

DON'T CALL ME BABE

Women who refuse to follow the girly rules face daily and abuse. **REAL** speaks to four women who live and work

A little girl sulks as her mother pulls a frilly, flowery dress over her head and helps her feet into white patent leather Mary-Jane shoes. She would rather run around freely in her jeans, her trainers mud-spattered from shinnying up trees and playing football with the neighbourhood boys. All the other girls love playing with their dolls and plaiting one another's hair, but this one prefers toy trucks and battle games. She hates giggling and other girly airs and graces, and she's not afraid of anything. She's what people call a 'tomboy' – a girl whose behaviour and interests are more like those of a boy.

Being a tomboy is often seen as a phase that girls grow out of and many women who grow up to be ladylike can remember preferring Action Man to Barbie in their childhoods. But other women refuse to be girly all their lives. According to an American study, around 30 per cent of women say that they are, or have been, a tomboy. Others reject labelling themselves a 'tomboy' but still have unladylike interests which make them feel like outsiders in our society.

Scientists have found that being non-girly is both

nature and nurture. A study by City University in 2003 discovered that mothers with above-average levels of the male hormone testosterone in pregnancy are more likely to have little girls who tended to prefer toy cars and sport. Meanwhile women with low levels of testosterone were found to give birth to daughters who preferred dressing up, dolls and make-up. However, the study also found that tomboys tended to have older brothers and parents who encouraged masculine behaviour.

Professor Melissa Hines, who helped conduct the study, says that less than three per cent of the girls studied were found to be 'very tomboyish tomboys – girls at the extreme of their gender group for male-typical behaviour'. She adds that, while most tomboy girls grow up to be sexually straight, non-heterosexual women may well have been tomboys as children. 'Lesbians or bisexual women are more likely to recall enjoying cross-sex activities as a child,' she says.

As adults, we all live with gender stereotypes which mark out traditionally feminine and masculine interests and jobs. Over the last 100 years, women have entered virtually every previously male profession, beating men at their own game in business, as doctors and

challenges, disbelief and, in some cases, appalling insults in a man's world

even as soldiers – therefore many would assume that in modern western society, women have broken the glass ceiling. Yet those who refuse to conform to girly rules still face attacks of being unfeminine.

Zara*, 27, a self-proclaimed tomboy from a strict Muslim background, explains why she would rather not be identified and risk disapproval: 'It's difficult for other people to understand why I'm not a "girly

“ BEING A TOMBOY IS OFTEN SEEN AS A PHASE THAT GIRLS GROW OUT OF

girl'. My religious parents are, understandably, concerned that I'm not a typical girl, and there is always pressure to dress up and present myself appropriately to their friends and relatives. Some guys find it threatening that I'm not a piece of fluff who will fall for the usual lines, and that I have an attitude to go with my tomboy exterior.

'Though I like looking after myself, and receive my fair share of attention from men, I'm not bound by a set of rules that says I always have to be a perfect

little woman, have my hair and nails done or totter along in high heels. I prefer being comfortable as well as practical. I'll be the one changing the tyre on the car, or putting up the shelves, or lifting the heavy stuff when it's needed. Being a tomboy isn't just about not wanting to play with dolls, it's an attitude of capability in a male-dominated society.'

Life may be even more difficult for men in a female domain, who are often accused of being wet and wimpy. Who could forget Ben Stiller as Greg Focker in *Meet the Parents*, humiliated for being a male nurse?

Gender stereotyping has far-reaching effects when it comes to ethical issues. Critics of IVF gender selection have pointed out that parents who are 'desperate for a girl' may not be hoping for one who becomes a mechanic.

Zara says, 'I'm proud of the fact that I'm able to take care of myself and my friends and family in a way that my more feminine sisters aren't. It's all about dependence and security. I feel safer dressed in boots and jeans than I do in heels and a miniskirt. I feel more capable too. But growing up in a Western society brings with it a certain independence too.

***Name has been changed**

else had. Within six months my gym instructor said to me, 'Why don't you enter a bodybuilding show?' so I entered the Southern Counties Bodybuilding Show and won. I carried on winning, doing every competition there was, and was soon famous within the bodybuilding world. I won the English Federation of Bodybuilders National Championships twice. In 1993 I got a call to appear in an advertisement as the face of Volkswagen. Then, at the age of 33, I became the face of London Weekend Television.

