and broader cultural narratives around athleticism play a significant role in shaping women's motivations, training approaches, and body self-images as they practice weight training.

All participants reported engaging with social media content related to fitness and bodybuilding, with many following both local and international fitness influencers. However, their responses varied in terms of how these influencers affected their training decisions and body image aspirations. Among the participants were three main trends in terms of the impacts of social media aimed at women weightlifters: attempts to conform in looks and workout regimes to the ideals promoted on social media; frustration and skepticism at the unrealistic or unreal bodies and looks promoted on social media; and finally, social media influencers as sources of motivation and personal autonomy.

Impact 1: Trying to Conform

A prominent theme among participants was the internalization of digital beauty ideals and the pressure to conform to gendered fitness aesthetics. Many women reported modifying their training goals and routines in response to content encountered on social media, particularly from popular fitness influencers. Ruba recounted the significant influence such figures had on shaping her perception of which muscles women should and should not train: *"I once watched a TikTok of a famous influencer about muscles that women should never train. He said that calves and rear delts should never be trained with weights because the damage would be irreversible, and the women would look like men forever."* This highlights how digital fitness culture can reinforce essentialist gender norms, deterring women from strength training in specific areas for fear of transgressing feminine boundaries.

For some participants, Sara, Sajeda, Shorouq and Amina, social media exposure contributed to increased self-surveillance and dissatisfaction with particular body parts. Shorouq reflected, *"I hate my body and feel like maybe it's just genetics; that I will always grow muscles very slowly but gain fat easily."* This statement reveals how comparisons with idealized bodies promoted online led women to perceive their own physical characteristics as

inherently deficient**,** internalizing societal standards and attributing personal limitations to biological inevitability. The frustration expressed here is not merely aesthetic but deeply psychological, echoing Bartky's (1990) theorization of the disciplinary body, in which women internalize societal norms and turn them inward in a process of self regulation and critique.

Noor, another participant, elaborated on how social media distorted her perception of bodily progress, *"I feel like I am only gaining muscles in the wrong areas, whereas these girls' bodies look more toned."* Her statement underscores the damaging impact of digitally altered images and curated fitness journeys, where the constant visual comparison diminishes body satisfaction, even among those actively engaged in strength training. These experiences resonate with Gill's (2007) analysis of the postfeminist sensibility, wherein agency through fitness and self-improvement becomes intertwined with anxiety, self doubt, and constant evaluation under the digital gaze.

Some women, particularly those newer to the weight training community, reported intensified insecurities when measuring themselves against the edited and often surgically enhanced bodies of global fitness influencers. Sara, a 31-year-old with one year of training experience, expressed *"I sometimes feel very insecure and hate my progress. I feel like I need to be working out forever until I see the same results they are showing."* She frequently criticized her body for storing fat in particular areas and struggled to replicate the hyper toned bodies showcased by influencers, attributing her dissatisfaction to unchangeable genetic differences.

Overall, this section reflects how social media fosters a sense of conformity rooted in narrow and often unattainable body ideals. The pressure to imitate digitally constructed fitness norms leads to dissatisfaction, self-blame, and an erosion of bodily confidence—even among committed female athletes. This pressure is particularly present within the context of

Palestinian society, where intersecting gendered and cultural expectations further shape women's experiences of their athletic bodies.

Impact 2: Frustration and Skepticism

For many participants, engagement with fitness content on social media led not to motivation but to heightened frustration and growing skepticism. Several women described their discontent with the unrealistic and often digitally manipulated body images promoted by influencers. Arwa, an experienced weightlifter with around eight years of experience, shared: *"I have started unfollowing any female fitness influencer whose body looks impossible to achieve naturally! I have also been watching reels on Instagram of fitness influencers who promote body positivity and show how bodies can be edited in videos not just in pictures. This made me believe that you can trust nothing on social media."* Her statement reflects a critical shift from consumption to questioning, demonstrating a growing awareness of the manipulative aesthetics that dominate online fitness culture. This critique resonates with Bartky's (1990) concept of disciplinary power, where women internalize the gaze and regulate their appearance according to culturally enforced norms. Arwa's selective engagement with content reflects a conscious attempt to resist this disciplinary gaze by turning toward more realistic and affirming representations.

Yasmeen, another experienced weightlifter, echoed similar sentiments, stating: *"I mostly follow Palestinian female athletes because I know they do not photoshop their pictures or get surgical work done like many foreign influencers."* Her preference for local figures reflects both cultural relatability and a rejection of globalized beauty standards that feel unattainable or artificial. As Gill (2007) suggests, women often navigate a postfeminist media environment where agency is marketed through conformity to hyper-visible and idealized

body aesthetics. Yasmeen's skepticism illustrates how some women are beginning to challenge the credibility and value of these curated ideals.

