

“Bah GAD, it’s ...!”

A Gender and Development Analysis of the Philippine Professional Wrestling Industry, 2016-2021

Danielle Erika A. Hill

ABSTRACT

This paper is the first academic research work to be done on the topic of 21st-century Filipino professional wrestling. It documents and analyzes Gender and Development (GAD) issues within the Filipino professional wrestling industry from 2016 to 2021, with a focus on the experiences of women wrestlers from the Manila Wrestling Federation (MWF). By interviewing key informants within the organization and reviewing GAD-related statements and projects by the organization, it analyzes gender dynamics within the company to better understand how inclusivity can be made to work in professional wrestling, a male-dominated industry that has long been perceived as hypermasculine. As literature and situation analyses surface themes of gender diversity, equality, and gender-based violence in the local pro wrestling industry, the paper proposes a kayfabe-based intervention concept that hopes to assist the pro wrestling community become a safer space for people of feminine and/or queer experience.

Keywords: *professional wrestling, gender mainstreaming, gender and sports, empowerment, pleasure*

Introduction

Professional wrestling is a form of theater that has roots in amateur (or Olympic/sport) wrestling and involves the performance of unarmed combat performed in an elevated ring similar to ones used in boxing and mixed martial arts. While pro wrestlers use sports wrestling as a basis for some of their moves and techniques, professional wrestling is not technically considered a sport, unlike its Olympic counterpart (MMA Channel, n.d.). It is, instead, defined as “scripted entertainment performed live in front of an audience by actors portraying characters” (Laine, 2017, p. 39).

Pro wrestling has a long and storied history as a form of sports entertainment, but in 21st-century Philippines, it is a fairly young scene with only a few performing groups, or “promotions,” to its name. The Manila Wrestling Federation (MWF), a Metro Manila-based professional wrestling promotion that debuted in 2016, is the oldest of three extant (as of writing) wrestling promotions in the Philippines, the other two being World Underground Wrestling - Philippines (WUW, est. 2019) and Filipino Professional Wrestling (FPW, est. 2023) (Pro Wrestling Today, n.d.). Other wrestling promotions, since dissolved, were Philippine Wrestling Revolution (PWR, 2013-2022) and Art of War Wrestling (AOWW, 2017-2019). MWF was the second wrestling promotion established in the Philippines in the mid-2010s, the first being PWR. Both groups were founded and run by Filipino pro wrestling enthusiasts who wanted to create a formal wrestling community in the Philippines that did not exist at that time.

The norm in the international pro wrestling industry is to either have women-exclusive promotions (as in Japan's *joshi puroresu* [女子プロレス] organizations), or for promotions to have a separate women's division (as is the case in WWE). However, because of pro wrestling's niche and startup status in the Philippines, there were not enough human resources or Filipino women wrestlers to justify either the creation of women-only promotions or to split wrestling talents into separate men's and women's divisions. This constraint meant that intergender matches were (and still are) common in the upstart Filipino wrestling scene, where women wrestlers "bravely face off against grapplers of both genders" (Bueza, 2018).

MWF styled itself as a progressive company from the get-go, creating kayfabe characters and storylines set in their "*Manilaverse*" inspired by real-life Filipino societal themes, tropes, and issues. The company, co-founded by Filipino pro wrestling enthusiast Veronica Litton—herself a trans woman—prides itself on the diversity of its staff and has spoken up on issues related to gender-based violence, namely sexual harassment in the workplace (MWF, 2020a) and transphobia (MWF, 2020b).

The promotion produces multiple types of wrestling content, including but not limited to the MWF *Askyonovela* (a portmanteau of "action" and "telenovela") series, which serves as the main "plot" of the Manilaverse and shows the narrative arcs of its characters. Each arc of the Aksyonovela leads up to one of MWF's major live shows, which are spread throughout the year: *Republika*, *Road to Fate*, and *Noche Buena*. This wrestling content is taped live and posted on MWF's social media accounts, including but not limited to Facebook and YouTube. Those who want to join MWF as talents sign up for the MWF Wrestling Factory, where they undergo formal physical and industry training under professional wrestling coaches. Only trainees who graduate from "Factory" training are allowed to join the roster.

MWF estimates how large its viewership is by measuring attendance in live events, audience engagement in social media and traditional PR campaigns, and the number of social media likes on its pages. While a demographic study of MWF's audience and viewership is beyond the scope of this paper, it is noted that the MWF Facebook page had more than 12,000 likes at the time of data gathering.

By virtue of its status as a pioneer Filipino wrestling promotion, and the only one of its "generation" still extant, it is fair to say that MWF sets the tone for the rest of the professional wrestling industry in the Philippines in its entirety. Because of this, there is a clear value in examining the foundation MWF is laying out for the industry. If MWF is indeed setting a progressive standard in Philippine wrestling (as it purports to do) despite the fact that professional wrestling, in general, is perceived as a male-dominated and hypermasculine industry (Bueza, 2018; Go, 2020), then there is an opportunity for MWF to influence how other promotions treat their women and LGBTQIA+ wrestling talents, thereby developing the Filipino wrestling industry in such a way that it as a whole becomes a space that is inclusive of, equitable to, safe for, and welcoming towards people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC).

Research Questions and Objectives

The main research question in this paper is "How can we apply feminist and GAD perspectives to the Filipino pro wrestling industry?" Three sub-questions follow from this inquiry:

1. What does the GAD landscape look like in the local pro wrestling industry?
2. What themes and issues related to GAD are extant in the industry?
3. What insights and implications follow from the findings?

To answer this line of questioning, the paper looks to the Manila Wrestling Federation (MWF), the most prominent of the Filipino pro wrestling promotions, as its primary lead in the investigation. Throughout the first five years since it was established, MWF has prided itself on the diversity of its staff and its stance on gender equality. But is MWF truly as feminist as it initially appears to be? What is the actual state of gender diversity and equality in this promotion? MWF has also published official statements condemning gender-based violence, specifically workplace harassment in the professional wrestling industry. What prompted their statements, and how may the issues they were reacting to be resolved?

By answering these questions, this paper aims to provide as objective a knowledge as can be achieved on the modern Filipino pro wrestling industry using a feminist and GAD lens that centers the lived experiences of women and queer talents in the industry, which may then be classified as objective and relevant and used as a starting point for future research on the topic.

Significance of the Study

Any academic discourse around a phenomenon, organization, or industry first necessitates the existence of a peer-reviewed text to critique, validate, or disprove it. No such text has been written thus far on the subject of modern Philippine professional wrestling—or at least, none where active members of the Filipino professional wrestling community have been directly consulted. I know this because I am privileged enough to be acquainted with a few of the community’s leaders, and this rapport allows me firsthand access to industry data in a natural, casual way. One of the first things I realized is that while the raw industry data *does* exist, it is *unorganized*—that is, it exists as oral history, as word of mouth, as company/industry culture, as social media posts, as video footage, as interviews in podcasts and documentaries—but these have not yet been compiled in an *organized way*. The industry is new. The scholarly literature for it *does not yet exist*.

The above statement presents both an opportunity and a challenge. Since there is no clear research path for me to follow (or break away from), I find myself in the unique position of being both GAD researcher (my original intent when I started my research) and Philippine pro wrestling historian (to be able to compile enough data for industry background and context). I have attempted to resolve this duality by applying best practices of academic research that fall under similar categories, like John Paul and Sharla Blank’s 2015 paper on female roller derby athletes. Roland Barthes’ 1972 post-structuralist treatise on the essence of professional wrestling was fundamental reading material for theory crafting, as well as Carol Bacchi and Joan Eveline’s 2010 gender mainstreaming approach, “What’s the problem represented to be?” or WPR. These three combined make up the scholarly cornerstone of this research. The rest is my own best effort.

