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Different dimensions of Indian women as bodybuilders

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Abstract

This paper looks at different dimensions of Indian women in the field of Body building, challenges faced by them, opportunities available and perception of common man towards them. The general mind set with people, what I have observed, is bodybuilding is meant for men and not women. And if a women tries to go against the wind and the ongoing traditional trend, they have to go through a lot of hardships and challenges, personally and professionally both. The basic stereotype says that men should be muscular and women should have good figure. Here, this mentality of public at large is put to a test!

Keywords: women bodybuilders; weight training; fitness; body building; weight lifting; workout myths.

Introduction

Indians (including women) generally don't think that women and body building is a good combination. In fact, it is a common myth that strength training using heavy weights would result to bulking in unfeminine ways. Females want themselves to be fit but not muscular.

It is said by Steve Jobs, "Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do." On the same lines, we have couple of Indian women who have started moving on the path of changing the mind set of people and creating a new trend. They are challenging traditional gender stereotypes by their hard work and determination.

On visiting few gyms (including chains and city based specially in Gujarat), it was found that hardly any female members coming to the gym for body building. Majority of them came to reduce/gain weight or few for fitness. The scenario is little better in North India in states like Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, etc. However, weight training is quite uncommon for females. And may be this leads to unacceptability of women in free weight zone and surprising responses from people.

When it comes to appreciation and viewing, Indian men and women both would see images of foreign women body builders and fitness models. But if women are asked to built muscles size or shape, majority don't agree to go ahead with it. Few responded to it by saying, "This is not meant for girls. Boys do that." Or "I can't pick up those heavy weights." Or "Girls should have good figure and that is what I want. I come to the gym and focus majorly on cardio. I am happy with it." Moreover, interaction with few men resulted to the same conclusion. Responses from men were like, "Why should girls have those bulky cuts! They should be slim and fit that's it!", "Girls lose their femininity.", "Women should have sexy physique and not muscular body. I would not like my girl to be like that." The responses were seriously disheartening and sarcastic! The same individuals, who can appreciate the images of foreign women body builders, can't accept someone turning out into a women body builder in front of them!

Search over the web is more for figures and Bikini models as compared to body builders. Also, if one searches on any search engine with the key word, "women body builders", there is hardly any image of an *Indian* women one would possibly see. There lies the catch and the fact! This triggers something in the mind and I ask myself, "Why so? Are there no good Indian Women Body Builders? What is the reason behind this?" This same trigger is the base of this research paper.

Understanding Body Building: Science

Muscle building (Bulking) is a process of tear/damage/injury and repair of muscles. Muscle growth occurs whenever the rate of muscle protein synthesis is greater than the rate of muscle protein breakdown. The muscles tear when we workout by giving tension to muscles by lifting heavy weights. This muscle damage causes a release of inflammatory molecules and immune system cells that activate satellite cells to jump into action. (Satellite cell activation is one of the factors in muscle growth). The muscles actually grow after the workout i.e. when muscles are at rest and getting repaired. Biological effort to repair or replace damaged muscle fibres begins with the satellite cells fusing together and to the muscles fibres, often leading to increases in muscle fibre cross-sectional area or hypertrophy. As the satellite cells multiply, some remain as organelles on the muscle fibre whereas the majority differentiate (the process cells undergo as they mature into normal cells) and fuse to muscle fibres to form new muscle protein stands (or myofibrils) and/or repair damaged fibres. Thus, the muscle cells' myofibrils will increase in thickness and number. Each muscle should get 24-48 hours of rest with good protein and carbohydrates intake for good and healthy growth of muscles. Hormones are another component largely responsible for muscle growth and repair. Insulin also stimulates muscle growth by enhancing protein synthesis and facilitating the entry of glucose into cells.

There are a lot of factors involved in body building process like levels of fat, hormones, testosterone, Insulin Growth Factor (IGF), Fibroblast growth factor (FGF), Insulin, age, gender, etc. For body fat, Epidemiological fitness levels show suggested ranges of 7–19% for men and 15–27% for women. The lower end is ideal for young adults and the higher end are for older individuals.

Men have between 20 and 30 times more circulating testosterone than women and it is for this reason, as well as the fact that men have more numerous and larger muscle fibres, that men can develop much bigger muscles than women. Men and women who train similarly can have same muscle strength but not same muscle size.

Young women have the same ability to build muscle as men. Older women require larger dosage of protein to equalize protein synthesis. However, the women start out with less muscle and their bodies tend to be lighter and smaller than men's.

Women's Body Building: Challenges and Survival

In the Indian society, it is not the case that no women are interested in body building or there are no women athletes. However, the ratio is comparatively less as they have to face a lot of challenges surviving in the society. They have to strive for acceptance in various areas. Women bodybuilding is a fledgling sport compared to men's category in India. But things are beginning to look bright for the aspiring women bodybuilders as more opportunities are coming their way to showcase their talent. However, challenges remain for these women.