Frustration was not exclusive to experienced lifters. Newer participants such as Shorouq, Sajeda, and Amina, who had been weight training for less than two years, also reported emotional fatigue from trying to live up to idealized bodies they saw online. Unlike the more experienced participants who had developed critical strategies of resistance, these women appeared more susceptible to the emotional toll of constant comparison. For them, social media intensified insecurities about body shape, muscle development, and femininity, particularly when their progress did not mirror that of popular influencers.

This comparison culture can create a loop of dissatisfaction, especially for women still forming their athletic identities. Even as they commit to physically demanding routines, they may feel their efforts fall short of the aesthetic appearance popularized online. Yet, the emergence of skepticism even among newer lifters suggests an evolving media literacy, a growing capacity to question and challenge dominant visual narratives rather than passively absorb them.

In sum, frustration and skepticism toward social media were common themes among participants, especially in relation to body ideals. While social media can serve as a site of community and inspiration, as will be explored in the next section, it is equally a space of deception and disempowerment. The participants' testimonies reflect an active process of negotiation, one in which some women reject the digital gaze and begin to seek out more credible, relatable, and culturally grounded sources of motivation.

Impact 3: agency and social media

While much of the existing literature highlights the harmful effects of social media on women's body image—particularly its role in reinforcing unrealistic beauty standards and

fostering appearance anxiety, several participants in this study described social media as a space of motivation and Autonomy rather than pressure. For these women, digital platforms provided not only exposure to diverse body types but also a form of virtual community that reinforced their personal goals and offered alternative representations of beauty.

Dunia, a 29-year-old participant from Ramallah, described social media as a source of motivation rather than pressure. She explained, *"I feel motivated to work harder to achieve the body I want after seeing stories of my favorite fitness influencer at the gym."* Her narrative illustrates how curated content by fitness influencers can serve as a form of external encouragement, helping women to reimagine their bodies as capable and strong rather than merely decorative.

This kind of engagement resonates with Bartky's (1990) argument that women internalize disciplinary practices related to appearance, but Dunia's response shows that this internalization can also be redirected. In her case, the gaze becomes something she navigates strategically, turning it into a motivational force for bodily transformation on her own terms.

Lana, a 21-year-old university student, offered a more complex reflection. She noted, *"I was praised by some women for being skinny, but others said I looked flat like a man. I always loved watching videos of models who have the same body type as mine… and I recently started watching reels on Instagram of foreign women who looked very curvy from weight training, so I decided to do the same."* Her experience highlights the ambivalence many women feel in response to body ideals, which are often contradictory. On one hand, she received validation for fitting into the thin ideal; on the other, she faced criticism for not conforming to local preferences for curvier bodies. Social media, for her, became a space where she encountered and eventually embraced a new ideal; one centered on muscularity and curves. This shift also illustrates how the female gaze, as noted by scholars such as Gill (2007), functions not only through men's objectification of women but also through women's

mutual surveillance and judgment. Lana's decision to begin weight training was influenced by seeing other women's bodies online, suggesting how the gaze operates in peer-to-peer, gendered ways that shape self-perception and bodily aspiration.

Moreover, several participants expressed that seeing women like themselves on social media; women who were strong, athletic, and unapologetically muscular, helped reframe their understanding of what a desirable body could look like. Instead of merely conforming to dominant beauty standards, they found new role models who embodied alternative ideals. Although some participants previously reported a lack of local female role models in weight training, social media filled this gap by offering global images that aligned with their evolving sense of agency and bodily pride.

In these cases, social media was not simply a site of self-surveillance or comparison, as discussed by Bartky (1990) and Gill (2007), but also a platform for reimagining the self. For women like Dunia and Lana, it enabled a form of agency that challenged traditional expectations and opened up new possibilities for physical and emotional agency through strength training.

Palestinian Women Weightlifters on Social Media: A lack of Role Models

As Yasmeen in the section mentioned above – she prefers to follow Palestinian women athletes on social media because they provide a more relatable and attainable model of fitness rather than the impossible body ideals promoted by foreign fitness videos and influencers. At the same time, there is a very limited amount of Palestinian female weightlifters on social media for women to follow or aspire to. When discussing the visibility of Palestinian female weightlifters in media, most participants expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of representation. Some believed cultural conservatism played a significant role in limiting their visibility. One participant, who exercised at Max Fitness, a facility near

Deheisheh refugee camp attended by women from nearby villages and refugee camps, explained, "*I think it's mostly because our society is very conservative and influenced by religion, so it's mostly girls from Christian backgrounds who get to post their fitness progress freely on social media.*" This suggests that the issue is not just a lack of media representation but also a socially regulated phenomenon, where cultural norms determine which women feel comfortable sharing their fitness journeys.