Scope and Limitations

This paper documents key GAD issues within the Filipino professional wrestling industry in general, and Manila Wrestling Federation in particular, from its inception in 2016 to its COVID-19

lockdown-enforced hiatus in 2020 and 2021. It focuses on issues of gender diversity, gender equality, and gender-based violence in pro wrestling that surfaced during interviews with participants. Any developments in the Philippine professional wrestling industry beyond January 2021 are beyond the scope of this paper.

The data for this paper were gathered in the latter half of 2020, and initial findings were shared with MWF in January 2021 for their use. Since then, there have been major developments in the industry: Of the three pioneer wrestling promotions established in the mid-2010s, MWF is the only one that remains. The promotion resumed live performances in 2022, both in the form of taped episodes of their Aksyonovela series and their main events—Republika, Road to Fate, and Noche Buena. MWF has also received mainstream attention, including but not limited to being interviewed in news features and talk shows, appearing in a popular game show, and being featured in a popular local documentary series. This paper does not cover these industry shifts, as all of them occurred after January 2021.

Review of Related Literature

The Women Pro Wrestlers of the Philippines

Michael Bueza's 2018 interviews with Filipino women wrestlers revealed that women joined the various local wrestling promotions for roughly similar reasons: a love for wrestling that stems from childhood. Crystal, billed as the first female pro wrestler in the Philippines, traced her backstory to her school days: "A couple of school friends and I loved wrestling. We would talk about WWE during lunch breaks, and try out Figure Four leglocks on each other during PE class" (Bueza, 2018). For Rogue, meanwhile, "Superstars like Trish Stratus, Lita, AJ Lee, and Beth Phoenix inspired me to be a wrestler. I've been watching WWE since I was a kid, and I admire strong women. I told myself I want to be just like them when I grow up." Robynn "started to watch wrestling because I had a crush on Jeff Hardy. Every time I watched him wrestle, it made me curious what it was like to do it in the ring and just be fearless. Then there's Lita and Trish Stratus. They were so empowering for me with how they wrestle, they are why I wanted to become a wrestler."

Women wrestlers recognize that their dreams are considered unconventional. According to Crystal (in Bueza, 2018), being a woman wrestler is "tiring and stressful, but it's also amazing and heartwarming." Starling "was often called 'crazy' for wanting to do stuff that aren't deemed ladylike [...]" Tala Haliya noted that a woman wrestler must be "strong-willed" because of "people who will find you weird and judge you." But still, all of Bueza's interviewees talked about deriving great personal pleasure, satisfaction, and pride from wrestling: For Ashura, seeing "the eyes and smiles" of the audience whenever she made a ring entrance is what makes her happy, and she said that "every moment of [the wrestling fans'] entertainment is my favorite moment." For Rogue, being able to show off her strength by "lifting a 180-pound man up on my shoulders" during her ring debut and throwing him in a Samoan drop² "felt amazing," especially since "no woman has done that in the history of wrestling in the Philippines." Crystal aspires "to be the first Filipina to make it to the WWE," Starling gets excited at "talks of getting booked abroad" to wrestle, Tala Haliya dreams of becoming "a wrestler who can be a good role model for kids [and] persons with disabilities," and Robynn wants "someone to tell me that they were able to reach their dream to

¹ The "Samoan Drop" is a maneuver in which a wrestler lifts their opponent over their shoulders in a fireman's carry, and then falls backward onto the mat, throwing their opponent to the ground on their back.

become a wrestler because I inspired them.”

GAD Issues in Contemporary Pro Wrestling

The literature review process surfaced GAD issues extant in Filipino pro wrestling and faced by the women wrestlers in the industry. These can be divided into three themes: gender diversity, gender equality, and gender-based violence (GBV).

Gender-based violence (GBV)

According to Solidarity Center (n.d.), “GBV in the world of work takes multiple forms, including:

- Physical abuse, including assault, battery, attempted murder, and murder
- Sexual violence, including rape and sexual assault
- Verbal abuse and threats of violence
- Bullying
- Psychological abuse and intimidation
- Sexual harassment, including quid pro quo
- Threats of violence
- Economic and financial abuse
- Stalking
- Human trafficking
- Forced prostitution” (Solidarity Center, n.d.).

#SpeakingOut Against Sexual Harassment in Pro Wrestling. On June 17, 2020, American wrestler David Starr was accused of sexual assault by his ex-girlfriend. The hashtag #SpeakingOut immediately began trending on Twitter afterwards, turning into what can only be described as the pro wrestling industry’s version of #MeToo: an online empowerment movement where people publicized accounts of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse perpetuated by prominent and/or powerful individuals in the international pro wrestling industry (Gartland, 2020).

On June 19, 2020, PWR wrestler Nina became the first Filipina pro wrestler to use the hashtag, posting on Twitter about instances of sexual harassment committed against her by former Singapore Pro Wrestling (SPW) athlete Alex Cuevas (Go, 2020; ABS-CBN News, 2020). On June 20, Crystal posted her own series of #SpeakingOut tweets against both Cuevas and fellow PWR wrestler Peter Versoza (Go, 2020). More allegations of sexual misconduct involving Cuevas came out afterwards, leading to his official firing from SPW, with the promotion releasing a statement underlining how “SPW does not condone matters involving abuse, sexual grooming and sexual assault. Any such behavior by SPW members will be dealt with severely” (SPW, 2020).

Meanwhile, on June 24, 2020, MWF released a statement on its Facebook page detailing three cases of sexual harassment within the MWF promotion: One “involving one of our male talents which resulted in reputational damage to the female talent,” one regarding “allegations of sexual misconduct by a visiting wrestler who had visited the promotion in 2019,” and a third one about an MWF staff being “embroiled in a separate issue from another organization, which allegedly happened prior to him joining MWF” (MWF, 2020a).

Local Promotions' Responses to GBV Cases. PWR released a statement of support for Nina, Crystal, and other wrestlers with similar experiences that same day: "PWR stands by our wrestlers who courageously spoke out against their abusers. And we will continue to stand by anyone who needs help speaking out" (PWR, 2020a). It also created "a management committee to assist the victims in actions that they want to take against their abusers" (Go, 2020). On June 26, PWR released a follow-up statement announcing that both Alex Cuevas and Peter Versoza (who was no longer on PWR's active roster at the time of Crystal's tweet) were permanently banned from working with the promotion (PWR, 2020b).

MWF, on the other hand, conducted an internal investigation of its own cases, and found the (unnamed) accused party in the first case to be "guilty of reputational damage to the complainant." In response, he was to be "suspended for six (6) months, effective starting the first MWF show after the lifting of the community quarantine. Additionally, he will be stripped of his position in upper management." As for the (once again unnamed) visiting wrestler, MWF decided that "we will no longer be working with this talent," and admitted that "in hindsight, our decision to book him was a business decision that did not consider the welfare and feelings of our roster and staff." Lastly, MWF assured its audience that in the third case (details of which were not released), "internal dialogue is currently underway with the accused staff, for the executive committee to determine how to properly handle the situation" (MWF, 2020a). Apart from the above responses for each of the three cases, MWF's statement included apologies to the victims and MWF personnel for "failing to ensure that they can work in a safe environment where they are empowered to speak in the face of potential abuse," and commitments to both conduct "sensitivity workshops that tackle the prevention of workplace harassment" and develop and implement policies "to set proper workplace behavior and impose corresponding sanctions to various offenses."

Workplace Sexual Harassment as a Key Issue in Philippine Pro Wrestling. This section of the literature review surfaced sexual harassment as the primary manifestation of GBV in the professional wrestling industry, and will be a major point of discussion in this and later portions of this paper.

