

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



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To: Geoffrey Litherland
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From: Dr. Gillian Creese 
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Re: Expert Opinion re Ralph Stopps v Just Ladies Fitness

1. Qualifications:

I have a Ph.D. in Sociology. I am a Full Professor in the Department of Anthropology & Sociology at the University of British Columbia. I have taught in the field of gender studies and social inequality in Canada for the past 19 years. I have an extensive publication record on issues related to gender and social inequality.

2. List of Documents Reviewed:

I have reviewed the complaint filed with the B.C. Human Rights Tribunal, the Respondents' reply, and surveys completed by members of the corporate Respondent.

3. List Other Data or Information:

Not applicable.

4a: "In your opinion why would it be "important" or "very important" for some women to be able to attend a women's only fitness club?"

Many women have a problematic relationship with their own bodies due to a poor self image. In Canadian society, like other western cultures, female beauty is defined through a very narrow range of culturally acceptable standards. The emphasis on thinness and particular notions of attractiveness are impossible for most women to achieve. At its most extreme level, body image problems can be manifest in eating disorders, a medical problem that is on the rise among young women. Much more commonly, women engage in compulsive dieting and some turn to plastic surgery. For reasons of body image, many women also curtail their physical activity in public spaces so as not to draw attention to their bodies. The curtailment of physical activity is often something that happens before women reach adulthood. Culturally dominant forms of femininity result in adolescent girls tending to be less physically active than boys, since excessive physicality, muscularity and strength, as well as sweating and obvious physical exertion, are often seen as 'unfeminine' and unattractive to men. This too can curtail women's physical activity in public spaces.

A female-only fitness centre therefore provides a greater level of comfort and safety for women who are uncomfortable with their bodies generally, and, if they do not have a history of physical exercise, may also be unfamiliar with the exercise equipment at the time they join. A women's only gym provides a space where women can develop their bodies and fitness outside of the usual 'male gaze'¹ in public spaces where women feel judged as to their conformity with standards of beauty and femininity. For those who are unfamiliar with fitness equipment, it provides a more comfortable space to learn about the equipment and develop their own sense of physical accomplishment.

In my view, this is reflected in the responses of members who completed the survey conducted by Just Ladies Fitness. 87% of respondents (393 out of 450) answered that it was "important" or "very important" when they joined that Just Ladies Fitness was a woman only club. Furthermore, 89% (402 of 450) indicated it remained "important" or "very important" that Just Ladies Fitness is a woman only club.

4b: "In your opinion, what factors could make some women feel 'uncomfortable' or 'very uncomfortable' when working out in the presence of men?"

Working out is a situation in which one's body is on display. Comfortable exercise clothing tends to be stretchy and therefore tightly fitting to one's body. The use of various pieces of exercise equipment displays one's body in ways that are not usual in public spaces and may be considered revealing. This will increase self-consciousness, especially for women with a poor body image. In mixed-gender public spaces men dominate by their very presence; their larger physical size and use of body language and space (men tend to take up as much physical space as possible, women tend to make themselves appear smaller) signal ownership of public spaces. Men's ownership of public spaces is also exemplified in their tendency to appraise the bodies of women encountered in public spaces. The 'male gaze' is, therefore, experienced as both a form of power and a sexualized appraisal of a woman's body. Some women will have particular reasons for their discomfort. Women who have been victims of male violence in the past, for example, will be less likely to feel safe working out in a mixed-gender setting. In addition, for some women religious or cultural norms may make such contact between women and men who are strangers highly inappropriate. In the context of a fitness situation in particular, where one's body is on display, many women will feel less comfortable working out in a mixed-gender space. In my view this is reflected in the responses of members who completed the survey conducted by Just Ladies Fitness. 99% of respondents (444 out of 450) were "comfortable" or "very comfortable" working out in a women-only club, and 81% (363 out of 450) were "not comfortable" or "not very comfortable" working out in the presence of men.

¹ The term 'male gaze' is used to refer to the ways in which men routinely appraise and judge women's bodies in everyday interactions.