Haneen, on the other hand, emphasized the need for greater representation of Palestinian female athletes. She stated, "*I would like to see more recognized weight training competitions for women in Palestine and more Palestinian fitness influencers, because it's also sometimes hard to understand foreign fitness influencers due to language barriers.*" This highlights the demand for localized role models who share both linguistic and cultural backgrounds with Palestinian women, making fitness more accessible and relatable. However, some participants believed Palestinian women could engage in digital fitness spaces while maintaining cultural modesty. Yasmeen suggested, "*I think Palestinian women can be present on social media without showing too much skin. They can still convey their message without drawing unnecessary attention to their bodies.*" Her perspective reflects an attempt to conform to cultural expectations with the growing desire for fitness visibility, emphasizing that representation does not necessarily have to compromise social norms.

Lastly, these findings reveal the complex relationship Palestinian women have with media exposure in the fitness world. While some find inspiration and motivation in online content, others experience increased insecurity and pressure to conform to unattainable beauty standards. The lack of local representation further complicates this relationship, reinforcing the need for local relevant role models who can offer a more realistic and empowering vision of female strength and athleticism.

Negotiating Social and Cultural Expectations

The negotiation of social and cultural expectations arose as a defining factor in how Palestinian women engage with weight training. The findings indicate that women face continuous pressure to conform to gender norms, often adjusting their training styles, clothing, and exercise choices to align with societal expectations of femininity. While some women adopted weight training as a means of autonomy, many also engaged in modifications to ensure their participation remained socially acceptable. These modifications highlight the complex connection between personal agency and social constraints, as women attempt to balance their fitness aspirations with external pressures.

For example, many participants expressed feeling obliged to adjust their workout clothing and training intensity due to external judgments from peers and family members – and as we saw this was very much the case of the women who worked out at the gender-mixed gym in Ramallah. Clothing choices, in particular, were influenced by a range of social expectations and perceptions of modesty, femininity and body shape and not only in relation to the male gaze (example women's clothing choices at the Ramalllah gym). As Bartky (1990) pointed out, women are not only subjected to the male gaze, but also to a form of internalized discipline, where the female gaze, the judgment and surveillance of other women, plays a crucial role in enforcing normative femininity. For instance, at the women-only gym she attends, Suad highlighted how gym attire became a site of female-on-female scrutiny, explaining, "*Many women at the gym think I look fat when I wear baggy clothes, even though they are more comfortable. That's why I had to shift to leggings and compression tops, to show that I am not fat, just curvy.*" This response suggests that women's bodies are constantly policed by social expectations, even within women only gyms. The fear of appearing overweight pushed some women to modify their clothing to highlight specific body aesthetics.

Beyond clothing choices, the findings reveal that some women internalized societal beauty standards to an extent beyond physical fitness and into cosmetic modifications. Ibtihal (25), who is married and has been lifting weights for a year, noted "*I have been told that I achieved the perfect toned body at the gym and that I am only lacking bigger boobs, so I am currently saving money for a boob job*." This illustrates how, even within the fitness space, women feel the need to conform to unattainable beauty ideals that extend beyond muscle tone and strength, often incorporating surgical improvements to meet social standards. The aspiration for an idealized feminine physique underscores the pervasiveness of aesthetic expectations that dictate not only how women train but also how they perceive their own bodily achievements.

Additionally, external fitness narratives play a significant role in shaping women's weight training experiences. Ruba's earlier comment on how a social influencer on social media discussion of women's routines – sent a message that they should not work on certain muscles, or they would look like men reveals the strong influence of digital fitness culture in discouraging women from developing strength in certain areas, reinforcing a narrow and gendered ideal of femininity. Such narratives contribute to misinformation, creating unnecessary fear around certain exercises and further restricting women's autonomy over their fitness choices.

Likewise, the presence or absence of support systems played a significant role in shaping women's experiences with weight training. While some women found encouragement from close family members, training partners, or gym coaches, others encountered strict limitations imposed by male figures in their lives. The experience of Dalia, who has three years of weight training experience, exemplifies how social validation is often dependent on adherence to beauty norms. She explained, *"Most people support what I am doing because I now look much more feminine and sexier than before, when I was a skinny*

girl." This suggests that women's participation in weight training is more socially accepted when it enhances normative ideals of attractiveness, reinforcing the idea that female athleticism is only encouraged when it remains within specific aesthetic constraints.

Similarly, Tamara, who started weight training for strength building and mental wellbeing purposes, emphasized the role of peer motivation, stating, "*It is mostly my training partner and gym coach who keep me motivated and encouraged to build muscles, no matter which part of my body I am training*." This highlights how women seek out support networks that validate their fitness goals, countering external pressures to conform. Such support systems are crucial in enabling women to pursue their fitness aspirations without the fear of social judgment or restrictive gender expectations.