Sexual harassment in the workplace, according to a report from the Rutgers Center for Women's Global Leadership, is "an all too common occurrence in many workplace environments. For example, in Asia and the Pacific Island countries, approximately 30-40% of female workers have reported workplace sexual harassment" (Center for Women's Global Leadership, n.d.). Unfortunately, the report added, "there is a scarcity of studies evaluating best practices for mitigating gender-based violence in the labor force, particularly in programs that engage men and boys in the process. *While numerous studies have explored risk factors for GBV in the workplace, relatively little research has been devoted to developing effective agents of change.* It is necessary to actively engage in understanding and implementing appropriate government policies and workplace programs that address gender-based violence in the work place, to invest in research that meets these goals, and to advocate for responsive regulation in the work place against GBV" (Center for Women's Global Leadership, n.d., emphasis mine).

Scott Holmes and Michael Flood's 2013 paper, entitled *Genders at Work: Exploring the role of workplace equality in preventing men's violence against women*, is a rare example of the kind of

research Center for Women’s Global Leadership refers to. In it, the authors argued that “If the workplace is to have a real impact on preventing men’s violence against women, then efforts in part must address men” (Holmes & Flood, 2013, p. 4). They then propose seven strategies through which this goal can be achieved:

1. Through face-to-face educational programs and social marketing, workplace-based strategies can raise men’s awareness of issues of gender inequality in general or men’s violence against women in particular.
2. Workplaces can promote a culture of zero tolerance for sexist and disrespectful behaviour.
3. Undermining established masculine norms and cultures is crucial to such efforts, and should include moves away from traditional models of masculine leadership.
4. Men can be involved through their professional roles themselves.
5. Men can be mobilised as advocates for change in workplaces, for example by running White Ribbon and other violence prevention campaigns at work.
6. Men can challenge the structures and systems at work that produce inequality and exclusion, including by countering unconscious bias in recruitment and promotion, conducting gender audits, setting targets for women’s representation, and examining gendered interactions at work.
7. Finally, workplaces can encourage men out of the paid workforce, adopting strategies for men to spend less time at work and more time involved in parenting and domestic work. (Holmes & Flood, 2013, p. 4-5)

The authors also noted that “workplace-based efforts to engage men in the prevention of men’s violence against women include attention to male leaders. ‘Buy-in’ by leaders and organisations is crucial in any program of workplace change, but this is particularly difficult when it involves unsettling the established links between management, masculinity, and privilege. Nevertheless, there are powerful examples of both individual men and men’s networks in workplaces acting as ‘champions’ of violence prevention in the workplace” (Holmes & Flood, 2013, p.5).

Gender Diversity and Equality

Gender Diversity in a Workplace Context. In a workplace context, “diversity” is a term connected to workforce representation. A 2018 perspective paper from Gallup defined diversity as “the full spectrum of human demographic differences—race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, socio-economic status or physical disability” (Washington & Patrick, 2018). According to management consulting firm McKinsey & Company, then, gender diversity in the workplace is all about the question “What makes up the composition of men, women, and nonbinary people in a given population?” (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

However, according to leadership development firm uExcelerate, “just hiring women, transgender, or non-binary individuals is not adequate. Gender diversity, in the truest sense of the term, requires these individuals to be empowered to perform at and even exceed their full potential” (uExcelerate, n.d.). To achieve this, the firm adds, an organization must consider the following factors:

- Providing a secure work environment for the women, transgender or binary individuals in the organization.
- Promulgation of robust anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies.
- Identification and elimination of biases in the organization's operating processes and policies.
- Ensuring gender diversity at all levels of the hierarchy—working, managerial, executive, and board levels. (uExcelerate, n.d.)

Gender Equality in a Workplace Context. Whereas gender diversity is related to the representation of individuals of diverse SOGIESC in the workplace, gender equality is related to how these individuals are treated. According to the Australian Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), “workplace gender equality will be achieved when people are able to access and enjoy equal rewards, resources and opportunities regardless of gender” (WGEA, 2018), a goal that would not only positively impact the organizational performance of a particular workplace, but also enhance both its reputation and its ability to attract talent and retain employees.

To achieve workplace gender equality, the WGEA proposes that workplaces should:

- provide equal pay for work of equal or comparable value
- remove barriers to the full and equal participation of women in the workforce
- provide] access to all occupations and industries, including leadership roles, regardless of gender; and
- [eliminate] discrimination on the basis of gender, particularly in relation to family and caring responsibilities. (WGEA, 2018)

MWF as “a Dedicated Ally” of Gender Diversity and Equality Movements. On September 7, 2020, then-President Rodrigo Duterte granted absolute pardon to US Marine Joseph Scott Pemberton for his 2014 murder of Jennifer Laude, a Filipino trans woman (CNN Philippines, 2020). This decision was not well received among the LGBTQIA+ community, gender equality advocates, and human rights groups, with the hashtags #JusticeForJenniferLaude and #TransLivesMatter trending on Filipino social media after the pardon was announced (Vaiana, 2020).

On September 8, MWF released a statement on its official Facebook page condemning Pemberton's pardon and reiterating the promotion's stance on gender diversity and equality. It was the only pro wrestling promotion to have issued an official statement on the issue.

The statement reads:

The Manila Wrestling Federation was co-founded by a transgender woman. And as such, we have always made it a priority to develop a safe-space [sic] for our talent and personnel from the very beginning as an equal opportunity company. Though this, the Manila Wrestling Federation is proud to support a diverse, passionate, and hard working roster. *On screen and backstage, diversity has and will always be at the forefront of the Manilaverse.*

In line with this, we have consistently developed stories and content that we believed best reflected the lived experiences of our transgender and non-binary siblings. We have also developed content such as Out & About, which helps our cisgender KapaFEDS understand the differences in

sexual orientation and gender identity.

That said, we condemn the pardon granted to the murderer of Jennifer Laude. Our thoughts and prayers are with her family and loved ones at this time.

The Manila Wrestling Federation will continue to remain a dedicated ally in the fight for equal rights of all Filipinos, regardless of gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation, inside and outside the squared circle.

#JusticeForJenniferLaude

#TransRightsAreHumanRights

#LGBTRightsAreHumanRights (MWF, 2020b, emphasis mine.)

Summary

The literature in this section introduces the demographic covered by this study (Filipina pro wrestlers), discusses and contextualizes gender issues faced by and responded to by local pro wrestlers and pro wrestling promotions, and paints a picture of the space occupied by the Filipino pro wrestling industry in GAD work and shows how a GAD lens can be applied to it. Literature related to issues in the pro wrestling scene surfaced gender-based violence (GBV), particularly sexual harassment in the workplace, as a key GAD issue in the Filipino pro wrestling industry in general, and gender diversity and equality as a unique GAD focus within MWF. Of particular note are Holmes and Flood’s (2013) comment about male leaders’ buy-in of workplace GBV prevention methods, and the WGEA’s propositions of ways to attain workplace gender equality. Both will be important points in the discussion portion of this paper.

Analytical Framework

Fun and/in Feminist Discourse

The relationship between pleasure, defined in this paper as the “affective positivity of all joy, gladness, liking, and enjoyment – *all our feeling good or happy*” (Katz, 2016; emphasis mine), and power is a key theme in feminist discourse—from Michel Foucault’s argument that “pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another” (Foucault, 1976, p. 48), to adrienne maree brown’s concept of “pleasure activism” which argues that there is a “connection between tuning into what brings aliveness into our systems and being able to access personal, relational and communal power” (Brown, 2017, p. 6). It would not be a stretch to say that fun, defined as “light-hearted pleasure” by the Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.), ought to be a key part of this conversation. However, feminist academic Shilpa Phadke noted that pleasure-based organizing, or engagement in activities seen as “fun,” are not seen as a “serious enough” topic within feminist discourse:

While claims for the economic and political participation of women have gained increasing legitimacy, the demand for fun may often be seen not just as frivolous, but also as undermining the seriousness of the feminist project itself. (Phadke, 2020, p. 1)

Phadke argued that the mere existence of a “fun” activity engaged in by people of marginalized identities normalizes the existence of the subject and the conversations that may stem from it, “thus making the space more comfortable even for those not involved in the project” (Phadke, 2020, p. 9). Nida Kirmani also asserted that the pursuit of fun and enjoyment “can be an important way in which women push against and challenge patriarchal boundaries, even if these acts may not always fall squarely into the category of what is generally thought of as political resistance within academic discourse” (Kirmani, 2020, p. 2).