“ PEOPLE LOOK AT YOU AS IF YOU'RE FROM ANOTHER PLANET

My whole body and life transformed – I've seen the world. I have my own business and my own show on the Discovery channel. When I started bodybuilding, I weighed about 11 and a half stone at five foot two. I weigh nearly 12 stone now, but I don't look it. I'm

a size 10-12 on the bottom and 14-16 on top, and I have tiny little hips. I started running my own gym, coaching other bodybuilders, and most girls competing in shows now come from my stable.

I'm not a tomboy. I love decorating my house and I am obsessed with my eight rescued cats – my babies – they are my world. I don't have any children but I don't want anyone to feel sorry for me, because I never was a kiddie person. If you own a business and spend 12-14 hours a day working, there's no way you can have a family. If you have children, your body also changes dramatically – it can open your hips and widen your abdominal muscles.

Women should open their minds to bodybuilding. Bodybuilding doesn't mean you build a huge body. It means you build lean tissue, which makes it easier for your body to utilise the calories you give it. Some women come to me and say they don't want huge arms, but they've got 14-inch bingo wings anyway. When you've got 14-inch muscular arms they don't look like bingo wings!



Female firefighter Natalie is in a minority

PEOPLE STARE AT ME IN DISBELIEF

Firefighter Natalie Mellors, 31, from Derbyshire, explains what it's like to be the only woman on her watch

When I tell people what I do, they can't believe it. It's probably because of my height – I am five foot one and a half. Some men have said, 'You wouldn't be able to lift me, would you?' But I can drag one of the heavy guys on my watch a fair way.

It's not an issue being the only woman among 12 men on my watch. I am down-to-earth and not overly polite. When I first joined the watch, the lads were very well-mannered around me, but now that they have gotten used to having a woman around, they treat me just like one of them.

To become a firefighter I had to do a back strength test, ladder climbing to prove I wasn't afraid of heights, and running out a length of heavy hose. The targets for women are the same as men but I didn't find these tasks scary.

You can't wear make-up, you have to tie your hair up, you break your nails and you get sweaty and dirty, which some women tell me would put them off the job. But I am able to make a difference to the lives of people in need. ➤



PEOPLE THINK MY MUSCLES MAKE ME AGGRESSIVE

Champion bodybuilder Kimberley-Anne Jones, 45, from Kent, says people assume she is not feminine

It's so controversial to look like me. People say, 'You don't want to look like a man'. They look at me and see a woman's head with a man's muscles. I see myself as very feminine. Because of my height, my muscles are obvious, but I don't go around showing them off.

The average woman thinks that muscles belong on men, and I think most men are intimidated by women bodybuilders – they don't know what to make of us. When people get drunk they come up and say, 'I bet you can arm wrestle,' or, 'What can you bench?' By the end of the conversation they tell me they don't see my muscles anymore.

I have to let people see that I'm not aggressive. Female bodybuilders don't go out and beat people up at football matches. We are actually unicorns grazing alone because there are so few of us. The sport is all

about being a better person and learning to love oneself.

It's a male-oriented sport and if you go into a normal gym as a muscular female bodybuilder, people look at you as if you're from the planet Zog. But in my gym the female bodybuilders train alongside the men and nobody raises an eyelid. When women come into my gym I welcome them – they can't be made to feel inferior in a grunting man's sport. They train hard and they look good.

I was an overweight housewife at 25. I decided to start doing something about it and tried aerobics classes, pounding the street, the Grapefruit Diet, but nothing worked. Then I spotted an ad in my local paper for a gym – first session free. If it hadn't been a ladies gym I don't know if I would have continued because I would have felt intimidated.

Bodybuilding really worked for me, as nothing

Muscular women are sexy, says Kimberley-Anne



MY TATTOOS HAVE GOT ME SPAT AT, MY SKULL FRACTURED AND MY NOSE BROKEN

Acclaimed writer, punk rocker and former biker Joolz Denby, 50, from Bradford, has faced appalling abuse as a woman who refuses to follow the girly route

My tattoos cover 80 per cent of my body and I have 19 piercings. I've had reactions ranging from physical violence to general abuse. I've been spat at and beaten up by men on the street, in pubs and in clubs. I've had my skull fractured and my nose broken because of misogyny and fear. Worst of all, those attacks left me scared to death. In summer, as a heavily tattooed woman, you have to make a decision whether to wear short sleeves or not. Some days you just can't bear the hassle of being abused because you have chosen not to look like other people.

