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Portuguese Female Bodybuilders: Between Constraints and Expectations

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Abstract

This exploratory study aims to identify and characterize the negative effects associated with the phenomenon of tokenism for Portuguese female bodybuilders, as well as the strategies they follow to integrate and remain in a context where men are significantly the majority and whose culture is marked by hegemonic masculinity. We conducted semi-structured interviews with seven men and eight women practicing bodybuilding and performed a thematic analysis of their recorded statements. Our analyses confirm that the context of bodybuilding is strongly gendered, in which, being a minority, women have more visibility, and organizational and group practices serve to diminish their efforts and results, placing them in an ambiguous and paradoxical territory.

Keywords: bodybuilding; sports; tokenism; gender relations; Portuguese women

1. Introduction

Sport is one of the human activities with a practically global character, recognized for its multiple facets and implications in diverse domains such as culture, economics, politics, and health [1–3]. Professional sports, in particular, through collective mobilization and visibility, can be an effective vehicle for transmitting positive social values and strengthening group and social cohesion [4].

Professional sports are also recognized as having the potential to influence the promotion of human rights, especially equality between men and women [5]. However, and contradictorily, professional sports reflect and amplify social inequalities, namely gender inequalities, as the support and income received contribute to the spread of cultures dominated by men and by male and heterosexual hegemonies [4,6]. Organizations tend to be gendered and as mentioned before, sports organizations are potentially generators of gender inequalities through the establishment of "gender regimes", causing patriarchal and male power to prevail and maintaining control over matters concerning women and non-heterosexual men [7–9].

Generally speaking, it can be stated that sports organizations are characterized by this strong link to male power and the direct effects of hegemonic masculinity namely, the emergence and establishment of psychosocial barriers that are not always visible [10–13]. Gender stereotype threat is one such barrier, arising whenever prejudices regarding girls and women are accentuated in the sports context [14,15]. Emphasis should be placed on assumptions regarding their physical inferiority, lack of skill, and/or natural (biological)

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unsuitability for sports requiring strength. Within this framework, contexts in which women are in the minority call for greater knowledge as a contribution to social change, in this case, within the world of professional sports [16].

Our exploratory study focuses on the field of Portuguese bodybuilding, in which women are highly underrepresented and which is characterized by the maintenance of a culture that reifies hegemonic masculinity [17,18]. Considering the work of Rosabeth Moss Kanter and the sporting context in question, we acknowledge that female bodybuilders may have experiences illustrating belonging to a token group, experiences that can also be identified by male bodybuilders [19,20].

1.1. Tokenism Theory and the Relevance of Numerical Proportion

The theory of tokenism has maintained a high level of applicability and relevance in supporting studies concerning the relationships between groups with large numerical asymmetry, especially those constituted based on the sex of their members, as is the case in the context in which we developed our research [19,20].

Rosabeth Moss Kanter pioneered the study of the functioning of diverse groups in professional contexts, aiming to portray inequalities between men and women. The author noted three major disadvantages experienced by women compared to men, especially those in tokenism situations: (i) fewer opportunities for career advancement and training within the organization; (ii) less decision-making power and resources within the organization; and (iii) a smaller numerical proportion within the workforce [19,20].

The disadvantage related to group numerical disproportion was fundamental to the construction of Kanter's theory of tokenism, which provided an explanation for the effects arising from a specific organizational situation, namely, the existence of an underrepresented group [19,20]. In fact, according to Santos and Amâncio, Kanter began by developing a theoretical model that describes four types of groups (uniform groups, skewed groups, titled groups, and balanced groups) within a group, on a continuum of gender representation. The author focused particularly on skewed groups, where the ratio of subgroups is approximately 85:15, resulting in the dominance of one group over the other, generating negative discrimination [21].

The author called the minority members of the group "tokens" because they are often seen as "examples" or "symbols" representing their category, not as individuals. These individuals often have difficulty forming bonds with other group members precisely because they are a small minority. The majority group, on the other hand, was called "dominant," since it holds more power and control within the larger group, as well as over its culture.

After conducting her studies, the author found that, in addition to how they are treated, token individuals experience three consequences that elicit characteristic behavioral responses from them.

The first consequence is the high visibility of token individuals, resulting from their dissimilarity to the other part of the larger group (i.e., the majority), since they correspond to its smaller segment. This phenomenon can lead token individuals to feel the need to demonstrate their abilities through greater effort and commitment, in order to be seen as competent as the members of the dominant group. The second consequence is the polarization, or contrast, carried out by the elements of the dominant group in relation to the group of token individuals, accentuating the differences between both groups and, consequently, potentially leading to the isolation or accommodation of the latter. Finally, assimilation, which consists of the distortion of the attributes of token individuals by members of the dominant group, so that they conform to pre-existing generalizations about their social group. This may cause token individuals to fear expressing themselves

spontaneously, so as not to contradict the expectations that the dominant group constructs about them and even lead to their marginalization.

When women find themselves in a tokenism situation within a traditionally male context, such as bodybuilding, the evident numerical imbalance leads to the formation of distorted groups. From the perspective of tokenism theory, this contingency will predictably cause token women to experience the three negative consequences described above [19,20].

Although Kanter [19,20] conducted her research in a context where women were a small minority (i.e., tokens), she stated that it would be possible to generalize her results to other social groups in similar contexts, and that they could be applied whenever a group is underrepresented. Since then, Kanter's assumptions have been tested in various professional contexts, such as in medicine, nursing, and the military, where Kanter's results have been corroborated [22–24].

However, Kanter's work has been the subject of criticism (e.g., [25,26]), since the author considered that the results obtained would apply to all social groups in contexts similar to those she studied. The work of Christine Williams [27,28] and Ruth Simpson [29], in particular, questioned the possibility of absolute generalization of Kanter's conclusions and even contradicted them, since they observed that, when the token group is composed of men in an organization, not all the negative consequences predicted in the theory of tokenism are observed, and it may even bring them advantages.

According to Santos and Amâncio [21], in interpreting his results, Kanter prioritized numerical proportion, neglecting other relevant aspects, namely, culture, the social and psychological framework, and structural aspects, which reveal an influence on the interactions between the token group and the dominant group in the organizational context in which they are embedded. Some authors have recently turned to Kanter's theory to demonstrate that numerical asymmetry influences intergroup relations; however, this approach requires greater complexity, particularly through an intersectional perspective. By way of example, mention can be made of studies that explicitly analyze the intersection of gender and race through the experiences of black women in the police force [30] and in the management of educational institutions [31]. As summarized by Stichman and colleagues ([26], p. 633), (. . .) "tokenism is more complex than a 'numbers game', and that quantitative examinations alone might not fully explain the myriad aspects of tokenism".