In contrast, some women faced disapproval from male family members. Multiple single respondents shared that their mothers supported their weight training journeys because they believed a curvier body would increase their daughters' chances of finding suitors by making them appear more traditionally feminine. This ideology illustrates the controversial nature of social support, where family encouragement is often conditional upon adherence to prevailing gender norms. Instead of being practiced for the pursuit of strength, health, or personal fulfillment, weight training was often pictured as a means to enhance marriage prospects, reflecting deeply ingrained patriarchal values.

Ruba described a different experience in which her husband became a needed support figure after she gave birth, explaining, "*My husband is my biggest supporter. He goes to the gym with me and encourages me to lift very heavy weights, especially after giving birth to five kids. He thinks resistance training is crucial for my strength and body shape*." This suggests that women's participation in weight training is more widely accepted when it is framed within the context of health, strength, and post-pregnancy recovery. The validation of

strength training for maternal health indicates that some contexts allow for better social acceptance of women's physical agency.

While some participants found ways to slightly challenge gender norms, others experienced direct attempts to adjust their bodies and fitness choices through the imposition of restrictive beliefs from family, social circles, and fitness influencers. For instance, Sara was discouraged from lifting heavy weights, recalling, "*I was told that lifting very heavy weights with lower repetitions would make me bulky like a man and that I should start lifting lighter weights with more repetitions to maintain a toned, womanly figure.*" Other women encountered misinformation about training and gender related exercise guidelines, such as avoiding training specific muscle groups for fear of looking "masculine." This illustrates how social control over women's fitness choices extends beyond family and peers to include social media and fitness narratives that preserve restrictive and often misleading fitness ideals.

In sum, the analysis reveals that Palestinian women's participation in weight training is deeply influenced by social and cultural expectations, requiring them to strategically navigate gender norms to maintain their engagement with the sport. Participants frequently adapted their training styles, clothing, and exercise choices to fit within socially accepted boundaries, showing a negotiated form of body autonomy rather than direct defiance. By making planned modifications, women are able to pursue their fitness goals while simultaneously managing social expectations. However, the continuous presence of external pressures, ranging from familial expectations to social media influence, highlights the ongoing struggle for autonomy in fitness spaces. These findings emphasize the need for wider social approval of various female body aesthetics and the demolishing of restrictive fitness narratives that hinder women's full participation in strength training.

Weight Training and the Palestinian Colonial Context

The intersection between weight training and the Palestinian colonial context reveals that women's participation in strength training is influenced not only by gender norms but also by the broader sociopolitical realities of occupation and resistance. The interview responses indicate that Palestinian women's engagement with weight training is shaped by their lived experiences under colonial rule, economic instability, and restricted access to resources. Their bodies are not only sites of gendered negotiations but also carry the weight of political struggles, survival, and resilience. This complicated reality underscores how fitness, particularly weight training, serves as an act of autonomy.

Participants frequently associated physical strength with broader narratives of resistance and survival, aligning their pursuit of weight training with the challenges of living under colonial occupation. Weight training was described as a complementary experience to Palestinian women's daily struggles, reinforcing the perception that strength is a necessary attribute for surviving life under occupation. Dalia, a 27-year-old single woman from a village in Hebron, exemplified this connection, stating, "*As Palestinian women, we are always struggling. Life is not easy for us, so weight training must be a complementary experience to our routines.*" This suggests that women do not see weight training as a luxury activity but rather as a physical and psychological necessity in an environment that continuously tests their endurance. Many respondents repeated this sentiment, emphasizing that women are responsible for both household labor and paid work, particularly married participants who were employed. As one participant put it, "*Most Palestinian women have to take care of the house and their jobs, so having some time for ourselves is necessary to empower us to thrive every day.*" This reinforces the notion that physical strength is not merely about aesthetics but about functionality, endurance, and autonomy within a demanding sociopolitical context.

Furthermore, colonial occupation affects more than just land and governance; it also influences the way Palestinian women's bodies are perceived and controlled. Participants described how Western beauty standards and colonial narratives about Arab women's bodies have shaped local beauty ideals, often positioning white, Eurocentric features as superior and leading to shame and criticism when Palestinian women's bodies do not conform. As one participant explained, "*Palestinians and Arabs in general are highly affected by Western beauty standards, whether it's skin color, hair, eyes, or body shape. My husband always criticizes my body, saying it's not as soft as Russian women's bodies.*" This highlights the pervasive influence of colonial beauty hierarchies, where whiteness is still perceived as the ideal, reinforcing internalized self-surveillance and body frustration (Gentles-Peart 2016). These beauty ideals impose additional control over Palestinian women's bodies, dictating not only how they should look but also how they should train, move, and exist within both private and public spaces.

