

Strength in Struggle: The Lived Experiences of Employed Female Powerlifters

Charlene Raye C. Tugade¹
Adventist University of the Philippines

charleneraye06@gmail.com¹

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This qualitative study investigates the lived experiences of employed Filipina powerlifters, emphasizing how they balance the demands of their professional careers with their athletic pursuits in a male-dominated sport. **Methods:** Employing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with a purposively selected group of participants. The research highlights key challenges these athletes face, such as entrenched gender stereotypes, difficulties in achieving work-life balance, and societal pressures that often undermine their efforts. Additionally, the study explores the coping mechanisms these women develop to navigate these challenges, including strong social support networks, time management strategies, and intrinsic motivation rooted in personal fulfillment and health benefits. **Findings:** The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersection between gender, employment, and athletic participation, offering valuable insights for coaches, employers, and sports psychologists. **Value:** This study not only sheds light on the unique struggles of Filipina powerlifters but also underscores the broader implications for promoting gender equality and support in strength sports.

Keywords: Female powerlifters, gender stereotypes, work-life balance, qualitative research, coping strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Background: Powerlifting, a strength-based sport that requires athletes to lift maximal weights in the squat, bench press, and deadlift, has been gaining recognition worldwide, including in the Philippines. Despite its growing popularity, powerlifting remains a male-dominated sport, with societal norms and gender stereotypes often discouraging female participation. This study delves into the unique experiences of employed Filipina powerlifters, focusing on how they navigate the challenges associated with balancing their careers and athletic endeavors in this traditionally male-dominated field.

Motivation: The motivation behind this research stems from the lack of scholarly attention given to the intersection of gender, employment, and powerlifting, particularly in non-Western contexts like the Philippines. While there has been an increase in female participation in strength sports, the literature is sparse when it comes to understanding the lived experiences of these women, especially those who juggle professional careers alongside their athletic

commitments. Existing studies have highlighted the challenges faced by female athletes in male-dominated sports, including discrimination, work-life balance issues, and societal pressures. However, these studies often focus on Western contexts and do not adequately address the cultural nuances that may influence the experiences of Filipina athletes. This gap in the literature underscores the need for research that explores these dynamics within the Filipino context, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of gender and sports in the Philippines.

Problem Formulation: The problem this study seeks to address is the underrepresentation of employed Filipina powerlifters in existing research and the lack of understanding of the specific challenges they face. Powerlifting is not only physically demanding but also requires significant time and emotional investment. For employed Filipina powerlifters, these demands are compounded by the pressures of maintaining a career, managing societal expectations, and overcoming gender-related barriers. This research aims to articulate these challenges and provide insights into how these athletes manage and cope with them.

Purpose of the Research: The primary purpose of this research is to explore and document the lived experiences of employed Filipina powerlifters, focusing on how they balance their professional responsibilities with their athletic pursuits. The study aims to uncover the motivations that drive these women to participate in powerlifting despite the challenges, as well as the strategies they employ to overcome the obstacles they face. By doing so, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the **intersection** of gender, employment, and sports in the context of powerlifting, contributing valuable insights to the field of sports psychology and gender studies.

Research Method and Findings: To achieve these objectives, this study employs a qualitative research design, specifically hermeneutic phenomenology, to gather in-depth insights from the participants. Through semi-structured interviews, the study captures the personal narratives of employed Filipina powerlifters, allowing for a rich exploration of their experiences. The findings reveal the significant struggles these athletes face, including entrenched gender stereotypes, difficulties in achieving work-life balance, and societal pressures that often undermine their efforts. Additionally, the study highlights the coping mechanisms these women develop, such as strong social support networks, time management strategies, and intrinsic motivation rooted in personal fulfillment and health benefits. These findings provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges and triumphs of employed Filipina powerlifters, offering implications for coaches, employers, and sports psychologists in supporting female athletes.