1.2. Bodybuilding and Masculinity

In simplified terms, bodybuilding can be defined as a relatively recent activity (about a century old) whose practitioners aim to shape the voluntary muscles of their bodies by following training plans that generally involve weights, specific nutritional regimes and, in some cases, the use of anabolic substances [32].

By using the term "activity", we signal knowledge of the discussion surrounding the categorization of bodybuilding as a sport. As a result, bodybuilding was accepted as an Olympic sport only during the brief period from 1998 to 2001 [33], and the discussion continues, from both an institutional and theoretical point of view, regarding this topic. For István Aranyosi [34], bodybuilding should be seen as an artistic presentation, even if focused on the body. However, this perspective is questioned by Kind and Helms ([35], p. 296) when they state:

"Bodybuilding, therefore, based on its combination of embodied and expressive skills should be on the more sport-like side of the spectrum if we are willing to use other paradigmatic examples of sporting disciplines widely accepted as sports, such as rhythmic gymnastics, as a threshold for this evaluation".

Despite this ongoing and unfinished discussion, in this work we will consider bodybuilding as a sporting discipline, which mobilizes thousands of practitioners world-

wide and has a substantial impact, particularly at the industrial, commercial and social levels [36,37].

Currently, the IFBF—International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness [38] recognizes a very wide range of categories and subcategories, which are distinguished mainly by whether they are practiced by men or women, by the levels of muscularity and presentation dynamics required, and by the age (from childhood to old age), weight, and height of the participants. The IFBB Pro League [38], in turn, recognizes a smaller number of categories. For the purposes of this study, we will only highlight the main categories of each gender recognized by the aforementioned federations.

Thus, for men, the main categories are: Men's Bodybuilding, Men's Classic Bodybuilding, Men's Classic Physique, and Men's Physique [39,40]. The Men's Bodybuilding category, especially the "open" subcategory, aims to achieve extreme muscle volume and density, while the Men's Physique category, in contrast, aims to achieve an athletic, aesthetically balanced body with less body volume and without excessive development of the lower limbs [36].

The main categories for women are: Women's Bodybuilding, Women's Figure, Women's Bikini Fitness, Women's Wellness, Women's Fitness, and Women's Physique [38–40]. The Women's Bodybuilding category is clearly the one in which participants invest most in gaining muscle mass, to an extreme degree, in addition to its density and definition [38]. The Women's Wellness and Figure categories focus primarily on the legs (Wellness) or the back and shoulders (Figure), both investing in muscle definition, but with less total volume than the Women's Bodybuilding and Women's Fitness categories. Finally, the Women's Bikini Fitness category seeks a more harmonious body, and although with an athletic build, with less muscle volume [39,40].

It is easily observed that it is difficult to collect reliable data on the proportion of men and women practicing bodybuilding at the global, regional, and national levels, a finding that also applies to Portugal. Although the Portuguese Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness (FPCF) was recognized as a "public utility institution" in 2021, we assume that the fact that bodybuilding is not recognized as an Olympic sport, as mentioned above, does not oblige the institution to register and/or publicize data relating to federated participants, despite being requested by the authors. Similarly, the International Fitness and Bodybuilding Federation (IFBF) has not published the number of people involved in the sport and, consequently, it is not feasible to access reliable data on the proportion of women and men.

Therefore, and for the purposes of this research, we assume, as indirect indicators, the figures relating to the athletes who have competed and been awarded prizes in competitions. These figures confirm the imbalance between men and women in the sport, in Portugal and internationally [38,40].

Since its inception as an institutionalized and socially recognized activity, bodybuilding has always been dominated, both numerically and symbolically, by men, despite the slow access of women, especially from the 1980s and 1990s onwards [41].

Due to its characteristics, regarding practices, objectives, and forms of organization, both formal and informal, bodybuilding is recognized as one of the sports with a strong connection to sporting discipline, power, and narcissism [42], which in turn are central to the construction and maintenance of stereotyped masculinity [6].

It is therefore understandable that Phillip Wagner's question ([17], p. 241) is important: "How does hegemonic masculinity operate as a motivator and inhibitor of body modification and improvement within male body culture?". One of the stimulating results of his study underlines that, in the case of men, the pursuit of good physical shape tends to be simultaneously associated with the reinforcement and/or affirmation, specifically,

of hegemonic masculinity. Indeed, men's investment in their bodies was anchored in prospects of business success, financial gains, and good sexual performance [17].

This observation clearly shows the close relationship between the goals and interests of male bodybuilders regarding the possession of traits of hegemonic masculinity [9,43], making use of performances that allow them to socioculturally shape masculinity in the domains of gender and sexuality, as advocated by Judith Butler [44].

Assuming that there is an association between strength and musculature with hegemonic masculinity, and that femininity is associated with fragility and thin, small bodies [45–49], questions about the integration and experiences of women in the world of bodybuilding are justified.

Literature has shown that female bodybuilders are examples of gendered deviance from what is socially defined as appropriate for women [48,50]. By choosing this activity, these women disregard and therefore flagrantly violate what is acceptable in the gendered order of social interaction, from aesthetic, kinaesthetic, and phenomenological points of view, and can therefore be classified as "outlaw" in relation to non-formalized but determining laws [51].

The degree to which gender norms are violated may, however, vary according to levels of muscularity, as female athletes with a "more muscular" appearance are seen as deviating further from the norm. The levels of muscularity sought and achieved by female practitioners are taken into account when assessing their violation of gender norms, as those with a "more muscular" appearance are seen as further removed from what is socially defined as feminine [46,52], something fundamental to understanding the dynamics of framing women in the different categories of bodybuilding.

It can therefore be stated that, in the context of bodybuilding, there is a "glass ceiling" for women, as Shari Dworkin [46] observed, since they are subjected to acceptable levels of muscularity so that they do not stray excessively from femininity. This creates a need for women to balance muscle growth, in order to achieve their goals and be accepted in the sport, with maintaining what is understood as a "feminine appearance", a paradoxical and challenging situation [6,48,53,54].

Thus, this investigation aims to analyse and understand whether women practicing bodybuilding, a clear minority, experience the negative consequences associated with token status described by Kanter [19,20] in Portugal. Given the insufficiency of this theorization regarding the effects of gender, which we alluded to earlier, we will resort to them in our analyses, specifically aiming to: (i) highlight the presence of the negative effects of tokenism on female bodybuilders—greater visibility, contrast or polarization of differences, and assimilation of stereotyped roles; (ii) identify and characterize possible difficulties faced by female bodybuilders in the context of the sport; and (iii) identify and characterize the actions and strategic options of female bodybuilders to integrate and remain in a sporting context dominated by men and masculinity.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Initially, 35 professional bodybuilding athletes who met the inclusion criteria were identified and invited to participate in the study. Potential participants were identified through their social media profiles and based on their placements in official bodybuilding competitions. Of these, 15 athletes agreed to participate in the study, including seven men and eight women, aged between 22 and 50 years (M = 32.20; SD = 8.99). The women were, on average, older (M = 33.25; SD = 10.51) than the men (M = 31; SD = 7.53). Single marital status was the most frequent (10), two women and one man were married, and one man and one woman were divorced. Most participants had higher education, with

three men and five women holding bachelor's degrees, one woman holding a master's degree, and one man holding a doctorate. The remaining five athletes completed secondary education—three men and two women.

