GLORIA STEINEM (1934—)

The Politics of Muscle

Once described as a writer with “unpretentious clarity and forceful expression,” Gloria Steinem is one of the foremost organizers and champions of the modern women’s movement. She was born in Toledo, Ohio, earned a B.A. at Smith College, and pursued graduate work in political science at the universities of Delhi and Calcutta in India before returning to America to begin a freelance career in journalism. One of her earliest and best-known articles, “I Was a Playboy Bunny,” was a witty exposé of the entire Playboy operation written in 1963 after she had worked undercover for two weeks in the New York City Playboy Club. In 1968 she and Clay Felker founded New York magazine; then, in 1972, they started Ms. magazine, which sold out its entire 300,000-copy run in eight days. Steinem’s subsequent publications have included Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions (1983), Marilyn: Norma Jean (1986), Bedside Book of Self-Esteem (1989), and Moving Beyond Words (1994). She has also written several television scripts and is a frequent contributor to such periodicals as Esquire, Vogue, Cosmopolitan, Seventeen, and Life. An articulate and passionate spokesperson for feminist causes, Steinem has been honored nine times by the World Almanac as one of the twenty-five most influential women in America.

Preparing to Read

Taken from the author’s newest book, Moving Beyond Words, “The Politics of Muscle” is actually an introduction to a longer essay entitled “The Strongest Woman in the World,” which celebrates the virtues of women’s bodybuilding champion Bev Francis. In this introductory essay, Steinem examines the sexual politics of women’s weightlifting and the extent to which a “new beauty standard” has begun to evolve because of pioneers in the sport like Francis.

Exploring Experience: As you prepare to read this essay, examine for a few minutes your own thoughts about the associations
Americans make with weakness and strength in both men and women: Which sex do you think of as stronger? In America, what does strength have to do with accomplishment? With failure? Do these associations vary for men and women? What does weakness suggest in American culture? Do these suggestions vary for men and women? What are the positive values Americans associate with muscles and strength? With helplessness and weakness? What are the negative values Americans associate with muscles and strength? With helplessness and weakness? What connections have you made from your experience between physical strength and gender roles?

**Learning Online:** Read expert opinions about Gloria Steinem by conducting an Internet search using the terms “Perspectives of Gloria Steinem.” As you read these perspectives, consider the ways Steinem uses her writing for social and political activism.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

In “The Politics of Muscle,” noted feminist Gloria Steinem contrasts several earlier repressive types of female body images imposed on our male-dominated society—for example, thezaftig, Marilyn Monroe silhouette that became popular after World War II and the anorexic, “Twiggy” look of the 1960s—with the new emerging emphasis on strength and muscle in such bodybuilders as Bev Francis. “Only when women rebel against patriarchal standards,” she argues, will a change in the concept of female beauty become more widely accepted (para. 12).

**READABILITY LEVEL**

6.6

**RELATED READINGS**

*Sexism*
Sandra Cisneros, “Only daughter” p. 141
Gloria Steinem, “The Politics of Muscle” p. 367
Sucheng Chan, “You’re Short, Besides!” p. 376

I come from a generation of women who didn’t do sports. Being a cheerleader or a drum majorette was as far as our imaginations or role models could take us. Oh yes, there was also being a stutter—one of a group of girls (and we were girls then) who marched and danced and turned cartwheels in front of the high school band at football games. Did you know that big football universities actually gave stuttering scholarships? That shouldn’t sound any more bizarre than football scholarships, yet somehow it does. Gender politics strikes again.

But even winning one of those rare positions, the stuff that dreams were made of, was more about body display than about the considerable skill they required. You could forget about trying out for them if you didn’t have the right face and figure, and my high school was full of girls who had learned to do back flips and twirl flaming batons, all to no avail. Winning wasn’t about being the best in an objective competition or achieving a personal best, or even about becoming healthy or fit. It was about being chosen.

That’s one of many reasons why I and other women of my generation grew up believing—as many girls still do—that the most important thing about a female body is not what it does but how it looks. The power lies not within us but in the gaze of the observer. In retrospect, I feel sorry for the protofeminist gym teachers who tried so hard to interest us in handball and other team sports thought suitable for girls and boys, while we worried about the hairdo we’d slept out to achieve. Gym was just a stupid requirement you licked off, with ugly gym suits whose very freedom was accustomed to being constricted for viewing. The neighborhood didn’t help much either, for it was and ballet as my only exercise, and though my parents farmed us out to supermarket openings and other events where we danced our hearts out in homemade events about display too, about smiling even during the rigors of ballet, about looking even any muscles or strength.