“Badass”-ness as Empowerment

In the 2015 study *The Power and Joy of Derby: Women’s Participation, Empowerment, and Transformation in a Flat-Track Roller Derby Team*, John Paul and Sharla Blank commented on how women use sport to “reject notions of [female] weakness and fragility” (Paul & Blank, 2015, p. 1). By centering the lived experiences of women derby athletes in their research and data gathering and therefore taking a feminist standpoint by putting gender at the center of inquiry, reclaiming the oppressed’s value of their own experiences, and recognizing the roles that values and emotions play in their activities, Paul and Blank discovered that not only do “women’s sporting experiences expose the patriarchal bias in sport” (p. 53), women also use sport “to create alternatives to traditional masculine power relations” (p. 53), which then become spaces where “participants challenge women’s supposed social and physical inferiority” (p. 54), gaining confidence in their bodies and using their athleticism to challenge dated ideals of femininity:

Time and time again, we heard athletes refer to themselves or to their teammates as badasses. But what is a badass, and what is its significance? [...] Emerging scholarship presents the female badass as a version of femininity that resignifies qualities typically associated with masculinity (Johnson, 2014). This redefinition includes, for example, a woman who is confident in her conception of self, who rarely “backs down” and who gets what she wants (Charlebois, 2011). When we asked the derby athletes what it meant to be a “badass,” several responded in terminology that celebrated female assertiveness and self-actualization. [...] Further, a number of derby athletes also used the physical and mental confidence gained through the sport to actively promote feminism and gender fairness and equity broadly. [...] For these interviewees, “being badass” was not about women becoming more masculine, but a realization that femininity could include celebration of women’s confidence and forcefulness (Paul & Blank, 2015, p. 58-59).

Like Paul and Blank’s derby athletes, women wrestlers operate in a traditionally male-dominated athletic space, perform dangerous bodily feats, and revel in their physical prowess. So while the authors’ research revolved around derby, it is easy enough to apply their work—particularly the concept of being a “badass”—to women in any male-dominated athletic activity, up to and including professional wrestling.

Wrestling as a Morality Play

The World of Wrestling, a 1972 treatise by French post-structuralist Roland Barthes, detailed the philosophy and symbolisms in professional wrestling, foremost among them the idea of catharsis: “The baser the actions of the salaud (the ‘bastard,’ [i.e. the heel]),” Barthes writes, “the

more delighted the public is by the blow which he rightly receives in return” (Barthes, 1972, p. 21). Wrestling psychology is rooted in this Barthesian formula, and the tropes he mentioned exist and persist throughout the professional wrestling industry. Within kayfabe, every character is either a “heel”—the antagonist character, who the audience is meant to jeer—or a “babyface” (or simply “face”), the protagonist character who is meant to be cheered (Shoemaker, 2014). Because wrestling dynamics encourage (and even expect) audiences to participate by vocally expressing themselves—to cheer when the face (who is always coded “Good”) triumphs and to boo when the heel (always coded “Evil”) does, or to be dismayed when a face turns heel (the theme of falling from grace) and celebrate when a heel turns face (the theme of redemption)—wrestling becomes a spectacle that means to portray the concept of Moral Justice, making it akin to a modern-day morality play:

But what wrestling is above all meant to portray is a purely moral concept: that of justice. [...] Wrestlers know very well how to play up to the capacity for indignation of the public by presenting the very limit of the concept of Justice, this outermost zone of confrontation where it is enough to infringe the rules a little more to open the gates of a world without restraints. (Barthes, 1972, p. 21)

“What’s the problem represented to be?”

Roland Barthes’ theory of wrestling as a spectacle of Moral Justice plays an important role as an industry anchor to Joan Eveline and Carol Bacchi’s *What’s the problem represented to be?* (WPR) (2010) gender mainstreaming (GM) approach to gender and development (GAD).

GAD and GM. Gender and Development (GAD) is a perspective on development with an explicit goal of “gaining organisation-wide commitment to gender equality” (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010, p. 42). Bacchi and Eveline called the development of GAD policies “fields of contestation, shaped by on-the-ground political deliberations and practices, including the discursive practices that produce specific ways of understanding the ‘problem’ of ‘gender inequality’” (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010, Introduction section). This focus on shaping the discourse that in turn shapes the knowledge that inform GAD policymakers’ decision-making is what powers “gender mainstreaming” (GM) as a GAD strategy: Organizations that apply GM make initiatives to ensure that “every part of that organisation becomes gender-inclusive and gender-sensitive” (p. 2), resulting in what Bacchi and Eveline called “movement through engagement and interaction” (p. 338) and enabling “a politics of movement – a non-linear and unpredictable shifting of hearts and minds [...]” (p. 5).

WPR and Kayfabe. *What’s the problem represented to be?* (WPR) is a gender mainstreaming approach discussed by Bacchi and Eveline (2010) which argues that “how ‘problems’ are represented has important effects for what can be seen as problematic, for what is silenced, and for how people think about these issues and about their place in the world” (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010, p. 112). WPR is what bridges the realms of the symbolic (kayfabe and wrestling philosophy) and the material (experiences of women and queer Filipino talents) in this paper: The philosophical themes underpinning professional wrestling are primarily symbolic, but because kayfabe (in which a symbolic world is passed off and accepted as real) is a cornerstone of pro wrestling, storytelling within kayfabe can serve as “a political intervention ‘in the real’, affecting how people are treated and how they live their lives” (p. 119). The implication is that kayfabe storytelling is and would be a viable mechanism/venue for gender mainstreaming in the world of pro wrestling. With MWF’s Manilaverse, from its storylines to its characters, serving as both fictional representations of and

reactions to contemporary Filipino cultural tropes and issues, and therefore “reflections of the discourses and social practices [...] in which we are embedded” (p. 118), kayfabe-as-WPR becomes even more relevant in this paper, especially considering that MWF has already used kayfabe storytelling as a gender mainstreaming program/activity/project, or PAP, in a storyline (MWF, 2018a, 2018b) that will be discussed and analyzed further on in this paper.

Summary

As a whole, this analysis shows pro wrestling’s potential as a creative avenue to address real-world social and gender issues. Phadke and Kirmani’s work showed that there is an overlap between pleasurable activities and feminist activism, and that these are not mutually exclusive values. Paul and Blank provided insight into how athletic activities become avenues for women’s empowerment. Barthes laid out how professional wrestling tells moral stories through the storytelling inherent in the art form, and Bacchi and Eveline’s WPR is used to explain where Barthes theory of wrestling as a spectacle of Moral Justice fits into GAD. Combined, these works support the notion that pro wrestling is a unique social phenomenon with academic relevance, and explain how a GAD lens is applicable to it.