The inclusion criteria for this study were defined as follows: being a professional bodybuilder in Portugal, having proficiency in the Portuguese language, being 18 years of age or older, and having a career as a professional athlete in the sport of at least one year.

Regarding competition categories, five of the men interviewed fell into the Men's Physique category and the remaining two into the Men's Classic Physique category. In the case of the women, three belonged to the Wellness category, two belonged to the Women's Bikini Fitness category, and three belonged to the Women's Figure category.

Regarding the year they started practicing the sport, two athletes had been practicing bodybuilding for at least 20 years: a man for 20 years and a woman for 24 years. The remaining athletes, both men and women, had been practicing bodybuilding for less than 10 years.

2.2. Procedure

Following the inclusion criteria, we used social media to publicize the study and, simultaneously, sent an invitation to each of the athletes to participate, explaining that this would be done through an interview.

Interviews were scheduled with interested athletes and, prior to the interviews, an informed consent form was provided, clarifying the overall objective of the research, the data processing and protection procedures, the rights of the interviewees, the identification of the research team, and their contact information. After the interviews, at the participants' option, questionnaires were completed to gather sociodemographic information.

All interviews were conducted online via Zoom, as the athletes participating in this study found it easier to take part in this format, given that many of them were in the middle of a competition season and had limited availability. Interview durations ranged from 45 min to 1 h and 10 min (M = 1 h), and were conducted between 30 March and 24 May 2024, by the first author of this article. These interviews were transcribed in full, with any information removed or modified that could compromise participant anonymity and the confidentiality of the collected data. At the end of each interview, a debriefing was held to thank participants for their participation and to clarify any questions or curiosities about the study's objective.

This study was conducted as part of the first author's master's thesis and was governed by the ethical principles for research and processing of personal data. It received a favourable opinion from the Specialized Ethics Committee of Psychology of Iscte—Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, the University of the first and last authors (Declaration of Conformity PSI-52/2024) on 3 February 2025.

2.3. Instruments

This study used two data collection instruments: a brief questionnaire to characterize the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants and a script for semi-structured interviews. The first instrument included questions such as: gender, marital status, age, academic degree, place of residence, training location, start date of the sport, and the bodybuilding categories in which the participant is involved. The interview script was created based on a literature review and guided by the study's objectives; however, there was one version for female and another for male participants.

Both scripts, however, were organized around the same four main topics: (i) entry into the world of bodybuilding, exploring the reasons, motivations, or factors that led participants to the sporting discipline; (ii) perception of possible gender inequalities in the

context of bodybuilding; (iii) description of the current context of bodybuilding, exploring the possible observation of the phenomena of visibility, polarization of differences, and assimilation of stereotypical roles of the belonging group found by Kanter [19,20]; and (iv) management of possible situations that highlight gender inequalities, seeking to understand them, as well as characterizing the strategies that women resort to in the role of tokens.

We opted for the semi-structured individual interview as a data collection technique because it suited the objectives of the study and its qualitative nature, since we intended to gather descriptions of the participants' experiences, perceptions, and representations regarding the topics in question, with depth and detail [55–57].

2.4. Data Analysis

To analyse the textual corpus produced by the interview transcripts, we opted for thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke [58], as it is considered flexible, rigorous, and realistic, as well as systematic and repeatable, which contributes to the validity and reliability of the research results. This methodological and epistemological choice allows for the synthesis of systematically obtained data and, consequently, identifies the similarities and differences between the ideas and meanings that participants attribute to their experiences. Furthermore, the high levels of flexibility, realism, and rigor of thematic analysis, which can be repeated, further support this choice, thus increasing the validity and reliability of its results and the overall study [58].

In conducting the analysis, we followed the six steps recommended by the authors, combining deductive and inductive approaches, that is, mixed methods analysis [58]. The first, guided by theory, was based primarily on identifying possible negative consequences of tokenism [19,20] and its relationship with gender. The inductive (data-driven) approach allowed our analyses to uncover themes and sub-themes that were initially unexpected and relevant to achieving the research objectives, as suggested by Braun and Clarke [58].

The familiarization with the collected data and the identification of themes and sub-themes [58] were carried out separately by the first and last authors, and the results obtained by both were subsequently discussed. In this way, we aim to ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis, controlling possible significant and determining differences in the interpretation and coding of the ideas expressed by the participants.

3. Results

Through analysis of the interview material, five major themes were identified, presented in the left column of Table 1 and named as follows: (i) Gender inequalities in the context of bodybuilding; (ii) Visibility of women in bodybuilding; (iii) Polarization of differences between women and men in bodybuilding; (iv) Assimilation of stereotypical roles of women; and (v) Strategies of women to manage their positioning in the contexts of bodybuilding practice. The right column of the table lists the sub-themes related to each of the aforementioned themes.

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Sub-Themes
Numerical and symbolic imbalance in the context of bodybuilding	Characteristics and evolution of bodybuilding
	Beliefs and stereotypes regarding the physical effects of bodybuilding
	Gender roles and body image
Visibility of women in bodybuilding	Low numerical representation of women and consequent greater exposure
	Pressure on women to perform well in the sporting discipline

Table 1. *Cont.*

Themes	Sub-Themes
Polarization of differences between women and men in bodybuilding	Divergence in rules applied to men and women in the context of competitions
	Exclusion of female athletes in the context of bodybuilding
	Sexualization of female athletes and sexual harassment
Assimilation of stereotypical roles of women	Emphasis on the stereotypical traits of femininity in female athletes
	Paternalism on the part of men
Strategies of women to manage their positioning in the contexts of bodybuilding practice	An attempt to move away from stereotypes associated with women and to move closer to masculinity
	Isolation and attempts to erase their presence in bodybuilding spaces and on social media
	Focusing on goals and receiving support from significant people
	Financial profitability of practicing bodybuilding

3.1. Numerical and Symbolic Imbalance in the Context of Bodybuilding

The ideas expressed by the interviewees, which constitute the first identified theme, confirm the participants' knowledge of the predominance of men in the practice of bodybuilding, as well as the identification of some of their justifications for this. This theme is divided into three sub-themes: (i) characteristics and evolution of bodybuilding; (ii) beliefs and stereotypes regarding the physical effects of bodybuilding; and (iii) gender roles and body image.