Men are worse than women in their reactions to me. Once, in a supermarket, I was queuing in front of a man and his five-year-old son. I looked down and smiled at the sweet little boy and the father got hold of the back of the kid's neck, pushed his head up so he was looking at me, and said, 'Tell the f*cking slut what you think of her.' I just turned away.

I also get a lot of hassle and bitching from other women who have chosen to follow the girly route. They tell me I'm a man-hater, a ball breaker, not a proper woman. I get comments like, 'What does your boyfriend see in you?' or, 'You're a disgrace'. Those women have given in to a kind of slavery but they don't want to know it – and they attack anything that might impinge on their world view. My friends and I call these women 'barracudas' because they are pretty and glittery on the outside but, on the inside, are absolute predators. Page Three girls are gender traitors. I'm a screaming feminist and I'm very proud of it.

I was privately educated and came from a conservative, middle-class army background, but I dislike being told what to do and have always been drawn to non-girly pursuits. At 16, I applied to be an apprentice mechanic, and I was shocked that they



Joolz's third novel, *Billie Morgan*, draws on her own experiences as a biker

wouldn't accept me because I was a girl. I wheeled my way in via the back door by doing valeting in a garage for a few years.

I've always liked riding motorcycles and, as a teenager, got involved with an outlaw biker gang called Satan's Slaves. No woman could be a member of an outlaw biker gang – that was strictly forbidden. So I got my husband to join. Women were the power behind the throne – a traditional woman's role. On the other hand, I did have to ride the motorbikes and have a certain amount of face and strength. As a woman, if you're not drawn to the girly world, you try to find other avenues, but you're often stopped and have nowhere to go. I didn't fit into the girly world but I liked bikes and the bikers' fun and freedom.

At 22 I was working as door security at a tough punk rock club in Bradford – I was the first female bouncer in West Yorkshire. I've worked in rock 'n' roll ever since as a crew person, as well as being an artist and writer. You hardly see a female lighting or sound

engineer out on the road. As a woman in that traditionally male world you have to be ten times as good as the men and ten times as hard.

I prefer to be treated as one of the lads because it's easier. You can't be running around with curling tongs. There is never any separate washing or toilet facility for women backstage, there are never bags for sanitary towels or anything private.

I like my long baths in aromatherapy oils, I like embroidery – but that doesn't stop me wanting to get underneath a car or dig the garden. I like anything creative. Other people are quick to put labels on you but I've never had any doubts about what I am. I'm not a tomboy or a girly girl. I'm a woman.

If you want to have a job or lifestyle which people feel is male, tell them to mind their own business. You've got one life, it's a short life, and you can't let people tell you what to do with it.

■ **Billie Morgan** by Joolz Denby, £8.99, *Serpent's Tail*, was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction

MY FEMININE SKILLS HAVE BROUGHT ME SUCCESS IN A MAN'S PROFESSION

Angie Foulds, 27, from Torquay, has careers as both a 'handygirly' and a nurse

I don't quite know what my title should be. I suppose I would call myself a handygirl. I am the first woman in my company.

I do all sorts of things – cementing, plumbing, painting, decorating and moving furniture. Getting my hands dirty doesn't bother me at all – that's where my nursing skills come into play. I'm used to dealing with mess from my work on the labour ward, which I do two days per week.

When they find out what I do, people – men especially – often seem surprised: 'A girl doing that? It's not possible!' They seem to think you need a man to do my job. Perhaps they think I am treading on their toes. A lot of people think my business is my husband's, not mine. But I think more women should go into this kind of work. It's all about your own skills, not about being a man or a woman.



Angie – here with her husband Greig and youngest daughter Olivia – is beating sexism in building

FEATURE Olivia Gordon PHOTOGRAPHS James & James/ Antony Thompson/John Barry Mounsey/Apex Pictures