My small school, through shock about class and wrongly assumed own lacrosse sticks and riding horses to school during training to carry on from childhood—and no club—childlike, as we must when we belatedly learn back to my familiar limits. Even at the casual softball played the staffs of other magazines, I confined myself As the MS. No Stars, we prided ourselves on keeping lineup, win or lose, and otherwise disbelieving in the jockocracy, so I contented myself with upsetting opposing team by cheering for their female team, amazed how upset those accustomed to convention can become when others refuse to be divided by lines.

In my case, an interest in the politics of strength from my own experience but from observing changes in many women around me. Several of my friends had deserted me by joining gyms, becoming discovering the pleasure of learning to yell and kick. Others who had young daughters described the thrill of seeing them learn to throw a ball or run that hadn’t been part of our lives in conscious misuse, I listened to formerly anorexic young women their obsession with dieting had diminished weighed strength as a third alternative to the usual...
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teachers who tried so hard to interest us in half-court basketball and other team sports thought suitable for girls in my high school, while we worried about the hairdo we’d slept on rollers all night to achieve. Gym was just a stupid requirement you tried to get out of, with ugly gym suits whose very freedom felt odd on bodies accustomed to being constricted for viewing. My blue-collar neighborhood didn’t help much either, for it convinced me that sports like tennis or golf were as remote as the country clubs where they were played—mostly by men anyway. That left tap dancing and ballet as my only exercise, and though my dancing school farmed us out to supermarket openings and local nightclubs, where we danced our hearts out in homemade costumes, those events were about display too, about smiling and pleasing and, even during the rigors of ballet, about looking ethereal and hiding any muscles or strength.

My sports avoidance continued into college, where I went through shock about class and wrongly assumed athletics were only for well-to-do prep school girls like those who brought their own lacrosse sticks and riding horses to school. With no sports training to carry over from childhood—and no place to become childlike, as we must when we deliberately learn basic skills—I clung to my familiar limits. Even at the casual softball games where Ms. played the staffs of other magazines, I confined myself to cheering. As the Ms. No Stars, we prided ourselves on keeping the same lineup, win or lose, and otherwise disobeying the rules of the jockocracy, so I contented myself with upsetting the men on the opposing team by cheering for their female team members. It’s amazing how upset those accustomed to conventional divisions can become when others refuse to be divided by them.

In my case, an interest in the politics of strength had come not from my own experience but from observing the mysterious changes in many women around me. Several of my unathletic friends had deserted me by joining gyms, becoming joggers, or discovering the pleasure of learning to yell and kick in self-defense class. Others who had young daughters described the unexpected thrill of seeing them learn to throw a ball or run with a freedom that hadn’t been part of our lives in conscious memory. On campuses, I listened to formerly anorexic young women who said their obsession with dieting had diminished when they discovered strength as a third alternative to the usual fat-versus-thin

Alice Walker, “Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self” p. 483
Robert Heilbroner, “Don’t Let Stereotypes Warp Your Judgment” p. 524
Jill Leslie Rosenbaum and Meda Chesney-Lind, “Appearance and Delinquency: A Research Note” p. 603
Societal Problems
Kimberly Wozencraft, “Notes from the Country Club” p. 58
Brent Staples, “A Brother’s Murder” p. 200
Phyllis Schneider, “Memory: Tips You’ll Never Forget” p. 277
K. C. Cole, “Calculated Risks” p. 283
Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, “Second Chances for Children of Divorce” p. 295
Sucheng Chan, “You’re Short, Besides!” p. 376
Ellen Goodman, “A Working Community” p. 433
Michael Dorris, “The Broken Cord” p. 462
Mary Roach, “Meet the Bickersons” p. 477
bell hooks, “Justice: Childhood Love Lessons” p. 512
Barbara Ehrenreich, “The Ecstasy of War” p. 593
Jill Leslie Rosenbaum and Meda Chesney-Lind, “Appearance and Delinquency: A Research Note” p. 603

Women’s Roles
Maya Angelou, “New Directions” p. 124
Sandra Cisneros, “Only daughter” p. 141
Amy Tan, “Mother Tongue” p. 190
Sucheng Chan, “You’re Short, Besides!” p. 376
Erma Bombeck, “Grandma” p. 401
Jill Leslie Rosenbaum and Meda Chesney-Lind, “Appearance and Delinquency: A Research Note” p. 603
Jess Row, “The Secrets of Bats” p. 638

DEFINITIONS
proto-feminist (para. 3): a person who espoused feminine ideals of full humanity for women and equal rights and opportunities for both sexes before the terminology existed.
ethereal (para. 3): with unusual delicacy and refinement.
dichotomy. Suddenly, a skinny, androgynous, “boyish” body was no longer the only way to escape the soft, female, “victim” bodies they associated with their mothers’ fates. Added together, these examples of before-and-after-strength changes were so dramatic that the only male analogues I could find were Vietnam amputees whose confidence was bolstered when they entered marathons in wheelchairs or on artificial legs, or paralyzed accident survivors whose sense of themselves was changed when they learned to play wheelchair basketball. Compared to their handicapped female counterparts, however, even those men seemed to be less transformed. Within each category, women had been less encouraged to develop whatever muscle and skills we had.