Methodology

Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) asserts that those who face oppression based on their identities have epistemic privilege when it comes to immediate knowledge of everyday life under oppression (Narayan, 2004). The standpoint system does not reflect “every detail of what members of the [oppressed] group actually believe;” rather, it “presents issues of concern to them in ways that allow their objective interests to be revealed” (Jaggar, 2016, p. 305). Taking a qualitative approach to this research and using FST as a lens a la Paul and Blank (2015) allowed me to take the collected experiences and insights of women wrestlers and use them to highlight the ways in which men and women worked together (and among each other) within the community, as well as zoom in on the impact of gender issues (i.e. gender diversity, gender equality, and gender-based violence) on women wrestling talents and what roles these issues play in their recruitment, retention, and attrition. Because of this, I was able to:

1. gain a better understanding of the gender dynamics in Filipino pro wrestling from the point of view of Filipina pro wrestlers,
2. have a conversation about areas of opportunity from interview participants’ perspectives, leading to the development of a bespoke intervention concept for MWF that could be efficient, effective, easy to implement, and easily-replicable by other Filipino pro wrestling promotions, to make their communities safer for women and queer talents, and
3. produce “objective knowledge” for a subject, industry, and community that has not yet been written about in a way that centers the lived experiences of “women and others who have been traditionally outside of the institutions in which knowledge about social life is generated and classified” (Naples & Gurr, 2014, p. 33).

Feminist research practice demands self-reflexivity and that “knowledge production should involve a collective process, rather than the individualistic, top-down, and distanced approach that typifies the traditional scientific method” (Naples & Gurr, 2014, p. 37). In this spirit, analysis

and critique throughout this paper have been framed in such a way that they would be useful to MWF, and potentially other professional wrestling promotions, to aid in their efforts for diversity, inclusion, and social relevance in their promotions.

Data Gathering Methods

From December 2020 to January 2021, I conducted interview sessions regarding gender issues with wrestling talents and executives from MWF. The initial findings from these sessions provide the backbone of the investigatory part of my research. Primary qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured online video and chat interviews with MWF talents, concurrent with secondary data collection. Interview participants were as follows:

1. Veronica Litton (transgender woman), co-founder, President, former Commissioner, and current Head of Creatives for MWF. Ring name³ Veronica Shannon, known as “Mike Shannon” prior to her transition in 2018;
2. Fabio Makisig (cisgender man), MWF Head Coach⁴ and COO;
3. Rogue (cisgender woman), a trainee under the 2019 cohort of the MWF Wrestling Factory, who initially wrestled for a different local promotion before its dissolution, and
4. Chelsea Marie (transgender woman), the first trans woman to join the MWF Wrestling Factory, also part of the 2019 cohort.

All interviewees were approached personally through online chat, with the research objectives and potential for publication explained to each one in turn. Gaining consent and conducting the interviews in this way required a level of trust and rapport with the participants—values that I have been able to cultivate over my years of friendship with each of them as individuals and my participation in the community.

All participants apart from Veronica requested to be referred to by their ring names for this paper. Veronica agreed to the use of her real name, with the condition that her in-ring surname “Shannon” be noted.

To support the discussion and analysis in this paper, I gathered data from articles in the MWF blog, posts from the MWF Facebook page, the official MWF podcast, third-party podcast interviews and related news articles, and visual segments featured in both the MWF Insider Blog and on the MWF YouTube channel. Finally, I reviewed a gender-focused MWF *Aksyonovela* storyline, *Out and About*.

Findings and Discussion

Gender Diversity and Equality in the “Fed”

In terms of numbers, men outnumbered women in MWF in 2021. While the promotion has a culture that celebrates gender diversity and attempts to enforce equality in the team, it still faces challenges in terms of recruiting and retaining women wrestling talents.

²A note on naming conventions in wrestling: Professional wrestlers are known to use stage names, or “ring names,” in order to differentiate their kayfabe personas from their real-life ones.

³Fabio described this role as “I’m head coach, which also involves ‘roster management’ during shows [...]. As head coach, I train and condition everyone and also make sure they’re not trying to pull off [sic] suicidal shit,” and defined “roster management” as “making sure nobody does something stupid, both in and out of the ring.”

Diversity in Numbers. At the beginning of 2021, Fabio noted that the official MWF roster listed seven active wrestlers (all cisgender men), a total of three referees (two men and one woman, all cisgender), and four coaches (all cisgender men). Among the 2019 cohort of trainees in the MWF Factory, Chelsea counted 13 cisgender men, one cisgender gay man, two cisgender women, and one trans woman—herself. Meanwhile, the management team was made up of a small team of four: two cisgender men, one trans woman (Veronica), and one cisgender woman.

Table 1: Count of MWF Talents Aggregated by Sex and Roles

MWF talents as of January 2021			
	Total	Men	Women
Talent	29	25	4
Wrestlers in main roster	7	7	0
MWF Factory trainees	17	14	3
Referees	3	2	1
Coaches	4	4	0
Management	4	2	2

Despite the low number of women and LGBTQIA+ individuals in the organization, MWF prides itself on the diversity of its talents and staff. In a 2020 podcast interview, Veronica claimed that “in MWF it doesn’t matter if you’re a man, woman, straight, gay, transgender. [...] As long as you’re passionate about what you’re doing, and you’re passionate about the promotion, and you put in the hard work, you’re accepted” (De Mesa, 2020). Chelsea and Rogue affirmed this statement in their respective interviews. Most importantly, Chelsea said in our interview that the existence of local promotions like MWF allowed her to pursue her childhood dream of being a pro wrestler like WWE’s Paige and AJ Lee—a dream she had all but given up on because she did not think that there would be any pro wrestling opportunities for her, being a) Filipino, and b) a Filipino trans woman.

Equality in the Locker Room: Mixing Up Gendered Expectations. In the MWF training room, Rogue averred, women’s athletic prowess is recognized as equal to the men’s. “*Walang gender. If you get hit, you get hit.*” Chelsea, meanwhile, entered training aware of the debate around transgender women in full-contact sports, and fully expecting her gender identity to color the roster’s perception of her. She was prepared for backlash, but “it didn’t happen at all, which surprised me.” She discovered afterwards that shortly before she arrived for her first day of training, Fabio, in his role as Head Coach, called for a roster meeting, announcing that the new addition to their team was a trans woman and saying “*Kung may problema kayo sa trans, umalis na kayo.* (If you have a problem with trans [people], leave now.)” This act—corroborated by Rogue, who was present during the meeting—alleviated Chelsea’s anxiety. “It made me feel good that they already knew. Disclosing is not the funnest [sic] thing.”

These statements and narratives point to a locker room culture within MWF that not only accepts, but also *enforces and expects* non-conformity to hetero-cisgender norms: The male wrestlers are expected to treat cis and trans women wrestlers the same way, regardless of their gender identity. The woman wrestler, in turn, is expected to be able to go toe-to-toe with her male counterparts, regardless of her gender expression.

Challenges to Gender Diversity and Equality in MWF

Representation and Retention. Fabio explained in our interview that while MWF had no women wrestlers in its main roster in 2021 (see Table 1), this was not always the case: The promotion had three women wrestlers between 2018-2019, but “[Wrestler 1] left for family reasons, [Wrestler 2] left to focus on stunts, and [Wrestler 3] left because of [the] sexual misconduct debacle.”⁵ “Fabio also made the observation that women wrestling talents “are hard to come by for various reasons. When they do, there’s the matter of keeping their morale up to keep them from leaving. If they do persist sa training, the hurdle becomes passing the athletic requirements. Which is preeetty [sic] difficult. 2018 Factory had 30+ applicants but only 8 passed with eventually 4 graduating. 2019 Factory had around 50 applicants but was whittled down.”

Challenges Affecting Retention of Women Wrestlers. Interviews with participants suggest that economic, social, and environmental factors play a part in why women wrestlers are “hard to come by.” Challenges related to money, family, and sexual harassment were recurring themes throughout the data gathering process. In our interviews, Chelsea and Rogue shared similar experiences they felt kept them from pursuing wrestling full-time: the notion that it is not lucrative employment, the threat of sexual harassment, and unsupportive friends and family members who see wrestling as a dangerous sport for a woman.