Beyond social expectations, Palestinian women also face significant challenges that limit their ability to access fitness spaces. The occupation has created physical, economic, and security barriers that impact women's ability to engage in consistent training. Nida' highlighted the issue of restricted mobility, explaining, "*It's always very hard for me to get to the gym because there are no women-only gyms in the area where I live. I have to pass checkpoints and travel for at least 40 minutes to get to the nearest gym, which makes me discouraged to go to the gym after a hard day of work.*" This was mostly the case for women coming from Hebron or villages south of Bethlehem who in order to exercise at Max Fitness Gym, had to pass through military checkpoints that make a journey much longer, more random and sometimes dangerous – especially following the most recent genocidal war in Gaza and the escalation of military invasions and settler attacks in the West Bank. The

women's responses underscores how colonial spatial control affects women's access to fitness spaces, reinforcing gendered restrictions on movement and bodily autonomy.

Economic constraints also played a major role, with many women reporting that financial difficulties (worsened since Israel's most recent war on Palestinians) limited their ability to maintain a gym membership. Hanan described this reality, stating, "*I was not able to go to the gym for months during the war because my husband lost his job, and I didn't have a job because I was taking care of the kids. I had no money to subscribe to the gym.*" This highlights how economic instability, exacerbated by the occupation, affects women's ability to engage in fitness activities, especially for unemployed married women- who depend on an employed spouse. The financial burden of gym memberships, coupled with the economic deterioration many families face, means that fitness remains an inaccessible luxury for a large segment of Palestinian women, further limiting their ability to develop physical strength as a form of self-care and resilience.

Finally, safety concerns also emerged as a key barrier. Some women described how military raids and settler violence restricted their ability to travel safely to and from gyms. As one respondent shared, "*My husband didn't want me to go to the gym because the nearest one was in an area where there are always Israeli raids. He was worried about me, so I had to quit until I convinced him to start working out as well so he would go with me.*" This reflects the layered insecurities Palestinian women face, where their physical movement and participation in gyms are not only limited by gendered restrictions, but also by colonial violence. These fears are not groundless, as Palestinian female weightlifters often encounter both physical danger and social scrutiny, reinforcing the need for alternative fitness solutions that take security concerns into account.

In short, the findings reveal that Palestinian women's participation in weight training is deeply entangled with their lived experiences under colonial rule. Weight training is not

just about fitness; it is a form of resilience, self-preservation, and defiance in the face of oppression. By engaging in strength training, Palestinian women promote physical power in response to the physical and psychological demands of occupation. Their pursuit of weight training extends beyond personal wellbeing to reach a broader assertion of agency. Their resilience demonstrates that despite systemic barriers and societal constraints, they continue to create spaces for strength, endurance, and self-determination. This reinforces the necessity of recognizing fitness as an essential aspect of Palestinian women's resistance, where bodily agency serves as an act of rebelliousness against colonial suppression.

Autonomy and Future Aspirations

The interviews indicate that Palestinian women's engagement with weight training is deeply tied to personal autonomy, self-confidence building, and a redefinition of their femininity. Participants described their experiences with weight training as a transformative process, shifting their self-perception and challenging their preexisting notions of strength and beauty that were perceived within dominant gender norms. While some women initially joined weight training to conform to dominant beauty ideals, many women through their exercise journey discovered a sense of autonomy and confidence that transcended external validation.

A recurring theme in participants' responses was that weight training had a profound impact on their confidence and self-worth. As women progressed in their training, they began to view their bodies not only through the lens of appearance but also through the lens of strength and capability. For example, Dalia expressed how weight training changed her self-perception, stating, "I *feel much more confident now that I am not very skinny*." Her statement reflects a shift from body dissatisfaction to self-assurance. Yasmeen shared a similar sentiment, stating, "*I feel very powerful and unstoppable because I can lift very heavy weights that even my brother cannot lift*." This highlights how strength training allows

women to challenge gendered expectations of physical ability, leading to a redefined sense of agency. In addition, Suad emphasized the role of body reshaping to heightening her self-esteem, explaining, "*I feel more confident because I have lost a lot of fat and gained muscles, and I can say that I am in very good shape now.*" Her response reflects how weight training provides a sense of personal accomplishment and body self-appreciation. These responses show that while weight training may begin as a way to conform to beauty standards, it often evolves into a source of self-styled redefinition of beauty standards, allowing women to embrace their physical capabilities rather than merely seeking approval based on aesthetics.