By addressing the specific experiences of employed Filipina powerlifters, this study not only fills a significant gap in the literature but also contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality in sports. The insights gained from this research have the potential to inform policies and practices that support female athletes in achieving both their professional and athletic goals, ultimately promoting a more inclusive and supportive environment in the world of sports.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Purpose and Scope of the Literature Review

The primary purpose of this literature review is to position the study within the existing body of knowledge on gender roles, sports, and work-life balance, with a specific focus on employed Filipina powerlifters. This review identifies the gaps and inconsistencies in the literature, particularly the lack of research on Filipina athletes in the context of powerlifting, a traditionally male-dominated sport. By doing so, the review establishes the significance of this research and its potential contribution to advancing the field.

Identification of Relevant Literature

The literature relevant to this study was identified using a systematic search process. Keywords such as “female powerlifters,” “gender stereotypes in sports,” “work-life balance,” “employed athletes,” and “Filipina athletes” were used to search academic databases including PubMed, Google Scholar, and EBSCOHOST. This process was guided by the need to focus on peer-reviewed journals, authoritative books, and other credible sources to ensure the robustness of the research foundation. Notably, this review draws upon the literature presented in both chapters 2 and 4 of this thesis, including foundational studies such as Hentschel et al. (2019) on gender stereotypes and Snook (2022) on work-life balance challenges for female athletes. The inclusion of these studies was based on their relevance to the themes of gender discrimination, societal expectations, and the unique challenges faced by female powerlifters.

Evaluation of Sources

Each source was critically evaluated to assess its relevance, credibility, and contribution to the field. For example, Guerrero (2022) provides an essential examination of gender norms in the Philippines, which is crucial for understanding the societal pressures that Filipina powerlifters encounter. Similarly, Matuszak (2020) discusses the logistical challenges female athletes face, offering valuable insights into the practical barriers that can hinder athletic participation. The selection of these sources was aimed at building a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the experiences of employed Filipina powerlifters.

Organization of Information

The gathered literature was systematically organized to facilitate a coherent analysis of the current state of knowledge. Reference management tools such as Mendeley were used to catalog the sources, create summaries, and note key points, methodologies, and findings. This organization was essential for synthesizing the literature and identifying common themes, trends, and patterns relevant to the research.

Synthesis of Literature

The synthesis of the literature reveals several key themes that are central to this study:

1. **Gender Stereotypes in Sports:** The literature consistently highlights the pervasive gender stereotypes that affect female athletes, particularly in strength sports like powerlifting. These stereotypes often frame women as less capable than men, leading to discrimination and a lack of support (Hentschel et al., 2019; Guerrero, 2022). This theme is crucial for understanding the social dynamics that Filipina powerlifters must navigate.

2. **Work-Life Balance Challenges:** Employed female athletes face significant challenges in balancing their professional and athletic responsibilities. Studies show that the dual pressures of work and sport can lead to stress and burnout, particularly in environments that do not support women in balancing these roles (Snook, 2022; Boniface, 2017). The lack of institutional support exacerbates these challenges, making it difficult for female powerlifters to sustain their participation in the sport.

3. **Psychological and Physical Demands of Powerlifting:** Powerlifting is both physically and psychologically demanding, and female athletes often face additional pressures due to societal expectations and potential discrimination (Weir, 2018; Purcell et al., 2019). These challenges are particularly pronounced for employed athletes, who must manage the demands of both their careers and their sport.

Conclusion of the Literature Review

The overall message is clear: women are encouraged to prioritize strength training to reap its myriad benefits, not only for their current health and physique but also to ensure a higher quality of life as they age. Unfortunately, the gender roles in Filipino society can create barriers for women who want to pursue strength sports. Traditional gender norms often associate masculinity with strength, while femininity is associated with more delicate activities. This can make it difficult for women who are interested in strength sports like powerlifting to pursue their athletic goals without facing societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles.