The sub-theme "characteristics and evolution of bodybuilding" organizes the interviewees' ideas about the factors justifying the numerical imbalance between men and women in bodybuilding. According to the interviewees, this phenomenon is explained by the recent emergence of female categories, something that, they believe, will tend to disappear or diminish with the development of the sport over time:

> *This [numerical imbalance between the sexes] is indeed the current reality, although I believe that in the future things will change and that this number will not be so disparate.* (I5, woman, Bikini Fitness, 50 years old)

> *But women don't have many things in their favour, and I understand that imbalance. I think it's going to be very difficult, but I believe that, with time and the evolution of the sporting discipline, more women will enter this context.* (I10, man, Men's Physique, 30 years old)

The second identified sub-theme is constituted through the association of beliefs and stereotypes related to the physical effects of bodybuilding. These are presented as justification for the numerical imbalance between men and women, since the interviewees believe that these factors condition the participation of more women in the sporting discipline.

> *I think this happens because when people talk about bodybuilding, they immediately think "oh, how awful". And they also say things like "you already have too much muscle, how disgusting, you already look like a man". I've even heard comments like that.* (I2, woman, Bikini Fitness, 26 years old)

> *I think this is largely a result of the stereotype associated with athletes and people's mentality. Basically, we're going to expose and display our bodies and be judged based on the best performance, or at least that's what's expected. And sometimes there are people who don't understand this concept, which I can understand, but I also believe that this lack of understanding comes from a preconceived idea of what it means to be an athlete.* (I5, woman, Bikini Fitness, 50 years old)

The third identified sub-theme focuses on the effects of social gender roles and their relationship to the importance of body image for men and women, something that interviewees consider central to how this sport is socially represented. In some cases, interviewees believe that body image also carries significant weight in their decision to start practicing this sporting discipline, in which, as we saw initially, men maintain an undeniable numerical predominance, despite the positive evolution of recent years.

> *I think that, in general, men like the male bodybuilder's physique more than women do. Women generally don't like the bodies of female bodybuilders, except for the Wellness category, which has the characteristics that women usually want to have. (. . .) It's also a very solitary sport and I think only men are willing to do it.* (I4, man, Men's Physique, 43 years old)

> *Social roles still carry a lot of weight in people's lives, making it complicated to manage an athlete's life. (. . .) Many of us are not just athletes, but also homemakers, wives, professionals in various fields, daughters, mothers, and we have all the responsibilities of those roles, and since men don't share these tasks with us.* (I5, woman, Bikini Fitness, 50 years old)

3.2. Visibility of Women in Bodybuilding

The second theme identified in the corpus of interviews encompasses the opinions expressed by the participants regarding the increased visibility of token women, the first phenomenon of tokenism identified by Kanter [19,20]. Within this theme, we identified two sub-themes: (i) the low numerical representation of women and consequent greater exposure; and (ii) the pressure on women to perform well in the sporting discipline.

In the context of bodybuilding, since women are clearly a minority, their presence stands out, according to those interviewed. The emergence of the phenomenon of greater visibility and, cumulatively, specific scrutiny will be highlighted:

> *I always feel very watched and under "surveillance". But not just at the gym, in general.* (I6, woman, Figure, 42 years old)

> *I would say that, in everyday life, female athletes end up standing out more. That's because we expect a man to train hard, but we don't expect a woman to do that. And female athletes, depending on the category, train hard to get on stage.* (I11, man, Men's Physique, 25 years old)

The second sub-theme refers to the pressure felt by female athletes to perform well in the sporting discipline, as predicted by tokenism theory [19,20]. The opinions expressed by all interviewees underline that women will feel intrinsically pressured to demonstrate sufficient competences for bodybuilding. This pressure can be manifested, according to them, directly through the evidence of expectations of failure expressed by male colleagues, although this may be less common among younger men:

> *We almost feel the need to prove that we are also capable of performing equally well, in some cases even better. The problem is that, since there is never any recognition from anyone, this pressure never leaves us.* (I7, woman, Wellness, 29 years old)

> *I believe there are men who think women can't achieve as much as they can, but I'd say that's mostly older men. I think younger men understand that we can all achieve whatever we want in the same way, without thinking that women are less capable.* (I10, man, Men's Physique, 30 years old)

3.3. Polarization of Differences Between Women and Men in Bodybuilding

The third theme organizes the ideas expressed by the interviewees regarding the polarization of differences between male athletes, the dominant group, and female athletes, the tokens, the second phenomenon of tokenism [19,20]. This theme contains three sub-themes: (i) divergence in rules applied to men and women in the context of competitions; (ii) exclusion of female athletes in the context of bodybuilding; and (iii) sexualization of female athletes and sexual harassment.

Regarding the sub-theme "divergence in rules applied to men and women in the context of competitions", the interviewees confirmed its existence, based on their experiences, namely in receiving sponsorships and prizes, in the rules of the competitions, and in the expenses associated with them.

Some men interviewed claim that female athletes are more easily chosen by fitness product brands for advertising because they are more appealing to the public, which, in their view, will boost sales of these products. However, when it comes to advertising related to gym equipment, including machines, male athletes are the ones chosen, as mentioned by the following male participants:

> *There are a few social components here that make a woman more subtle and elegant when selling certain products. I'm talking about nutritional supplements, sportswear, that sort of thing.* (I1, man, Men's Classic Physique, 40 years old)

> *I don't know if it's for aesthetic reasons or because they think a man will convey more credibility, but the truth is I've never seen a female athlete advertise gym equipment. And I don't believe it's due to a lack of female athletes to do it, but because they think men understand it better.* (I10, man, Men's Physique, 30 years old)

Prize money in competitions is also an area where a clear difference between men and women is noticeable. According to participants, in the men's categories, prizes are systematically awarded, while in the women's categories this is not guaranteed. Furthermore, the expenses associated with bodybuilding are higher for women, who, they say, do not have the necessary support to cover them.

> *The truth is that [women] don't always get the prize, even if they come in first place.* (I9, man, Men's Physique, 26 years old)

> *We don't have any support, and we spend a lot, from body paint, makeup, heels, bikinis, hair, jewellery and nails. Men don't have a quarter of what we have. They just must wear shorts, have their hair done properly, their body painted and oiled.* (I6, woman, Figure, 42 years old)

The sequence of presentations in the competitions, by category and gender, also shows disadvantageous differences for women, depending on whether the competitions involve male or female athletes, as stated by the interviewees:

> *They have more categories than we do and they go on stage first. We're left until the end, they have awards and we don't. (. . .) Even on stage, I notice this difference: we don't have any time to be there, (. . .) while they have much more time and effectively take much longer and nobody stops them.* (I6, woman, Figure, 42 years old)

> *In every competition I've ever been to, the women are always scheduled for times with the smallest audience.* (I9, man, Men's Physique, 26 years old)

The second sub-theme focuses on the exclusion of female athletes in the context of bodybuilding and is organized around references to moments in which they felt targeted by men's behaviour aimed at isolating them as members of a minority group:

> *I felt excluded right from the start, I felt they were very elitist, (. . .) and that they kept me somewhat apart from everything, in general. However, I also think that was because the sport was underdeveloped at the time, and it was a very restricted group.* (I5, woman, Bikini Fitness, 50 years old)

> *The men tend to talk more amongst themselves, somewhat neglecting the female athletes. However, the women also do this with their respective colleagues, kind of isolating themselves a bit. On competition day, nobody is there for anyone else, and it's every man for himself. So, yes, I've seen my male colleagues ignored by other men on competition days.* (I13, man, Men's Physique, 24 years old)

In the third sub-theme, on the "sexualization of female athletes and sexual harassment", the athletes interviewed reported several episodes and situations in which their sexual identity is emphasized, which, in turn, gives rise to and/or justifies situations perceived as sexual harassment:

> *At the gym, it's happened to me too; in fact, I stopped wearing shorts to work out because it was too uncomfortable. It was things like constant staring, mouths, and actions that caused discomfort.* (I2, woman, Bikini Fitness, 26 years old)

> *There are specific moments on competition day when our bodies are literally completely exposed. There are federations that lack consideration and don't provide a specific section for athletes to change clothes, for example, or apply the paint. (. . .) The scenario is, literally, we are naked and have countless men around us with the possibility of looking at us, (. . .) we are just uncomfortable. (. . .) The men, although they are also being painted, can be in their underwear, and that's it, they are not as exposed as we are."* (I5, woman, Bikini Fitness, 50 years old)

3.4. Assimilation of Stereotypical Roles of Women

The fourth theme identified in the corpus of interviews focuses on the possible assimilation to stereotypical roles of female athletes, that is, on the third phenomenon of tokenism identified by Kanter [19,20]. This theme is divided into two sub-themes. (i) emphasis on the stereotypical traits of femininity in female athletes; and (ii) paternalism on the part of men.

The first sub-theme refers to the possible presence of "emphasis on the stereotypical traits of femininity in female athletes", even though the context and objectives of the sporting discipline are potentially not strongly associated with them. Our interpretation of women's perceptions is that men point to what women do and achieve in a way that signals the inadequacy of the female form in bodybuilding:

> *We are still very much discredited and sexualized in many contexts, we don't have the same recognition that male athletes have. (. . .) But, in general, I notice that people expect men to be the disciplined ones, and if we try, we're just being paranoid and undisciplined.* (I3, woman, Figure, 44 years old)

> *Some men don't consider us to be real athletes and, especially in the lower categories, (. . .) I feel they view our categories less seriously than theirs. (. . .) They think we practice the sporting discipline differently, in a "softer" way, and not with as much rigor.* (I5, woman, Bikini Fitness, 50 years old)

The placement of female athletes within the group is neither definitive nor constant, as it depends in particular on the bodybuilding categories they belong to. In other words, in our interpretation, for the dominant culture of the sport, being a woman may be incompatible with being a bodybuilder:

> *Overall, I also think that as you move up in the sport, the idea of "looking like a man" grows stronger, which ends up being a bit contradictory because the lower we go in the weight classes, the first categories aren't considered real bodybuilding categories. And it's like: so, where does that leave us? If we move up in the category, we're men; if we move down, we're not bodybuilders. (. . .) They simply criticize us, judge us, and devalue us, regardless of the efforts we make.* (I3, woman, Figure, 44 years old)

> *You still have many men criticizing the lower categories of women's bodybuilding, saying that they are not worthy of being called athletes. (. . .) And many of them still have the typical discourse of "oh, you eat lettuce, lose weight and are ready to move up". There is still the idea that women's preparations are easier than men's.* (I7, woman, Wellness, 29 years old)

The second sub-theme suggests the presence of "paternalism on the part of men" in relation to their female colleagues. References to the support received by women from male figures (colleagues, coaches, and partners) function, from our perspective, as an emphasis on their specificity as women:

> *They are surrounded by men, wherever they go, and end up having male support. From their boyfriend, coach, and colleagues, it's a form of protection for them.* (I4, man, Men's Physique, 43 years old)

> *Many of them [women] end up confiding in each other, or even in their male colleagues and coaches. I also know female colleagues who rely heavily on their male partners.* (I12, man, Men's Classic Physique, 29 years old)

3.5. Strategies of Women to Manage Their Positioning in the Contexts of Bodybuilding Practice

The fifth, and final, theme identified in the interview corpus deals with the strategies used by female athletes to manage the token situation. This theme is composed of four sub-themes: (i) an attempt to move away from stereotypes associated with women and to move closer to masculinity; (ii) isolation and attempts to erase their presence in bodybuilding spaces and on social media; (iii) focusing on goals and receiving support from significant people; and (iv) financial profitability of practicing this bodybuilding.

The first sub-theme is constituted from the verbalizations that, in our interpretation, denote "an attempt to move away from stereotypes associated with women and to move closer to masculinity":

> *I personally feel that I have a mix of both male and female characteristics. However, I feel that many women adopt a more masculine, ruder, and distant posture as a way to protect themselves from criticism.* (I7, woman, Wellness, 29 years old)

> *I think we ended up deviating a bit from the stereotype. (. . .) I find it easier to adopt a more rugged and distant posture, things that perhaps aren't associated with non-athlete women, as a way of protecting myself from the outside world, and, ultimately, blending in a little more with the bodybuilding atmosphere. I'm almost forced to have a more masculine posture, because otherwise I'm the target of even more comments than I already am.* (I14, woman, Figure, 29 years old)

The second sub-theme refers to the strategies of female athletes based on isolation and attempts to downplay their presence in sports practice spaces and on social media:

> *I train right when the gym opens or when it closes, because I always manage to avoid a larger crowd. (. . .) Not posting photos of my body in a more revealing way on social media. This didn't prevent me from receiving unwanted comments, with messages of other kinds, however. I realize that it has greatly reduced my exposure and, consequently, also some behaviours in private messages or comments.* (I3, woman, Figure, 44 years old)

> *Another thing I do is keep my social media profiles private, which means that only those I want to know that I'm an athlete outside of work know about it. In a way, I've managed to filter who has access to that part of my life, as it has caused me problems in the past.* (I5, woman, Bikini Fitness, 50 years old)

The third sub-theme is based on women's ideas about "focusing on goals and receiving support from significant people" as strategies for maintaining their connection to bodybuilding:

> *I think it's complex, and we must remind ourselves that we're doing what we love and that the effort is worthwhile. Surrounding ourselves with people who like us and understand us is important so we can be in a safe environment.* (I3, woman, Figure, 44 years old)

> *I also rely heavily on the people who like me and respect my decisions, because they are undoubtedly my right hand to keep going.* (I14, woman, Figure, 29 years old)