The women also expressed a desire to encourage more Palestinian women to engage in weight training, despite the social barriers and misconceptions that surround female participation in strength training. Many saw their own progress as an opportunity to challenge restrictive norms and empower others. A common piece of advice they give to women considering weight training was to ignore societal stigma and embrace the benefits of training. As Suad, a 27-year-old weightlifter and gym coach, put it, "*Just do it! It's worth it. You won't look like a man; you will just look sexier and more powerful.*" This statement reflects a direct challenge to the myth that weight training masculinizes women, reaffirming that strength can coexist with femininity. Manar, who had been burdened by a heavy workload, further emphasized the mental health benefits of training, explaining, "*Lifting weights changed my life, and it can change yours. It just releases all the tension from the day, and you instantly feel better after exercising.*" This highlights the psychological and emotional benefits of weight training, reinforcing its role as a form of stress relief and emotional resilience.

While many participants expressed a desire to see more Palestinian women engage in weight training, they also identified several structural and cultural barriers that must be addressed to enable broader participation. One major challenge was the lack of women only

gyms, particularly in areas where travel restrictions and security concerns limit access to fitness spaces. As some respondents suggested, "*More women-only gyms are needed everywhere, so we don't have to travel long distances, especially during these hard times of war and unsafe roads and settlers' attacks on villages.*" Women from villages near Bethlehem particularly expressed their need for gyms in their areas due to the lack of a strong sports culture that supports women practicing weight training, as well as the difficulty of transportation and traffic when trying to reach gyms in central Bethlehem. This underscores how occupation related barriers further restrict women's access to fitness facilities, making physical activity not just a social issue but also a political one, where women's mobility is affected by broader geopolitical constraints.

Participants also called for greater awareness about the benefits of strength training for women, advocating for educational campaigns to counter misconceptions. Saja, a registered dentist working in the medical field, stated, "*We need more campaigns to spread awareness of the importance of this sport to a woman's body and health.*" This reflects a desire for institutional support to normalize weight training and remove the stigma surrounding female participation. Similarly, Tamara, whose primary motivation for weight training is to improve her strength and overall wellbeing, emphasized the need for recognized competitions for women in weight training, explaining, "*We need serious weight training competitions for women in Palestine to encourage them to take the sport more seriously.*" This highlights how the lack of official recognition limits the visibility and professionalization of female weightlifters, reinforcing the perception that weight training remains a male dominated space. Raneen, the university student aiming to restore her strength after years away from sports, addressed the importance of changing male perceptions about female strength training, stating, "*We need to spread awareness to men that a woman's body can be feminine and strong. They need to encourage and support their wives instead of*

bringing them down and preventing them from practicing the sport they love." This underscores the social resistance women encounter from male figures, reinforcing the need for broader cultural shifts to make weight training more accessible to women and to redefine masculinity in ways that support female agency rather than restrict it.

In sum, the results suggest that weight training is a powerful tool for self-autonomy among Palestinian women, allowing them to gain confidence, challenge social norms, and encourage others to pursue strength training. However, broader structural and cultural barriers continue to restrict women's participation, limiting the extent to which weight training can become widely accessible. The intersection of gender, culture, and political realities underscores the necessity of institutional and societal support to ensure that weight training is not only seen as a personal endeavor but as a movement toward broader gender equality and self-determination.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

This section synthesizes the key findings from the analysis of Palestinian women's participation in weight training, drawing on a Grounded Theory approach to examine the relation between gender norms, social expectations, colonial realities, and structural barriers that shape their engagement with the sport. By analyzing these interrelated influences, the discussion highlights the ways in which Palestinian women navigate both autonomy and constraint in their fitness journeys. The analysis is structured around the major themes that emerged from the data, illustrating the complex reciprocity between personal agency and external limitations in shaping women's experiences within weight training. Through the process of coding and constant comparison, the fieldwork led to the development of a grounded theory about negotiated bodily agency, which conceptualizes how women strategically navigate the pressures of gendered expectations, family constraints, and colonial restrictions through their engagement in weight training. Rather than interpreting their

participation as a straightforward act of resistance or compliance, the findings reveal how women continuously reposition themselves within conflicting discourses of femininity, respectability, and strength.

This emergent theory contributes to feminist and postcolonial literature by foregrounding how bodily practices, such as weight training, can function as both sites of constraint and subtle redefinition. It extends existing literature by situating women's embodied agency within the specific context of Palestinian sociopolitical realities, including occupation and gendered surveillance.

This examination not only underscores the challenges women face but also emphasizes the strategies they employ to assert autonomy and redefine their physical capabilities within a sociopolitical context marked by occupation and gendered restrictions.