4c: "In your opinion, what impact (if any) does personal privacy have on women who would wish to join a women's only fitness club?"

Since public spaces are routinely dominated by a 'male gaze', privacy is likely to be an important consideration for many women engaging in physical exercise. The cost of the equipment, and the space required to house it, makes it impossible for most women to set up a private gym in their own homes. A woman-only club may be the next best option for women who are uncomfortable working out alongside men. It creates a private space, a refuge from everyday gender relations, where women's bodies and behaviour (sweating, grunting, etc.) are not judged as to standards of beauty and femininity. In a single-gender environment women can wear whatever work-out clothing is most comfortable, and use the equipment in whatever way is most beneficial, without inviting unwelcome attention from men. Thus they can work out in a setting that feels more private than a mixed-gender setting.

4d: "In your opinion, could some women feel like they are the subject of sexual attention if they worked out in the presence of men? If so, how is this so and what effect could this have on the women involved?"

Yes. There is an explicitly sexual element to men's appraisal of women's bodies. This is especially true in a gym, where exercise positions can expose bodies in ways that are very revealing. Hardly any women measure up to the very narrowly-defined standards of beauty and femininity culturally dominant in Canada today. Constant body-appraisal in public spaces can, therefore, have the effect of belittling women's other accomplishments and undermining their self-confidence. It can also result in women curtailing their activities so as not to invite men's judgments about their bodies. The sexualized nature of men's attentions was reflected in many comments made by members who completed the survey conducted by Just Ladies Fitness. For example, in a woman-only gym respondents appreciated:

- "not being ogled at";
- "nice to not be in a flirtatious, competitive atmosphere";
- "not having men staring at me when I am working out";
- "no pressure from opposite sex";
- "can work out without having any men looking at me";
- "not have any men judge them";
- "no gawkers";
- "men would harass you in other gyms";
- "to have privacy from males that stare";
- "there is no men to intimate others in weight room";
- "no bravado from men";
- "work out without men watching me";
- "didn't have to worry about being around guys who go to gyms to pick-up women";
- "don't worry about men staring at you";

- "I don't want men watching me";
- "no flirtatious men hanging over you";
- "no intimidation from men";
- "don't like men leering at the women";
- "don't have to 'put on shows' for men";
- "workout without feeling stares or feeling uncomfortable";
- "no men comparing me to Barbie types";
- "no ogling men staring";
- "workout without prying male eyes";
- "no worries about performance anxiety (fear of male criticism)";
- "not being stared at";
- "didn't have men watching";
- "without feeling like a sex object";
- "don't like co-ed because of men staring at you";
- "not feeling like someone is watching or gauging over you";
- "men not intimidating me";
- "not a 'pick-up joint'";
- "didn't like being stared at by guys";
- "no sweaty boys who ogle!";
- "no testosterone or leering".

As one can see from the above comments, women who completed the survey conducted by Just Ladies Fitness were very clear about the sexualized nature of men's attentions in a mixed-gender fitness setting, and this was a central reason why so many placed a high value on a woman-only environment.

4e. "In your opinion, what impact (if any) does weight and physical appearance have on women and their self-confidence? Further, could this influence women when deciding whether or not to join a women's only gym? If so, how could this influence them?"

Poor body image is based on dissatisfaction with one's weight and/or physical appearance. This dissatisfaction need not be based on 'real' issues (e.g., a woman of normal weight according to medical guidelines may still think she is overweight, or conventionally attractive women may still focus on every perceived imperfection in her appearance). The culturally dominant images of beauty are not based on real women's appearances, but instead on a much narrower body-image that is for most women unattainably thin (indeed underweight), unattainably tall (much taller than the average woman), and with features that are usually artificially enhanced (through plastic surgery, air-brushing, lighting techniques etc.). Thus most women are bound to feel inadequate in regard to their bodies. Poor body image can influence a woman's decision about whether to work out at all, and in what contexts. The more public the space, the more susceptible to the 'male gaze' that exacerbates one's poor body image. Thus many women will prefer a woman-only gym as a space to work out where they do not have to feel sexualized, inadequate, or self-conscious about their own bodies.