Being told that wrestling is “a dangerous sport for a woman” is an experience women wrestlers share with Paul and Blank’s women’s derby athletes, whose friends and family members “expressed a form of paternalism, arguing that the risk of physical injury and pain was too great for a woman (Paul & Blank, 2015, p. 59).” A running theme in Bueza’s 2018 interviews with Filipina wrestlers was discouraging comments related to the intersection of womanhood and pro wrestling: Starling was called “crazy” for her “unladylike” interest in pro wrestling, and also related that “some nobody from another promotion made a sexist comment saying females are the inferior gender” (Bueza, 2018). Tala Haliya shared that “I have people saying I won’t make it.” Rogue accepted that “there will be a lot of haters.” Because of this, women wrestlers place emphasis on having “guts” (Starling and Crystal), “dedication and faith in yourself” (Rogue), “a great deal of heart and willpower” (Ashura), and emotional “toughness” (Robynn).

Unique Challenges Related to Transgender Identity. Chelsea related in our interview that while she felt full acceptance within the MWF roster, her identity as a trans athlete necessarily added another layer of challenges on top of the ones she shares with other women wrestlers. She expressed anxiety about potential fan reaction to her debut, especially considering her desire to vie for a women’s championship title, should one ever materialize. She also expressed concerns about what her kayfabe persona would be upon her debut, relating that a male manager once approached her with a gimmick that would portray her as a comedic wrestler—a barangay trans beauty queen, in reference to her real-life participation in the widely-televised *Eat Bulaga Super Sireyna* pageant. Feeling that the trope was much too stereotypical, however, and fearing that it may hinder her from being taken seriously as an athlete, she refused the concept.

⁴ Referring to the 2020 sexual harassment incident described in MWF 2020a.

Gender-based Violence in Philippine Pro Wrestling

Gender-based violence (GBV) in the form of sexual harassment of female wrestling talents surfaced as a recurring theme throughout interviews with this study's participants, which they related to a culture of sexual objectification they perceived as persisting throughout the professional wrestling industry. Threats to the safety of women and LGBTQIA+ athletes negatively affect not only the athletes themselves, but also impact the company in terms of talent acquisition, talent retention, and public opinion. As COO and Head Coach, Fabio noted that the well-being of women athletes is crucial in terms of the promotion's bottom line. Despite (or perhaps because of) being a male-dominated industry, he says that "men aren't that lucrative in this game, and the headaches (in) training men and women just make investing in female wrestlers more cost-effective."

Sexual Harassment and Objectification. Sexual harassment negatively affects how women athletes experience their wrestling careers on both a physical and psychological level. The threat of harassment undermines their sense of personal safety and has a negative impact on their psyche as well, in that being seen as "sex objects" makes them feel invalidated as athletes, dampens their enjoyment of the sport, makes them less likely to engage in fan interactions, and could potentially make them quit the industry.

Instances of Harassment among Filipino Women Wrestlers. Women wrestlers outside of MWF have reported instances of online stalking, sexual innuendo, and unwanted touching from men both within their promotions and among their audience (Go, 2020). In 2020, PWR wrestlers Crystal and Nina came forward with stories of sexual harassment within their promotion (ABS-CBN, 2020; Go, 2020; PWR, 2020a). During our interview, Rogue recollected similar instances of sexual harassment as a wrestler in her previous promotion, like having her personal Facebook profile stalked by a fan and encountering real-life instances of wrestling-related sexual comments such as "Ah, wrestler *ka?* Tara, wrestling *tayo sa kama* (Oh, you're a wrestler? Come on, let's wrestle in bed)."

Sexual Objectification in Locker Room Talk. In our interview, Fabio shared insights and observations on "locker room talk" and the local wrestling culture that support women's experiences of harassment and objectification:

There's this concept of 'ring rats,' basically groupies of pro wrestling. When I trained with other companies, boys' locker room talk involved mostly of groupies and which female trainee is hot... It's disgusting and disturbing. [Wrestling promotion] is particularly notorious for having a '*bakod club*' which involves the management 'putting up fences' on female trainees so they can set her up with their male friends. I heard it's very predatory there.

Fabio also mused that "MWF was able to extricate itself from such culture by the [sic] virtue of having less pro wres [sic] fans. Most of the wrestlers, believe it or not, aren't pro wrestling fans. So we're removed from the 'boys locker room' of pro wrestling, and end up being simply individuals who participate in this."

Handling Instances of GBV in Pro Wrestling.

MWF's "Zero-Tolerance" Policy on GBV. MWF is not without its own incidents of GBV. In 2019, MWF fulfilled a talent exchange obligation involving, Veronica says, "one particular [non-Filipino] wrestler who was a bit of an unintentional creep." Fabio mentioned mobilizing the roster to "protect" the women of MWF from this "creep" by "[telling] the boys to always keep an eye out for him, and if he ever approaches a woman, make sure to join the conversation and steer the woman away to 'protect' her." Apart from this incident, both Fabio and Veronica made references in their respective interviews to a 2020 "sexual misconduct debacle" perpetrated by an MWF decision-maker which led to both the perpetrator's removal from the upper management team *and* the resignation of one of the MWF's three female wrestlers.⁶

Interestingly, the interviewees maintained that MWF strictly enforces a zero-tolerance policy for GBV within and outside the promotion despite these incidents. Veronica highlighted in our interview that "the [MWF] boys will go out of their way to protect the girls if they have to." Chelsea and Rogue affirmed that they have never felt unsafe among the male wrestlers of MWF, despite being vastly outnumbered as women. When I asked about sexual harassment within the MWF roster, Rogue pointed out that Fabio takes on the role of locker room enforcer⁷ when it comes to MWF's zero-tolerance policy on sexual harassment, so "*kapag nagkaroon ka ng ganoon sa MWF, sisipain ka ni Fabio* (If you try to pull something like that in MWF, Fabio will kick⁸ you)."

Fabio's actions are examples of what Holmes and Flood (2013) call "individual men and men's networks in workplaces acting as 'champions' of violence prevention in the workplace" (Holmes & Flood, 2013, p. 5). By both mobilizing "the boys" in his capacity as an authority figure as well as using the threat of physical force as a deterrent, Fabio enforces a standard of behavior "undermining established masculine norms and cultures" (Holmes & Flood, 2013, p. 3) of, in this case, so-called "boys' locker room" behavior, in MWF.

Challenges to Handling Incidents of GBV. While MWF itself claims a zero-tolerance policy for sexual harassment and other forms of GBV within its ranks, interviewee narratives strongly suggested that there is no guarantee of safety when non-MWF entities are involved. Despite MWF's tight-knit, protective culture, the fact that there are still instances where "the girls" even have to be protected from personalities from outside the promotion suggests that MWF's internal anti-GBV culture is the exception, not the norm, in the Philippine wrestling scene. For example: Rogue accepts Veronica's claims that MWF does "all safety measures possible" to prevent fans from invading wrestlers' personal space during its shows. But what of the spaces beyond shows? After all, Rogue has experienced online stalking and sexual harassment from audience members of her previous promotion, so, as she says in our interview, she would feel much safer, and would enjoy interacting with fans more, if the sexualization and harassment of women athletes was less of an occupational hazard overall.

⁵ See MWF 2020a for the promotion's full statement on workplace harassment and the actions it took regarding incidents of sexual harassment in the promotion.

⁶ In a pro wrestling context, an "enforcer" is defined as "a wrestler who keeps order [...] in the locker room by threat of physical force" (Shoemaker, 2014).