Weight Training as a Negotiated Practice: Conformity and Resistance

The findings reveal that Palestinian women's engagement with weight training is neither a rejection of gender norms, including feminine body ideals, nor full compliance with them. Instead, women engage in a weight training while strategically selecting aspects of it that align with dominant beauty ideals while resisting restrictions on their physical capabilities and personal training goals. To illustrate, on the one hand many women conformed to the feminine norm by prioritizing lower body training to achieve a curvy, socially acceptable physique while avoiding upper-body strength development for fear of looking "masculine." This reflects how cultural beauty standards continue to dictate how women train, even in strength-based sports. The fear of transgressing feminine body norms was reinforced by family and social circles, illustrating how their weight training experience is shaped by external validation and gendered perceptions of appropriate female bodies. In addition, some women adjusted their workout attire or training intensity in reaction

to the male gaze (for example among women training in mixed gender gyms) but they also adjusted their clothing in relation to the female gaze in gym spaces. At the same time, women's motivations and desires in terms of their weight training journey and practice did not stay limited to or simply reflect these normative expectations. Instead, they attached alternative meanings to their weight training by negotiating and redefining femininity, framing it as a path toward self-realization, physical and mental strength, and wellbeing,

This suggests how Palestinian women's participation in weight training is not solely, conformity to or acts of resistance against patriarchal norms - but is also an embodied negotiation of their agency. As Saba Mahmood (2005) argued, agency is not always enacted through direct opposition but can also be expressed through the strategic and embodied inhabitation of social expectations. In this case, Palestinian women's choice to focus on lower body training rather than full body muscle development reflects a compromise between agency and societal conformity. While women challenge traditional expectations by engaging in weight training, they adapt their training to fit beauty norms, demonstrating a negotiated form of bodily autonomy.

This negotiation further reveals the complexities of self-expression within restrictive gender frameworks. By selectively engaging in strength training, women create a space for themselves within the fitness culture without entirely disrupting prevailing ideals of femininity. This highlights how participation in weight training is shaped not only by individual desire but also by social structures that dictate which forms of bodily transformation are acceptable.

Additionally, the increasing visibility of women in gyms, even in mixed gender spaces, signifies a gradual shift in gender dynamics. While constraints remain, the mere act of occupying traditionally male dominated spaces represents a redefinition of physical agency.

Over time, these slight shifts may contribute to broader social changes, encouraging a more inclusive perception of women's strength and athleticism.

In sum, Palestinian women's engagement in weight training exemplifies the connection between adaptation and resistance, illustrating that agency isn't always in direct challenge but often through reshaping existing social norms.

The Role of Social Approval and External Influences

Social approval and external influences, particularly family and social, played a crucial role in shaping participants' engagement with weight training.

Given that weight training is not considered an acceptable "feminine" activity in the Palestinian context, the role of family support in both enabling women to enter weight training; in shaping their training choices; as well as their desired training outcome – was crucial for all the women weight trainers in the study. While some women, hid their involvement in the sport from especially male family members, the majority of them experienced family support as conditional support. Women who received encouragement to enter or keep practicing weight training, this support was usually tied to them pursuing a conventional beauty ideal or in order to further gender social expectations around finding a spouse. Not only among husbands, but also among mothers – women's engagement in weight training was more accepted when it was framed as a way to achieve or maintain an ideal feminine body – in order to be attractive to their husband or to attract a future marriage partner. Rarely was family support based on the priorities of many women weight trainers themselves - the pursuit of personal strength, well-being and athleticism. In most cases, this led to women adjusting their workout routines so as not to develop bodies that challenged these familial expectations and priorities.

The influence of social media was contradictory. The feminine body ideals and role models promoted by social media acted as simultaneously a source of motivation and dissatisfaction for the women. While some felt inspired by specific fitness influencers and used online content to set personal fitness goals, for the majority of women online ideals and models led them to experience insecurity and frustration when comparing themselves to the unrealistic body standards promoted by social media. In addition, the influence of colonial beauty ideals, as described by Gentles-Peart (2016), was evident in how women sought to conform to digitally curated aesthetics that emphasized lean yet curvy physiques. The lack of visible Palestinian female weightlifters in social media reinforced the feeling of isolation among women in the sport. The absence of culturally relevant female weight training role models meant that women were forced to rely on the often-alienating ideals and expectations promoted by western training media and influencers These western/colonial models increased the women weight trainers' sense of isolation in the sport both locally and globally. Global role models and references did not speak to their identity and experiences as specifically Palestinian women weight trainers, while the absence of local role models and references on social media confirmed the lack of acceptance of the sport for women within their own community and society – confirming their status as "gender outsiders" in their own society.

The Colonial Context and Structural Barriers

The broader Palestinian colonial reality plays a significant role in shaping women's access to weight training and their perception of their resilience and strength. The all-encompassing nature of the colonial occupation created another layer of barriers (along with the social gender norms) to women's participation in weight training. Firstly, the spatial and economic limits imposed by the occupation creates a series of structural barriers to the development of weight training as a sport for women more generally. Constant economic

crises created by military destruction and invasion, as well as the checkpoint regime leads to a lack of women-only gyms in different regions. Women-only gyms as we saw in the comparison between the three gyms in the sample as well as in the interviews are crucial for both allowing women from more conservative areas to undertake the sport at all, at the same time they create a separate space for women to explore their athleticism without the limits imposed by male surveillance. Many women reported difficulties in traveling to gyms due to checkpoints, Israeli military and settler violence, or financial constraints exacerbated by the occupation – which can make women's exercise a low priority when family income is not enough to cover basic family. These range of barriers demonstrate how colonial control over movement and resources directly affects Palestinian women's ability to engage in fitness and sports.