The fourth, and final, sub-theme focuses on "financial profitability of practicing bodybuilding as a strategy to cover associated expenses and, in some cases, to achieve professionalization. The strategies employed include holding multiple jobs and creating content on social media, including adult content platforms:

> *One of the strategies I used at the time was to get another job, since I didn't have sponsors and the expenses for my category were high; it was a solution I found.* (I3, woman, Figure, 44 years old)

> *I know female colleagues who have two or three jobs to be able to afford the costs of the competition, others who use social media to try to attract sponsors. And I also know that some use adult content platforms.* (I9, man, Men's Physique, 26 years old)

Taken together, the accounts of male and female participants revealed differences in how gender inequalities were perceived and experienced within bodybuilding. Although participants from both groups acknowledged the existence of gender differences, female participants more consistently described their position as a minority in terms of heightened visibility, scrutiny, pressure to demonstrate their legitimacy, and the devaluation of their efforts and achievements. In contrast, male participants tended to recognize gender differences primarily through the distinct categories, roles, and expectations associated with male and female bodybuilding, without describing the same degree of scrutiny or pressure associated with occupying a minority position. Thus, while gender inequalities were recognized by participants from both groups, their accounts reflected different positions in relation to these inequalities: women described their consequences from the position of the minority group, whereas men generally described them from the position of the dominant group.

4. Discussion

The experiences of Portuguese female bodybuilders were the focus of this research, which was guided by Rosabeth Moss Kanter's [19,20] theorization on token groups and, because it was absent in that theorization, also considered theories on gender and, specifically, masculinity. We consider this set of conceptual and theoretical orientations appropriate, given that the study focused on a sporting discipline with a clear numerical predominance of men and in whose contexts, they assume and disseminate the ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

Our central objective in this study was to identify tokenism phenomena in the participants' narratives, namely, greater visibility, contrast, or polarization of differences between the dominant group and the tokens, and the assimilation of stereotypical roles attributed to women. We were also interested in identifying the potential difficulties experienced by

female athletes in a context that is, as mentioned, numerically and symbolically masculine, as well as the strategies they employ to integrate and remain within it.

Our analyses show that female bodybuilders have more visibility than male bodybuilders, thus confirming one of the negative consequences of belonging to the token group [19,20], as observed in studies on other organizational and occupational contexts [12,59–61]. Their small number, compared to men, and their dedication to an activity considered uncommon in women, such as training with considerable weights, will be, for the participants, at the root of this phenomenon.

According to participants of both genders, the increased visibility of women in bodybuilding creates pressure on their performance, since, as seen before, they are entering an environment marked by masculinity. The explicit expectation of failure from their male colleagues (especially older ones) is perceived by them as rigorous surveillance, inducing them to "show that they are not fragile" and to omit certain mistakes in their practice. The high visibility of female bodybuilders, the expectations of their failure, and the devaluation of their achievements shape a male-dominated sporting environment. We acknowledge that, at an individual level, these women are affected by the threat of gender stereotypes [19,20]—which detrimentally impacts their athletic performance [60]—thereby legitimizing and reinforcing the notion that women, and specifically their bodies, are unsuited for bodybuilding.

The differences observed between male and female participants' accounts further contribute to understanding this dynamic. While female participants more consistently described their minority position in terms of heightened visibility, scrutiny, pressure to demonstrate their legitimacy, and the devaluation of their efforts and achievements, male participants tended to acknowledge gender differences primarily through the distinct categories, roles, and expectations associated with male and female bodybuilding [19–21,58,59]. Thus, the greater visibility associated with token status was not necessarily experienced or interpreted in the same way by members of the token and dominant groups [19–21]. For female bodybuilders, visibility could constitute an additional source of pressure rather than a pathway to recognition or inclusion [19,20,58,59].

Our analyses also show that there is a polarization of differences between female bodybuilders, as the token group, and their male counterparts, as members of the majority and dominant group, thus confirming Kanter's theorization [19,20]. This second negative consequence associated with token status is evidenced in the application of rules and/or the creation of opportunities that benefit men, as well as in the accentuation of the specificity of female athletes, so that they are clearly and negatively distinguished from the dominant group, that is, male athletes. This result is consistent with studies related to the sporting context [12,60,62], but also to other occupational contexts [63].

The men interviewed stated that female bodybuilders are chosen to participate in advertisements for so-called "fitness" products, such as nutritional supplements and sportswear. Male bodybuilders, on the other hand, are chosen to advertise specific fitness equipment. The decisions underlying this dichotomy are made by sponsors, but they highlight the strong association of women, even athletes, with the world of beauty and elegance and with substances that are not essential for enhancing physical fitness, while men are associated with machinery and technology, both fundamental to the practice of bodybuilding and involving considerable financial investment.

These observations illustrate, for a specific sport, one of the results of the study by Julie Napoli and colleagues [64] on the content and communication strategies of sports sponsors: the messages disseminated tend to reflect the traditional social roles of men and women, associating the former with agency and the latter with communality. Inclusion in the context of bodybuilding does not prevent women practitioners from being located at the

pole of femininity in the item under analysis, insisting on a still prevalent representation synthesized in the phrase "A real woman is decorative" [54]. This confirms that the economic and industrial dimension of bodybuilding is based on the values and practices of hegemonic masculinity, with the media being effective vehicles for its dissemination, as observed by Guillaume Vallet [37].

The guarantee of prizes in the men's categories and the absence or uncertainty of these in the women's categories can be understood as a practice of polarizing the differences between men and women. For the participants, this distinction, decided by the sponsors, is not fair to women, and women, specifically, underline the double negative discrimination, since their participation in competitions involves much higher expenses. Indeed, in the women's categories, successful participation in competitions requires investments in their appearance (hair, makeup, clothing. . .), so that, despite their muscular development, they resemble what is socially considered feminine [54].

In the voices of female athletes, the organization of competitions in this sport, especially regarding the scheduling of individual performances, clearly highlights the superior value given to men and their categories within the sporting discipline. In descriptions of these events, men's performances are always preceded and scheduled for times when there is a larger audience, resulting in an explicit undervaluation of the investment women make in their preparation and the physical results they achieve.

Still about the competition context, the women interviewed mention the inadequacy of the backstage areas where they prepare for their performances. The specific nature of their sporting disciplines, particularly about changing clothes and applying body paint, means that the women are required to expose their entire bodies, with no possibility of privacy in relation to all the other athletes and those moving about in these areas—something to which male athletes are not subjected.

The women interviewed also alluded to experiences that could be classified as sexual harassment by male athletes, specifically, in this case, in the gyms they attend. In their words, these are "actions that cause discomfort", an allusion to looks and verbalizations of an erotic-sexual nature that male athletes direct at them, asserting superiority, virility, and heterosexism, something that tends to be common in this type of space, as observed in other studies [65–67].