⁷ Asked whether she meant "sisipain" (lit. "will kick") figuratively, as in firing the perpetrator, or literally, Rogue quipped: "Literally. Malakas siya manipa (He kicks hard)."

MWF has shown a willingness to address GBV in the wrestling community (see MWF, 2020a), but there is, according to Fabio, “a limited capacity to enforce.” Since the pro wrestling industry in the Philippines is still in its infancy, there is neither a formal sector-wide authority yet that can hold promotions accountable for sexual harassment cases, nor enough funding or even HR personnel for a promotion to be able to pursue formal/dedicated anti-sexual harassment measures. The result is reactive company policies (MWF, 2020a; PWR, 2020b) that can deal with sexual harassment incidents only as they happen. “At the very least we can try to control our own ranks,” Fabio says in our interview, “but there isn’t much in space [*sic*] for punishments really.”

Intervention Concept: Exploring and Mainstreaming Gender through Kayfabe Storytelling

“Out and About” for Gender Diversity and Equality. MWF is no stranger to bringing gender issues to the fore in its storytelling. In September 2018, it became the first wrestling promotion in the Philippines to explicitly include a storyline about gender sensitivity: *Out and About*.

Out and About is a story arc within the MWF’s *Manilaverse* that serves as an example of how kayfabe storytelling can work as a gender mainstreaming initiative grounded in WPR. The precipitating incident occurred in the 2018 live show *MWF 3: Republika*, in which Rex Lawin (a heel character from MWF) faced off against Martivo (a visiting face from PWR) in a match that deliberately pitted diametrically-opposed representations of Filipino manhood against each other:

Martivo is the rainbow warrior, a man who is unapologetically himself and a reflection of how far acceptance and tolerance have come in the Philippines; a new wave of strong and eclectic Filipino men. On the other hand, Rex Lawin represents the toughness and aggression of traditional Filipino masculinity. And yet, he accepts and understands these differences without any issues. Here we have two characters that represent the past and future of Filipino men, understanding each other. (Litton, 2018b)

After their match, Rex Lawin took the Pride flag Martivo came in with and wiped his sweat with it, to the sound of booing from the audience. Veronica confirmed in our interview that this action was consistent with Rex Lawin’s character as a macho heel, although the specific act itself was not scripted. “It was something he did impromptu. [Rex Lawin] saw the Pride flag and went for it. He apologized to me when he got backstage and I told him that I was both proud of him as a heel and slightly offended by his actions. [...] We wanted to do something that built itself off what Rex did, so we decided to do *Out and About* from that” (V. Litton, personal communication, January 6, 2021).

Out and About was written into the Aksyonovela series as an in-universe intervention following the events of *Republika*. The first part of the storyline serves as a prologue and opens in a boardroom, with Rex Lawin being reprimanded for the Pride flag incident by his manager, Gus Queens. Lawin is told that his action was offensive to LGBT+ individuals, and therefore “bad for business.” Queens then books a private gender sensitivity training seminar for Lawin, and decides at the last minute to accompany the wrestler (MWF, 2018a). The second part of the storyline focuses on the seminar itself, opening with the fictional CMS gender sensitivity training team preparing for their appointment and following them as they begin to lecture the two heels on the basics of

SOGIESC. Lawin and Queens are shown as attentive students, asking questions that prompt the trainers—Mike Shannon (Veronica’s ring name at the time), PWR wrestler Robynn, and Martivo himself—to expound on SOGIESC concepts until the subject becomes clear to both learners. The segment ends with Rex Lawin and Gus Queens thanking the group for educating them, and the trainers pleased with the results of the seminar (MWF, 2018b).

In terms of the Barthesian story arc, *Out and About* demonstrates Rex Lawin using the LGBT+ Pride flag as a rag as the “base action,” with the forced attendance in a gender sensitivity training seminar as the corresponding “blow.” The problem of toxic masculinity is “resolved” in the world of kayfabe on two levels of Barthes’ *salaud*: Rex Lawin, the *salaud* unaware of the impact of his actions; and Gus Queens, the *salaud* who recognizes that there are actions so abhorrent that even heels, who are supposed to be “organically repugnant” (Barthes, 1972, p. 17), cannot get away with them. In using the gender sensitivity seminar storyline as a tool to humble the traditionally macho heel character, not only does MWF present and normalize SOGIESC education among its audience, it also categorically states that the acceptance of gender diversity “in the real” is what is Moral and Just (CMS as the face organization), and that to act otherwise would make one worse than the worst villain (heel manager Gus Queens reprimanding co-heel Rex Lawin).

While Rex Lawin, Gus Queens, the CMS organization, etc. are all fictional characters operating in a symbolic world, their actions matter “in the real”: Veronica says that public response was overwhelmingly positive when *Out and About* was aired live later that year, during *MWF 4: Road to Fate*: “Public response was amazing! I actually cried when it aired during the show. It was when I mentioned I had started transitioning, and it got an applause. It was [so] overwhelming that I broke down in tears.” Apart from *Out and About* having been an instrumental tool that allowed Veronica to shed her “Mike Shannon” persona and announce her transition in front of a live audience, the video has been used as a teaching tool beyond the world of wrestling. “I found out from my ex-girlfriend’s mom that she would use the *Out and About* video during seminars to help people understand SOGIE better,” Veronica says.

There is an opportunity to facilitate even greater gender diversity in MWF, according to Chelsea, if the company writes more women-centered storylines and rivalries. If budget allows, she says, it would be helpful to hire more women as storyline writers in order “to balance out the male and female perspectives,” and from a marketing standpoint, to reel in more women into the fandom. In embedding gender-related storylines into the *Manilaverse*, MWF can make room for further discourse of gender issues in the industry, turning kayfabe into a tool that not only depicts these issues, but also prescribes feminist courses of action not only for its target audience, but also for those who may come by it through other means (e.g. seeing *Manilaverse* content shared by friends on social media), thus triggering the creation of a “safe space” *a la* Phadke (2020) and proving true Bacchi and Eveline’s view of policy as a creative process that has both subjectification and lived effects (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010).

Un-silencing the Realities of GBV in Pro Wrestling through Kayfabe.

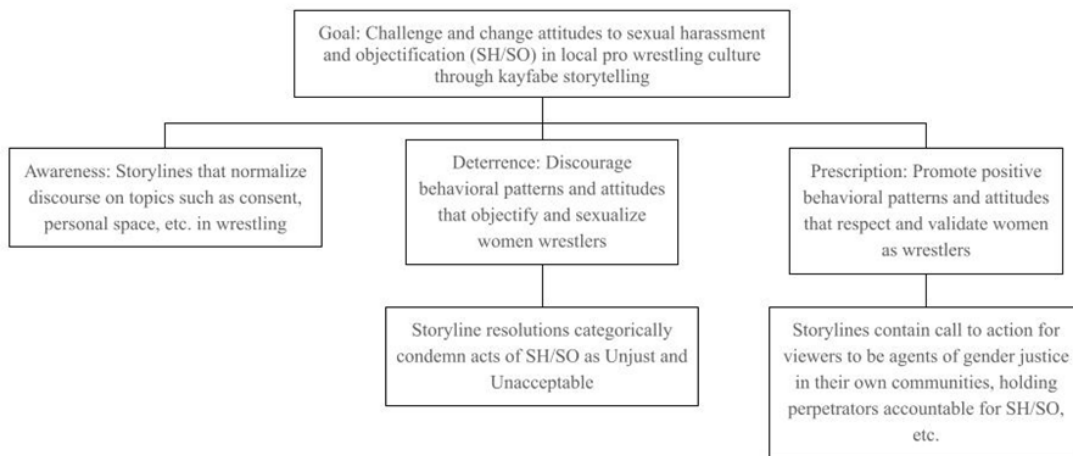
“While numerous studies have explored risk factors for GBV in the workplace, relatively little research has been devoted to developing effective agents of change. It is necessary to actively engage in understanding and implementing appropriate government policies and workplace programs that address gender-based violence in the workplace, to invest in research that meets

these goals, and to advocate for responsive regulation in the workplace against GBV.” (Center for Women’s Global Leadership, n.d.)