Since my old habits of ignoring my body and living inside my head weren’t that easy to break, it was difficult to change my nonathletic ways. Instead, I continued to learn secondhand from watching my friends, from reading about female strength in other cultures, and from asking questions wherever I traveled.

Though cultural differences were many, there were political similarities in the way women’s bodies were treated that went as deep as patriarchy itself. Whether achieved through law and social policy, as in this and other industrialized countries, or by way of tribal practice and religious ritual, as in older cultures, an individual woman’s body was far more subject to other people’s rules than was that of her male counterpart. Women always seemed to be owned to some degree as the means of reproduction. And as possessions, women’s bodies then became symbols of men’s status, with a value that was often determined by what was rare. Thus, rich cultures valued thin women, and poor cultures valued fat women. Yet all patriarchal cultures valued weakness in women. How else could male dominance survive? In my own country, for example, women who “belong” to rich white men are often thinner (as in “You can never be too rich or too thin”) than those who “belong” to poor men of color; ye: those very different groups of males tend to come together in their belief that women are supposed to be weaker than men; that muscles and strength aren’t “feminine.”

If I had any doubts about the psychological importance of cultural emphasis on male/female strength difference, listening to arguments about equality put them to rest. Sooner or later, even the most intellectual discussion came down to men’s supposedly superior strength as a justification for the system arguing regretted or celebrated. To explore, however, was the inadmissible way of explaining oppression in other traditions. African men, and blacks hadn’t been in the United States because whites had not. Males of the “wrong” class of laboring positions precisely because of their strength, just as the lower pay feminized by their supposedly lesser strength was just a self-fulfilling prophecy, just a system.

The more I learned, the more strength differences between women and men, as gender mind-game. In fact, we can exaggerate by culture. They seem bearing years (when men as a group were body strength, and women have bodily flexibility) but only marginal during a male (when females and males seem to be physical strength). Even during this difference among men and among women, a generalized difference between men and women societies like ours, where males than females of others, judgments sense. Yet we go right on assuming male and female strength.

But there is a problem about keeping the patriarchy. Women are workers, as production. Lower-class women are esp. occupational labor. So the problem becomes: strength is used for work but not for society. Make women ashamed of it. Though class women to be stronger than the same, those strong women are maleness weakness of women who “belong” to production for, upper-class men—and physically restricted if the lines of race...
Skinny, androgynous, “boyish” body was to escape the soft, female, “victim” bodies of their mothers’ fates. Added together, these after-strength changes were so dramatic I could find were Vietnam amputees registered when they entered marathons with artificial legs, or paralyzed accident survivors was changed when they learned to walk.

Compared to their handicapped female counterparts, men seemed to be less transgressive; women had been less encouraged to be tough and skilled. By ignoring my body and living inside my mind, it was difficult to change my mind. I continued to learn secondhand from a reading about female strength in other countries.

Weaknesses were many, there were political as well as social. Women’s bodies were treated that went as far as to be a weapon to gain power in many countries, or by way of religious ritual, as in other cultures, an individual more subject to other people’s rules than their own. Women always seemed to be in the means of reproduction. And as men then became symbols of men’s status, women determined by what was rare. Thus, women, and poor cultures valued fat, cultures valued weak women. Were we to survive? In my own country, for “belong” to rich white men are often thinner than those who do not. Yet those very different groups of women in their belief that women are supposed men; that muscles and strength aren’t about the psychological importance of cultural female strength difference, listening to put them to rest. Sooner or later, even muscular came down to men’s supposedly

superior strength as a justification for inequality, whether the person arguing regretted or celebrated it. What no one seemed to explore, however, was the inadequacy of physical strength as a way of explaining oppression in other cases. Men of European origin hadn’t ruled in South Africa because they were stronger than African men, and blacks hadn’t been kept in slavery or bad jobs in the United States because whites had more muscles. On the contrary, males of the “wrong” class or color were often confined to laboring positions precisely because of their supposedly greater strength, just as the lower pay males received was often rationalized by their supposedly lesser strength. Oppression has no logic—just a self-fulfilling prophecy, justified by a self-perpetuating system.