Given this context, the study shows how weight training also becomes understood by women who practice it as a political act. Many narrated how practicing or struggling to continue practicing weight training was an act of resistance and resilience in the face of occupation and structural inequalities. To clarify, many participants described strength training as a necessary extension of their everyday struggles, reflecting the notion that Palestinian women are expected to be emotionally and physically strong (in both domestic and public spheres) in order for their family and society to remain viable in the face of colonial attempts at its destruction.

On the other hand, colonial and Western beauty ideals continue to shape local standards of feminine attractiveness, leading to contradictory pressures on Palestinian women- that were strongly apparent among the women weightlifters. While mental and bodily strength is valued for survival, softness and Eurocentric features remain dominant beauty and body ideals for women, creating conflicting ideals around muscularity and femininity/ strength and softness.

These findings show that weight training is not just a fitness practice but an act of bodily autonomy in a highly controlled and militarized environment. The ability to access and engage in weight training is shaped by both gendered expectations and colonial oppression, illustrating the layered challenges Palestinian women face in their fitness journeys. At the same time, among the women who practice it – the act of weight training becomes integrated into wider Palestinian political ethics of survival and resistance.

Agency, and the Future of Weight Training for Palestinian Women

Despite these challenges of both the colonial limits, as well as the socially dominant feminine body ideals, many participants expressed a strong sense of agency through weight training. For instance, weight training helped women redefine their sense of self and self-confidence beyond normative feminine beauty ideals. Many reported feeling physically and mentally stronger, more capable, and more independent, suggesting that physical agency through training also translated into a sense of psychological and emotional strength and resilience.

Furthermore, participants actively encouraged other women to enter the sport, challenging restrictive gender norms and calling for more awareness about the benefits of strength training. Many of them advocated for greater inclusion and recognition of female weightlifters in the Palestinian society This reflects a growing movement toward redefining femininity to include strength and athleticism. They called specifically for practical solutions such as: more women only gyms; nationally recognized women weight training competitions, and wider cultural shifts in male perceptions of female strength. Some participants emphasized the need to educate men about women's ability to be both strong and feminine, highlighting the role of gendered expectations in limiting women's access to weight training.

These findings suggest that Palestinian women are actively working to expand opportunities for weight training, despite existing cultural and structural constraints. The debate of social expectations, media influence, and colonial barriers highlights that weight training is both a site of resistance and a space of strategic adaptation, illustrating how women continue to use power structures in their pursuit of fitness, self-realization and self-expression.

Recommendations

This thesis study came up with the following recommendation:

1. Expanding Access to Women-Only Fitness Spaces

One of the most significant barriers identified in this research is the lack of accessible women-only gyms, particularly in areas where cultural restrictions or security concerns limit women's ability to train in mixed-gender environments. It is recommended that:

- More women-only gyms be established in cities, refugee camps and villages.
- Existing gyms create women-only training hours, if they do not do so already, to provide safer, more comfortable spaces for female athletes.

2. Increasing Awareness About Strength Training for Women

Social misconceptions about female weight training, such as the belief that it leads to masculinization, continue to limit women's engagement in the sport. To reduce these misconceptions, the following actions should be taken:

- Develop awareness campaigns that educate Palestinian communities on the health benefits of strength training for women.
- Promote scientific knowledge on female strength training through social media, public talks, and school programs.

3. Creating More Opportunities for Women in Competitive Weight training

Participants expressed frustration over the lack of professional competitions and recognition for female weightlifters. Addressing this gap requires:

- The establishment of national women's weight training competitions in Palestine.

- Greater media coverage of Palestinian female athletes to enhance their visibility.

4. Challenging Gender Norms Through Community Engagement

Cultural resistance to female weight training is largely rooted in gender norms that discourage women from developing physical strength. To challenge these norms:

- Male family members, including husbands and fathers, should be included in educational efforts about women's fitness, helping to shift attitudes toward female athleticism.

- Schools and universities should incorporate strength training in physical education curricula, normalizing the idea that strength is not exclusively a male domain.

5. Addressing Structural and Economic Barriers

Economic instability, travel restrictions, and occupation-related challenges disproportionately affect Palestinian women's ability to engage in sports. To improve accessibility:

- Subsidized gym memberships should be provided for women from low-income backgrounds.

- Funding for women's fitness initiatives should be included in development projects and international aid programs.

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