In our interpretation, this set of observations results from a collective determination to accentuate the differences between genders of practitioners and to affirm the male mainstream of the modality, thus disadvantaging women. Since this organizational strategy is constant and widespread, we believe it should be considered a product of the modality's culture, shaped by masculinity [18], maintained by gendered organizations, with practices that ensure gender division and hierarchy [7], benefiting men.

It also seems to us that these forms of normative organization of competitive events, as well as some practices of exclusion and isolation of female athletes, can be interpreted as performances, in the sense attributed by Judith Butler [68]. These performances contribute, explicitly and effectively, to producing and maintaining a normative view of gender, specifically oriented towards the maintenance of patriarchal and masculine power and supremacy over women and non-heterosexual men, that is, the establishment of a "gender regime" [8,9].

The assimilation of stereotypical roles assigned to minority groups is the third negative consequence of tokenism, which may originate from a strategy adopted by tokens to be accepted in contexts, or from the direct and targeted intervention of elements of dominant groups to ensure their privileged status [19,20].

Respondents of both genders did not cite situations in which female bodybuilders voluntarily and strategically demonstrated the assimilation of stereotypical feminine traits.

However, they were very emphatic and descriptive in sharing situations that can be seen as attempts by men to make them conform to the more traditional stereotypical roles attributed to women.

Female bodybuilders recognize these strategies employed by men in their frequent assertions or insinuations that the modality is not suitable for them or even incompatible with it. This is based on allusions to the "lightness" and "smoothness" of women's training, considering it easier and less rigorous, especially in the lower female categories, which, as one of the women interviewed said, "are not considered serious bodybuilding categories".

We believe it is admissible to state that, in this scenario, the thoughts and actions of the dominant group aim to deny female bodybuilders the possibility of demonstrating endurance, bravery, competence, and strength, qualities socially attributed to men, which can be interpreted as "role encapsulation" or "role entrapment" [8,20]. Consequently, and simultaneously, at least a portion of the female categories in the modality are placed at a lower level of effort and seriousness and should not be accepted as "serious bodybuilding".

Women's participation in categories characterised by higher levels of muscularity (such as Women's Figure, Women's Bodybuilding and Women's Physique) results, according to them, in them being viewed "as men", as they do not conform, physically and in terms of the physical exertion required, to what is socially expected of a woman. We have identified, in this situation, a significant phenomenon which we believe is very specific to this sports modality: the need and the difficulty of managing inclusion within the group and subculture of bodybuilders, through increased levels of muscularity, whilst respecting what is socially established as characteristic of women.

This phenomenon has been evidenced by other studies. Sarah Grogan and colleagues [53] called the effort of female bodybuilders to possess a muscular body while maintaining some traits of the socially idealized feminine appearance a "balancing act". This justifies Shari Dworkin's [69] application of the concept of "glass ceiling" to the situation of women in bodybuilding, since their acceptable levels of muscularity are limited by ideology more than by biology. As observed by Ravinsankar and Kuriase [48] and Musolino, O'Connor, and Cioe [52], female bodybuilders challenge dominant ideals of the female body, overturning and renewing gender norms, so that they can be admired and, simultaneously, repudiated.

In this scenario, pressures stemming from the context of bodybuilding and the sociocultural environment come into play, as Grogan and colleagues [53] point out. Beyond critical comments from family and friends, we must consider those originating on social media, as verbalized by the women participating in our study. Catherine Phipps' research [70] showed how, through the public digital sphere, women in strength sports are the object of expressions of hatred, abuse, and gender-based violence because they challenge male dominance. The author categorizes as "virtual manhood acts" the comments that aim to ensure respect for gender norms, ideologies, and hierarchy through the expression of misogyny and the devaluation of women's results, which could influence the decisions and well-being of female practitioners.

Throughout the interviews, the men refer to the emotional and affective support received by the women, which contributes positively to their continued participation and success in the modality. However, it should be noted that they highlight the male figures who provide this support: colleagues, coaches, and husbands. We understand these allusions as expressions of paternalism on the part of male bodybuilders towards their female colleagues, and also because of their attempts to make them conform to stereotypical feminine roles.

We believe that these positions taken by men may not be primarily motivated by a desire to emphasize women's fragility, emotionality, and dependence on men, in general

and in bodybuilding, but, from a rhetorical point of view, this is the stereotypical figure that emerges from their discourse. Furthermore, we interpret these male reflections, associated with the context of bodybuilding, as benevolent sexism, under the guise of protective paternalism, which, in our view, is a way to confine female bodybuilders to their most stereotypical role [71,72].

As we saw earlier, female bodybuilders negatively experience the polarization of differences between the token group and the dominant group, composed of men, as well as being subject to attempts by the latter to confine them to their stereotypical gender roles. One of the strategies followed by female bodybuilders to ensure integration into the contexts of bodybuilding and achieve their goals is precisely the attempt to distance themselves from the stereotype that constrains them as women, and the adoption of some traits of masculinity evidenced by male bodybuilders.

In the words of some of the women participants, they seek to appear "rude", "harsh", "distant", or simply "masculine", thus constructing a "defense", a "protection", or a "cover", which they seem to perceive as an effective strategy. These are, we admit, processes of embodiment or performance, consistent with their desire not to show fragility, as we saw in the analysis of the negative consequences of greater visibility, and also to avoid situations of sexual harassment, as mentioned earlier.

Managing gym attendance is another strategy women employ to better control the effects of their visibility and, in this context, to avoid harassment from their male colleagues. Specifically, the women interviewed mentioned choosing times with fewer users to attend gyms, to feel less exposed and vulnerable to undesirable male behaviour and comments. These narratives from women are consistent with descriptions of negative discrimination and harassment in spaces where this type of sport is practiced, as analysed previously and evidenced in other studies [65–67].

The choice of sports equipment that conceals more of the body contributes to the same objectives as female bodybuilders, which represents and concretizes the regulation and limitation of their actions and movement needs, illustrating very well what Jamilla Rosdahl [54] observed:

"Femininity forces the female body to operate within a closed space, in a state of inhibited intentionality and with restricted movements that do not allow the full physical capacity of the woman's muscles, power and strength".

For some of the women interviewed, keeping their social media accounts restricted to family and friends is another strategy aimed at controlling their exposure within the context of the modality and, equally, in the broader public opinion. This female strategy is understandable because, as we saw earlier, the virtual space facilitates and encourages the sharing of comments that directly attack female bodybuilders and defend the exclusive power and rights of men in the modality [70].

Securing and valuing the support of significant people is, for female bodybuilders, a very important strategic element for remaining in the modality and achieving their goals. The reference to this support is associated, in the discourse of female bodybuilders, with their narratives about the various constraints associated with belonging to a token group in a space centred on hegemonic masculinity [17] and, specifically, being "deviant" and failing to comply with gender norms [48,50,51].