METHODS

Research Design

This research employs a qualitative design, specifically hermeneutic phenomenology, to explore the lived experiences of employed Filipina powerlifters. This approach is well-suited for understanding the subjective realities and meanings that participants ascribe to their experiences. The study seeks to capture the depth and complexity of these experiences through detailed, interpretive analysis.

Sampling

The study utilized purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique where participants are selected based on specific characteristics that align with the research objectives. The criteria for inclusion were as follows: participants had to be Filipina, employed (either in a work-from-home or on-site capacity), aged between 25-35 years old, and have participated in at least one powerlifting competition. This method was chosen to ensure that the sample was homogeneous, focusing on individuals who share similar experiences relevant to the research question. The researcher identified potential participants

through competition results posted by the Powerlifting Association of the Philippines and reached out to them via social media platforms such as Facebook Messenger and Instagram.

Participants

The final sample consisted of ten employed Filipina powerlifters who met the inclusion criteria. These participants were diverse in terms of their professional backgrounds, including roles such as sales managers, social media managers, freelance artists, and powerlifting coaches. This diversity within the sample provided a broad perspective on the various challenges and experiences faced by Filipina powerlifters.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face, depending on the participant's location. The interview protocol included questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about the participants' experiences in balancing their professional and athletic responsibilities. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method, a rigorous approach that involves the following steps: familiarization with the data, identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, developing an exhaustive description, producing a fundamental structure, and seeking verification from participants. This method was chosen for its ability to uncover the underlying themes and structures that characterize the participants' lived experiences.

Ethical

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities, and all data were securely stored to maintain confidentiality.

Considerations

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges Experienced by the Employed Female Powerlifters

The study sought to understand the challenges faced by employed Filipina powerlifters, revealing four significant themes: physiological barriers, scheduling conflicts, psychological turmoil, and societal judgment. These themes highlight the multifaceted nature of the struggles these athletes endure, balancing their professional lives with the demands of competitive powerlifting.

Physiological Barriers

Physiological challenges were among the most commonly reported issues, with respondents frequently mentioning fatigue, menstrual cycle effects, and injuries as major

obstacles. One participant, J31, described the difficulty of managing both her role as a coach and her own training, noting, “Kailangan mo magtrain para lumakas and kailangan mo ng recovery... doble yung pagod sa suot palang tapos yung mga bugbog at sugat extra challenge siya.” (You need to train to be stronger and you need recovery.), (...doing it [equipped lifting] is tiring because wearing the equipment, the scars and bruises that come along with it is an added challenge.) This highlights the dual burden of physical exertion from training and the additional physical toll of coaching others.

Another participant, N28, shared how her menstrual cycle affected her training: “Since our hormones mess up training talaga sobrang weak ko. I feel so weak.” This statement aligns with research by Carmichael et al. (2021), which found that menstrual cycles can significantly impact female athletes’ perceived and actual performance, especially during the late luteal and early follicular phases. The physiological impact of these cycles on performance is further corroborated by Jones et al. (2024), emphasizing the need for tailored management strategies to mitigate these effects.

Scheduling Conflicts

Scheduling conflicts emerged as another prominent theme, with participants struggling to balance their work, personal responsibilities, and powerlifting training. JZ35 mentioned, “Minsan nasa kotse palang ako papuntang gym pagod na ako wala akong gana,” highlighting the exhaustion from juggling work deadlines and training sessions. Similarly, P27 reflected on how her work commute and gym schedule conflicted, leading her to adjust her training program: “Kailangan ko siya icut into three day program kasi di ko magawa yung work ko ng maayos if ipaprioritize ko ang gym.”

This struggle to balance multiple commitments is echoed in the literature. Boswell and Cavallerio (2022) discuss the role conflict experienced by women in sports, particularly those who are mothers and coaches, who often find themselves having to choose between their careers and family life. This reinforces the idea that female athletes, especially those with additional responsibilities, face unique challenges in managing their time effectively.