The more I learned, the more I realized that belief in great strength differences between women and men was itself part of the gender mind-game. In fact, we can’t really know what those differences might be, because they are so enshrined, perpetuated, and exaggerated by culture. They seem to be greatest during the childbearing years (when men as a group have more strength and upper-body strength, and women have a better balance, endurance, and flexibility) but only marginal during early childhood and old age (when females and males seem to have about the same degree of physical strength). Even during those middle years, the range of difference among men and among women is far greater than the generalized difference between males and females as groups. In multicultural societies like ours, where males of some races are smaller than females of others, judgments based on sex make even less sense. Yet we go right on assuming and praising female weakness and male strength.

But there is a problem about keeping women weak, even in a patriarchy. Women are workers, as well as the means of reproduction. Lower-class women are especially likely to do hard physical labor. So the problem becomes: How to make sure female strength isn’t used for work but not for rebellion? The answer is: Make women ashamed of it. Though hard work requires lower-class women to be stronger than their upper-class sisters, for example, those strong women are made to envy and imitate the weakness of women who “belong” to them, and are the means of reproduction for, upper-class men—and so must be kept even more physically restricted if the lines of race and inheritance are to be
kept “pure.” That’s why restrictive dress, from the chadors, or full-body veils, of the Middle East to metal anklet and neck rings in Africa, from nineteenth-century hoop skirts in Europe to corsets and high heels here, started among upper-class women and then sifted downward as poor women were encouraged to envy or imitate them. So did such bodily restrictions as bound feet in China, or clitoridectomies and infibulations in much of the Middle East and Africa, both of which practices began with women whose bodies were the means of reproduction for the powerful, and gradually became generalized symbols of femininity. In this country, the self-starvation known as anorexia nervosa is mostly a white, upper-middle-class, young-female phenomenon, but all women are encouraged to envy a white and impossibly thin ideal.

Sexual politics are also reflected through differing emphases on the reproductive parts of women’s bodies. Whenever a patriarchy wants females to populate a new territory or replenish an old one, big breasts and hips become admirable. Think of the bosomy ideal of this country’s frontier days, or the zaftig, Marilyn Monroe-type figure that became popular after the population losses of World War II. As soon as increased population wasn’t desirable or necessary, hips and breasts were deemphasized. Think of the Twiggy look that arrived in the 1960s.

But whether bosomy or flat, zaftig or thin, the female ideal remains weak, and it stays that way unless women ourselves organize to change it. Suffragists shed the unhealthy corsets that produced such a tiny-waisted, big-breasted look that fainting and smelling salts became routine. Instead, they brought in bloomers and bicycling. Feminists of today are struggling against social pressures that exalt siliconed breasts but otherwise stick-thin silhouettes. Introducing health and fitness has already led to a fashion industry effort to reintroduce weakness with the waif look, but at least it’s being protested. The point is: Only when women rebel against patriarchal standards does female muscle become more accepted.

For these very political reasons, I’ve gradually come to believe that society’s acceptance of muscular women may be one of the most intimate, visceral measures of change. Yes, we need progress everywhere, but an increase in our physical strength could have more impact on the everyday lives of most women than the occasional role model in the boardroom or in the White House.

UNDERSTANDING DETAILS
1. According to Steinem, what is “gender chosen” (paragraph 2)? Why is this important in her essay?
2. What does Steinem mean when she says "logic" (paragraph 8)? Explain your answer.
3. In what ways does “power” lie within the female?

ANALYZING MEANING
1. Why does Steinem call the female ideal "zaftig" (paragraph 5)? What did girls’ mothers think of this association?
2. Do you agree with the author that a woman is subject to other people’s rules than men (paragraph 7)? Explain your answer in terms of your own experience.
3. What is Steinem implying about the connection between female weakness and masculinity? Why, according to Steinem, why are these judgments of social and cultural mores?
4. What are Steinem’s reasons for saying that muscular women may be one of the measures of change (paragraph 13)? Is this statement or not? Explain your reaction.

DISCOVERING RHETORICAL STRATEGIES
1. Who do you think is Steinem’s intended audience for this essay? On what do you base your answer?
2. In your opinion, what is Steinem’s purpose in this essay? Explain your answer in detail.
3. How appropriate is the title of this essay? Why? What alternate possible titles might be appropriate?
4. What rhetorical modes support the argument in the essay? Give examples of each.
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