The first basic challenge is our culture does not support this. Being accepted with the image of muscular person, women have to go against the wind to fit in. This is also one of the sports, which few people fail to understand. It is demanding and calls for a lot of hard work, dedication and discipline. Secondly, it is expensive as Bodybuilders spend exorbitant amount of money on their diet and intake of protein supplements. The sponsors to support them are very rare in India. Also, as bodybuilding is almost a full-time lifestyle, one

may have to forego decent jobs and pursue body building. This results to another challenge of convincing the family for the same. And even after they win the championship, they get trivial returns compared to the efforts they had put in to reach that place. So, somewhere there may be lack of motivation to participate.

Thirty-one-year old Leela Phad, a woman bodybuilder, said in 2014, "They (her parents) know I am a trainer but they don't know that I will be competing as a bodybuilder. They are conservative and don't like women wearing that particular attire (bikini) on stage. Apart from that they are angry that I have not taken up the secure job of sales tax inspector and instead pursuing sports. They want me to save and not spend". Moreover, there are other natural factors also which go against women and hence they have to work out harder than men. The female body itself does not support the whole activity. Insulin Growth Factor (IGF)-1, in particular Mecho-Growth Factor (MGF) and testosterone levels are less compared to men and these are the two most vital mechanisms that promote muscle growth. Women body supports muscle building and size to certain extent only. Beyond that they have to rely upon external supplements and intakes. They may have to take steroids as structure of the body and hormones are not up to that level. Because of this, they undergo hormonal changes and face other side effects of the same. Women gain fat quicker hence, has to be on a strict diet. As the fat level is more in women, bulking and cutting becomes more difficult

Women's Body Building: Present Scenario

Body building is considered as a man dominating sport in India. However, as women have started entering all the diverse areas and have started proving themselves, this area is also now one of them. Internationally, there are now five categories of competition for female athletes: Women's Bodybuilding, Physique, Figure, Fitness, and Bikini. These categories can be interpreted as progressive stops along a continuum between femininity and masculinity. It is now that Indian women have started following this sport and few have won some competitions as well.

Natasha Pradhan, a woman bodybuilder, says, "There were not many opportunities earlier. But now there are a few. This category is not only about bodybuilding, but also about fitness and modelling, something which is new in India. Women here are mostly scared to have a bulked up physique hence, this kind of fitness that also looks beautiful and also retains the feminine side, will help others to pursue." There are similar responses from few others women as well

Overcoming the challenges, ignoring what people had to say, striving for family support, going through injuries and surviving in the Indian society; few women have seriously turned the tables and have given answer to the taboo stigma of women not being into body building.

Jaipur based 25-years old engineer, Shweta Rathod participated in the 6th World Body Building Championship & Physique Sports Competition at Bombay Exhibition Centre, NESCO, organized by The Indian Body Builders Federation (IBBF) during December 2014. She said, "I am participating in the model physique category where I will wear a bikini and pose for 90 seconds. If I win, I will be the first Indian to do so." Later she won the Miss India 2015 title in bodybuilding. Deepika Chowdary, 31, molecular biologist turned figure athlete, became the first Indian to win an International Federation of Body Building and Fitness (IFBB) title. Ashwini Waskar, 32, marine researcher had to quit her job to be a full-time bodybuilder and has participated in three championships,

including an international event.

“It’s not the size of the dog in the fight, It’s the size of the fight in the dog”, said Mark Twain. These women have proved it right! The scenario is now changing. It was in the year 2014 that Indian women started participating in such competitions. For the first time, Indian women bodybuilders participated in national selection and India had a women category in an international body building tournament (World Body Building and Physique Sports Competition 2014). They have started winning competitions in 2015. But the awareness is still lacking.

Conclusion

Not many women body builders are found in India, taking body building as a passion or a sport because of traditional mentality and other reasons. However, growing popularity of bodybuilding among Indian women now proves that muscles aren’t always macho and women can also think about this sport and pursue it! As with changing winds in all the fields, it shall not be a surprise if India witnesses some more women body builders entering this area. As we have seen sportspersons like Saina Nehwal, Sania Mirza, Jwala Gutta, Mary Kom, etc. to name a few, earning glory for India; it would be a proud moment for Indians to see more Indian women getting laurels and grandeur for our nation in the area of body building too!

Recommendations

It is recommended to increase the awareness of this sport and make people understand the importance of fitness and wipe off their misconceptions about women and body building as a combination. Some basics of body building can be introduced at school levels only as a part of the course, Physical Education or Training. It can later be expanded at college level.

Moreover, there should be more competitions and championships organized in all zones and states just like any other sport. This will enable aspirants to pursue this profession; they get a platform and right guidelines and can channelize their efforts and dreams!.

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