Psychological Turmoil

The psychological impact of powerlifting was another significant challenge identified by the respondents. Feelings of burnout, frustration, and self-doubt were common, with C33 describing her experience with burnout: “Part ng cycle ng prep talaga yung burnout and frustration... noong July 2023 nagstart ako with gradschool... dun ko talaga naranasan yung sobrang burnout.”

The psychological strain is further complicated by societal pressures and the high expectations placed on female athletes. The psychological challenges faced by these athletes are supported by the findings of Martínez Ocaña et al. (2024), who identified burnout as a critical issue that can lead to a deterioration in both mental health and sports performance.

Societal Judgment

Societal judgment and stigma were also pervasive issues, with many respondents facing criticism for participating in what is traditionally seen as a male-dominated sport. J35 expressed frustration with societal expectations: “Outsiders will always make unsolicited comments

about the appearance of female lifters... how we are built different from society's definition of the ‘perfect’ woman.”

This theme is supported by Soares et al. (2018), who discuss the societal discomfort with women engaging in strength sports and the stigma associated with muscular physiques. The persistence of such stereotypes not only discourages women from participating in these activities but also perpetuates a narrow view of femininity, which continues to challenge female athletes.

Triangulation

Triangulation of the respondents' statements with those of their significant others, friends, and coaches further supports these findings. For instance, the impact of physiological barriers was corroborated by the observations of partners who noted their significant others' struggles with recovery and the physical toll of balancing work and training. Similarly, the scheduling conflicts were highlighted by spouses who observed the strain of managing professional responsibilities alongside rigorous training schedules.

In summary, the challenges faced by employed Filipina powerlifters are multifaceted and deeply intertwined with their roles as professionals, athletes, and in some cases, family members. These challenges are compounded by societal expectations and physiological demands, requiring these women to develop exceptional resilience and time management skills to succeed in both their careers and in powerlifting. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the unique challenges faced by female athletes in non-Western contexts, offering valuable insights for coaches, employers, and sports psychologists in supporting these women.

Lessons Learned by the Employed Female Powerlifters

The second research question aimed to uncover the key lessons learned by employed Filipina powerlifters as they balanced their work and athletic responsibilities. Three major themes emerged from the analysis: discipline, confidence, and grit. These lessons reflect the significant personal growth these athletes experience as they navigate the challenges of maintaining dual roles.

Discipline

Discipline was a core lesson learned by all participants, emphasizing the importance of consistency and commitment in both their professional and athletic pursuits. Many respondents highlighted how the discipline required for powerlifting extended into other areas of their lives. P27 stated, “Through powerlifting, natutunan ko talaga ang halaga ng discipline. Kailangan mong maging consistent sa training at sa work para mag-excel sa parehong aspeto.” (Because of powerlifting I really learned how to be discipline. You need to be consistent in both training and work in order to excel in both aspects). This discipline not only helped them excel in powerlifting but also enhanced their productivity and focus in their careers.

The importance of discipline in sports and life is well-documented in the literature. According to Achor (2020), disciplined habits developed in sports often translate into better time management, focus, and work ethic in other life areas. The participants' experiences align

with these findings, demonstrating how the structured nature of powerlifting training promotes discipline in their broader lives.

Confidence

Confidence was another significant lesson learned, with many participants noting how powerlifting improved their self-esteem and belief in their abilities. J31 reflected, “Dati hindi ako ganun ka-confident, pero nung naging consistent na ako sa powerlifting, nakita ko na kaya ko pala... Lumaki ang tiwala ko sa sarili.” (Before, I wasn’t as confident but when I became more consistent in powerlifting, I saw that I am capable and my belief in myself improved.) This newfound confidence not only improved their performance in the sport but also positively impacted their professional interactions and decision-making.

The literature supports this connection between sports participation and increased confidence, particularly for women in male-dominated fields. Labbé et al. (2021) found that engaging in strength sports like powerlifting can significantly enhance women’s self-esteem, providing them with a sense of empowerment that extends beyond the gym.