The positive reception of *Out and About* among and outside MWF’s audience strongly suggests that wrestling promotions may already have the means to address and raise awareness of GBV in a manner that requires no additional training or funding on their part. Developing storylines that address the issue of sexual harassment within kayfabe as a proactive effort to challenge the “boys-will-be-boys” culture that is perceived to be rife within the local professional wrestling community is a strategy that may have the ability to affect how wrestling fans perceive and approach similar gender issues.

In our interview, Rogue suggested that storylines “can influence how fans perceive their heroes. Having [real-world issues] represented in a storyline and creating a lesson from it can work with fans, especially the younger ones. This can serve as an education for everyone.” Just as *Out and About* served as a morality tale for gender diversity, a storyline tackling themes of sexual harassment and objectification (SH/SO) can challenge and change current attitudes to sexual harassment and sexual objectification “in the real.”

Figure 2 Objectives Tree for Kayfabe-Oriented Intervention Concept



As seen in the case of *Out and About*, pro wrestling’s use of heel vs. face storytelling makes it possible to deter and prescribe certain behaviors and attitudes. Applied to issues of GBV, what this means is that it is possible for pro wrestling promotions to not only raise awareness of SH/SO issues by normalizing discussions on consent, personal space, etc. in kayfabe, but also to make a stand against the objectification and sexualization of women wrestlers by developing storylines in which these behavioral patterns and attitudes are tagged as unjust and unacceptable heel behavior (with the perpetrator/s meant to be booed throughout the narrative and punished in-universe by the end of the story arc) and in contrast, promoting behaviors and actions that respect and validate women wrestlers via the actions of heroic face characters who aim to inspire viewers to be agents of gender justice “in the real” in their own communities.

Barthes describes wrestling as a “theater of Moral Justice,” a kind of interactive morality play where heels are jeered and faces are cheered live by a captive audience. This dynamic, powered by the kayfabe storytelling that prompts it, can be leveraged to 1) present real-world gender issues like gender diversity, gender equality, and GBV to wrestling audiences, 2) normalize conversations

surrounding these issues, and 3) prescribe ways to resolve gender-based oppressions "in the real." Should the Philippine pro wrestling industry deliberately pursue this course, it would fulfill wrestling's Barthesian purpose as "a mythological fight between Good and Evil [...] based on ethics, not politics" (Barthes, 1972, p. 23).

Conclusion: Philippine Pro Wrestling's Potential as a Feminist Space

Focusing on the pursuit of fun and enjoyment can be an important way in which women push against and challenge patriarchal boundaries, even if these acts may not always fall squarely into the category of what is generally thought of as political resistance within academic discourse. (Kirmani, 2020, p. 2)

Professional wrestling is a niche industry in the Philippines that participants persist in primarily for self-actualization and love of the game. While the scene is male-dominated in terms of numbers, the data is clear on two points. One, there are women who dream of being pro wrestlers. Two, having a local wrestling scene gives these women the opportunity to pursue their dreams. The passion that Filipino women pro wrestlers have for their industry and the value they represent to their promotions is what gives Philippine pro wrestling the potential to be a space for feminist transformation under a GAD perspective. It pushes for gender equality with its intergender nature (Bueza, 2018) that allows women and queer athletes access to a unique combination of physicality and fun. It allows women wrestlers to challenge "paternalism and traditional notions of femininity" (Paul & Blank, 2015, p. 59) by emphasizing their ability to resist pain and their being "badass." The larger-than-life personas they adopt, coupled with the high-octane stunts they perform for the crowd, give them an avenue to discover and express confidence and badass-ness in front of an audience that cheers on their displays of assertiveness. In turn, Filipinos of feminine and/or queer experience within the audience are granted the opportunity to see themselves reflected in the characters they see onstage, to participate in the "theater of Moral Justice" that is kayfabe, and to even be inspired to wrestle themselves.

As for the Manila Wrestling Federation, which prides itself on the diversity of its staff (De Mesa, 2020), its stance on gender equality (Litton 2018a, 2018b; MWF, 2020b), and its strong views against GBV (MWF 2020a, 2020b), the participatory interviews and textual analysis done for this paper support the assertion that as a company, it *does* make deliberate attempts to be as diverse, progressive, and gender-equal as it can be in its storylines and day-to-day operations, to have a company culture that strives to be supportive and welcoming for people of diverse SOGIESC, and to actively reject misogyny, transphobia, and sexual harassment while highlighting the badass-ness of its women and queer talents. There is more that needs to be done, but the promotion has built for itself a foundation that could foster an environment for the Philippine pro wrestling industry, as a whole, to be more inclusive, equitable, safer, and thus more enjoyable for wrestlers and fans of diverse SOGIESC—despite the very real and pressing issues women wrestlers face within the greater community (ABS-CBN News, 2020; Go, 2020; MWF, 2020b; PWR, 2020a, 2020b).

Considering how young the local wrestling scene is and the fact that MWF is one of the industry's pioneers, there is an opportunity here for MWF to use its influence and its storytelling to help develop the up-and-coming local wrestling culture in such a way that it follows MWF's moral compass. Because professional wrestling is a space where people are encouraged to boo a heel's villainous actions as loudly as they cheer for a face's heroic ones (Barthes, 1972), when an

influential promotion like MWF writes kayfabe storylines with resolutions that have a progressive and/or feminist bent like *Out and About* (MWF 2018a, 2018b)—where feminist values like equality, diversity, and inclusivity are coded Good and their opposites are coded Evil—storytelling becomes a powerful memetic tool that creates safe spaces for activism, self-expression, and the empowerment of marginalized identities. Kayfabe becomes a space that provides an opening for viewers and consumers of wrestling content, whether or not they identify as wrestling enthusiasts, to push back against rigid gender codes and oppressions. In doing this, Filipino pro wrestling not only fulfills its symbolic role *a la* Barthes, but also cements what Kirmani calls “the potential that enjoyment holds for the transformation of the structure of gendered power relations” (Kirmani, 2020, p. 11). It becomes a space where fun becomes political, where entertainment becomes activism, and where oppressive, patriarchal norms are confronted head-on, brought over the proverbial top rope, and thrown right out of the ring.

Glossary of Terms

Aksyonovela	a portmanteau of "action" and "telenovela," the Manila Wrestling Federation (MWF)'s Aksyonovela series serves as the main "plot" of MWF's kayfabe
cisgender/cis	a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth (IOM, 2020)
face (or babyface)	refers to a wrestler whose kayfabe persona is a heroic archetype
Gender and Development (GAD)	a perspective on development with the stated goal of attaining "organisation-wide commitment to gender equality" (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010, p. 42)
heel	refers to a wrestler whose kayfabe persona is a villainous archetype
kayfabe	[kei-feyb] the pro wrestling industry's convention of presenting pro wrestling personas, feuds, and storylines as authentic, i.e., not scripted or staged (Shoemaker, 2014)
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and "people with diverse SOGIESC who identify using other terms" (IOM, 2020)
<i>Manilaverse</i>	MWF's term for their kayfabe; the setting in which their kayfabe storylines are set
promotion	in pro wrestling, a company that regularly performs professional wrestling shows (Shoemaker, 2014)
SOGIESC	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, Sex Characteristics (IOM, 2020)
transgender/trans	a person whose gender identity differs from the gender identity typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth (IOM, 2020)

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