As we saw earlier, participation in women's bodybuilding categories implies unavoidable monetary expenses related to appearance because, as Jamilla Rosdahl [54] states, for the bodies of female bodybuilders to remain feminine, (…) "there must be a stable sex that is expressed through the decoration of the body that is oppositionally defined against a non-decorated male body". Without significant sponsor support, as we mentioned, the

women interviewed shared some of their strategies to overcome or mitigate this difficulty, such as having more than one job or working overtime.

While some of the women interviewed said they had restricted their exposure on social media to avoid unwanted comments, others use it to "gain more visibility", "get more support", and "a larger client base", thus obtaining funding for the expenses required by the modality.

Some studies show that the use of social media by female bodybuilders can have multiple motivations and effects of different natures. Their visibility, voluntary and determined, on these media represents pride and some nonconformity in the face of dominant sociocultural impositions on femininity, namely regarding beauty stereotypes, fragility, and submission [73].

According to the same authors, however, this visibility on social media, specifically on Instagram, can also lead to the objectification of female bodybuilders' bodies and to conformity with ideals of femininity (ornamented, sexualized, and passive) to guarantee their profitability [73]. It is understood, therefore, that the exposure of female bodybuilders on social media can increase their vulnerability to situations of harassment and attempts at sexual exploitation [74].

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the relevance of the present study, some limitations should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative nature of the study does not allow for statistical generalization of the findings. Rather, the study aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and the meanings they attributed to gender inequalities and tokenism within bodybuilding.

Second, all interviews were conducted online via Zoom, primarily to accommodate the athletes' schedules and routines during the competition season. Although this format facilitated participation, the absence of face-to-face interaction may have influenced the interview dynamics and the depth or nature of some participants' accounts.

Third, the sample did not include representatives of all female and male bodybuilding categories, which limits the diversity of experiences captured. In addition, participants were recruited through convenience sampling, which may have introduced selection bias and limited the range of perspectives represented in the study. Finally, the sample was restricted to professional bodybuilding athletes in Portugal, and therefore the findings should be interpreted within this specific national and sporting context.

Future research could build on these findings by examining gender inequalities and tokenism across different national and sociocultural contexts, allowing for comparisons between bodybuilding cultures and organizational structures. It would also be valuable to include a wider range of actors involved in bodybuilding, such as judges, coaches, sponsors, competition organizers, and other industry stakeholders, whose perspectives could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms that contribute to gender inequalities within the sport. Future studies could also seek greater diversity among participants in terms of gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and other relevant social characteristics, thereby examining how different forms of minority status may intersect within bodybuilding contexts.

Further research could also investigate more specifically the paradoxical role of visibility identified in the present study. While visibility may provide female bodybuilders with opportunities for recognition, professional promotion, and financial support, it may simultaneously increase exposure to scrutiny, sexualization, stereotyping, and gender-based hostility.

Future studies could also explore more sensitive dimensions of women's experiences in bodybuilding, including the ways in which the female body may become a resource for sustaining participation in and contributing to the economic and social dynamics of the sport. Some female participants referred to the need to use their physical appearance and bodily exposure as a means of obtaining visibility, professional opportunities, financial support, or other resources that facilitate their continued participation in bodybuilding. Although this dimension emerged in the present study, its complexity and sensitivity warrant more in-depth investigation, particularly in relation to the boundaries between empowerment, self-exploitation, objectification, and economic necessity. Examining these dynamics across different stages of athletes' careers, or through longitudinal and mixed-method approaches, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how visibility, bodily exposure, and token status shape women's experiences over time. Such research could further clarify how individual strategies and contextual resources contribute to women's integration, persistence, and advancement within male-dominated sporting environments.

5. Conclusions

This study corroborated Rosabeth Moss Kanter's [19,20] theorization regarding the negative consequences of belonging to a token group. The highly specific and gendered context of bodybuilding and its practice by women, from our perspective, made important contributions to this construct by identifying original situations and phenomena that illustrate the emergence of greater visibility of the token group, the polarization of differences between this group and the dominant group, and the assimilation of stereotypical roles by the minority group.

In the realm of greater visibility and, especially, the demonstration of overcoming challenges and good performance, it should be emphasized, we believe that this is a utopian and therefore unattainable goal. The women's categories in the modality are, from the outset, considered less prestigious and less valued when compared to the men's categories, which are assumed to be "valid bodybuilding". Therefore, it is unlikely that the efforts and results of women will be validated by the mainstream of bodybuilding culture, which defines the identity of this modality and its practitioners [18]. It can therefore be assumed that, as mentioned above, greater visibility will lead to the creation of barriers to the full inclusion of women in the modality and, consequently, the frustration of their aspirations.

The phenomenon of polarization of differences between tokens and members of the dominant group is, as we have seen, supported by the ideology of exalting masculinity and diminishing femininity. This phenomenon is very evident in the organizational domain, especially in competitive contexts, where support, benefits, and opportunities favour male bodybuilders and, in some contexts, place women in situations of subordination and disregard for their dignity. We consider that the institutionalization of these practices, based on sex differences, legitimizes and ensures the continuity of an inequality regime [75] with clear gender inequalities, harmful to female bodybuilders.

We identified among the female participants a refusal to assimilate stereotypical roles, which partly contradicts the theory put forward by Rosabeth Moss Kanter [19,20]. Indeed, this theory posits that, by attributing stereotypical traits to token groups, members of dominant groups invest in their "role encapsulation", as mentioned above, thereby achieving some success in positioning female athletes outside the realm of bodybuilding, at least those in the women's categories with lower levels of muscularity.

In conclusion, we consider the questioning of the personal and group development prospects of female bodybuilders, in this case, Portuguese women, to be particularly significant and challenging. Our analyses, articulated with the contributions of other authors, portray a scenario in which possibilities for the achievement of female athletes

coexist with the apparent freedom for their inclusion, but in which several paradoxical and contradictory factors are present that prevent pacification between token and dominant groups and the end of the inequity in which the former live. The words of one of the women interviewed, in our reading, summarize the structural paradox present in their sporting practice: "if we move up in the category, we are men, if we move down, we are not bodybuilders".

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Institutional Review Board Statement: As of 2024, ISCTE—University Institute of Lisbon operated with a single ethics committee responsible for reviewing all research approval requests across its eight research units and five schools, which encompass numerous master's and doctoral programs. Given the considerable volume of submissions, students at the time were advised that only studies involving vulnerable populations, minors, or procedures considered more invasive required ethics committee review. It was not until early 2024 that the Ethics Committee for Psychology (CEEP) at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities formally commenced its activities. In early 2025, the research presented in this manuscript applied for and obtained a compliance statement, confirming that the study adhered to the principles set forth in ISCTE's Code of Conduct for Research Ethics. The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and the University Ethics Committee of the first author (declaration of conformity PSI-52/2024). The authors have provided sufficient justification for the circumstances surrounding their ethics submission.

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