Grit

Grit, defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals, was another critical lesson emphasized by the participants. The challenges of powerlifting, combined with the demands of their jobs, taught these athletes the value of perseverance. C33 shared, “Sa powerlifting, natutunan ko kung paano maging matatag at hindi basta-basta sumusuko... Importante ang grit para maabot mo yung goals mo, kahit na mahirap.” (In powerlifting, I knew how to be strong and not easily give up, grit is important to achieve your goals even if it’s hard.) This persistence in the face of obstacles is a testament to their commitment to both their sport and their careers.

Duckworth et al. (2016) describe grit as a crucial trait for success, particularly in challenging environments. The participants’ experiences highlight how the grit developed through powerlifting has helped them overcome difficulties and achieve their goals, both in their athletic pursuits and their professional lives.

Triangulation

Triangulation with observations from coaches, colleagues, and spouses confirmed these findings. Coaches noted the disciplined approach their athletes took in both training and work, while colleagues observed an increase in confidence and assertiveness in the workplace. Family members also recognized the persistence and grit their loved ones displayed, both in overcoming challenges at work and in their dedication to powerlifting.

In summary, the lessons of discipline, confidence, and grit learned by employed Filipina powerlifters are crucial to their success in balancing their professional and athletic roles. These qualities not only enhance their performance in powerlifting but also contribute to their personal and professional growth, demonstrating the powerful impact of sports on overall life development.

The study revealed that employed Filipina powerlifters face significant challenges, including physiological barriers, scheduling conflicts, psychological turmoil, and societal judgment, all of which require resilience and effective coping strategies. Despite these challenges, the athletes have learned valuable lessons in discipline, confidence, and grit, which have not only enhanced their performance in powerlifting but also contributed to their personal and professional growth, demonstrating the transformative impact of the sport on their overall lives.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION, SUGGESTION, AND LIMITATIONS

Conclusion

This study explored the challenges and lessons learned by employed Filipina powerlifters, revealing a complex interplay between their professional lives and athletic pursuits. The research highlighted the significant barriers these athletes face, such as physiological strains, scheduling conflicts, psychological stress, and societal judgment. Despite these challenges, the participants demonstrated remarkable resilience, discipline, confidence, and grit, which not only contributed to their success in powerlifting but also fostered personal and professional growth. The findings underscore the transformative impact of powerlifting on these women's lives, providing valuable insights into the broader discourse on gender, sports, and work-life balance.

Implication

The implications of this study extend beyond the realm of sports, offering insights for employers, coaches, and policymakers. For employers, recognizing the dual roles of female athletes can lead to more supportive workplace environments that accommodate the unique needs of these individuals. Coaches can utilize the findings to better support female athletes in managing the physical and psychological demands of powerlifting, while policymakers might consider implementing initiatives that promote gender equality in sports and provide resources for women balancing athletic and professional careers. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection between gender, employment, and sports, particularly in non-Western contexts, and encourages a more inclusive approach to supporting female athletes.

Suggestion

Future research should consider expanding the scope of this study by including a larger and more diverse sample of female athletes from various sports and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how the lessons learned by these athletes evolve over time and how they impact their long-term personal and professional development. Researchers might also explore the effectiveness of specific interventions or support systems in alleviating the challenges faced by female athletes. Finally, a comparative analysis between female and male athletes could further illuminate gender-specific challenges and coping mechanisms in balancing sports and professional responsibilities.

Limitations

This study is not without its limitations. The small sample size and focus on a specific group of Filipina powerlifters limit the generalizability of the findings. The reliance on self-reported data from interviews may introduce bias, as participants may have provided socially desirable responses or may not have fully articulated their experiences. The nature of the study only provides a snapshot of the participants' experiences at a particular point in time, which may not capture the dynamic and evolving nature of their challenges and coping strategies. These limitations suggest that while the findings offer valuable insights, they should be interpreted with caution, and further research is needed to validate and extend these results.

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