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## Muscles that Matter: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Emotions and Experiences of Female Bodybuilders in Italy

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### Abstract

In Italy, female bodybuilders challenge attractiveness stereotypes because timidity and slenderness, not outward behaviour and a muscular frame, are women's most valued characteristics. Surprisingly, the stories of this population have been, at best, subliminal within the Italian discourse of sport. This manuscript redresses such oversight by exploring the narratives of 30 female bodybuilders via online qualitative interviews conducted between January 2019 and 2022. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 35 years, were Italian, trained daily and lived in Naples, Bologna, Milan, and Rome. Interpretative phenomenological analysis influenced the research project. Specifically, it permitted the author to evaluate how individuals make sense and derive meaning from their personal and social worlds. Outcomes demonstrate how women can subvert the idea that gender and body are static, removing the default presumption of femininity and masculinity to biological femaleness and maleness. For the respondents, bodybuilding was a means of empowerment. The more they trained, the more confidence they gained. Social media and reality TV shows helped them thrive as athletes but also caused unrealistic expectations of how they should be. Notably, results underline that some people get image and performance-enhancing drugs (IPEDs) to enhance their agency further. They also detailed how COVID-19 negatively affected the interviewees, causing them to pause, adapt or renounce their quest for a muscular ideal. Future scholarships can document the consumption of anabolic-androgenic steroids (AAS), a category of IPEDs, among amateur and elite female bodybuilders in Italy and how this group cope with masculinisation. If done correctly, these probes can facilitate the creation of harm prevention and reduction guidelines.

**Keywords:** Bodybuilding, IPEDs, AAS, COVID-19, Italy

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## Introduction

In bodybuilding, people aim to improve the size and tone of their muscles via weightlifting, dieting, and rest (Martin & Gavey, 1996). The sport was invented in the 19th century by the Prussian strongman Eugen Sandow and grew in popularity between the 1950s - and 1960s. It got global recognition in the 1970s following the rise to stardom of Austrian-American actor Arnold Schwarzenegger (Saunders, 2009). In Italy, bodybuilding has been historically associated with men. Because of that, women who do it may upset the normalised body and gender ideals (Dutton & Laura, 1989). Public responses to transgression have traditionally ranged from confusion and fear to disgust and anger (Mennesson, 2000; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009). Most scientific publications on bodybuilding have been quantitative and stressed the relationship between the sport and performance and image-enhancing drugs (IPEDs) (Liokaftos, 2019). They often described the licit and unlawful items individuals consume to boost performance and improve looks, from anabolic steroids to growth hormones, insulin and stimulants like caffeine amphetamines or ephedrine. A few investigations also highlighted how Western societies interpret bodybuilding and the ways by which public attitudes can shift. These scholarships are worthy but tell little about personal perspectives and lived experiences. There are exceptions, however. Underwood (2018) let bodybuilders speak about themselves. By doing that, she uncovered homosocial relations among athletes and how cyberspace can de-gender the traditionally feminised traits of emotional vulnerability and intimacy. Phoenix and Smith (2011) followed a similar path and delineated how mature bodybuilders cope with natural ageing and physical decline. This paper aims to expand the international literature on the outside and inside of sport, with attention given to the signification of the body and the performativity of gender. It will also try to decode the impact of COVID-19 on athletes' daily lives and how IPEDs circulate among the interviewees. The first section elucidates the project's methods, methodology, and theoretical background. The second draws on online qualitative one-to-one interviews with 30 women to outline their sports narratives. The third summarises the findings.

## Materials and Methods

### Objectives

The author identifies mainstream interpretations of sports in Italy, how they emerge and are communicated, and then inspects how they affect women's connection with them. He also reflects on bodybuilding, the personal/situational factors behind using IPEDs and how COVID-19 shaped the interviewees' daily lives. The author assumes that (a) In the West, collective consciousness favours men to the disadvantage of other genders (Theberge, 1997); (b) Women whose comportments and aesthetics are deemed abnormal often suffer from lesbian labelling and other homophobic accusations; (c) COVID-19 disrupted regular training and coaching schedules. (d) The consumption of legal/illegal androgenic anabolic steroids (AAS) and other image and performance-enhancing drugs

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(IPEDs) can result from the notion that some aspects of the body or gender are flawed. (e) Not all IPEDs are dangerous. Likewise, not all of them are illegal. The problem is that people can self-describe and self-administered them. (f) Individuals confronted with doping (the consumption of banned substances by athletes as a means of cheating) temptation can violate moral standards via conscious and subconscious psychosocial manoeuvres.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Judith Butler and Rewyin Connell's operas inspired the author to unpack female bodybuilders' embodied and gendered practices and the structural forces that shape and are formed by them. Butler (2004) writes that gender is not biologically determined but rather a performative act. Said differently, individuals constantly make it through their actions, gestures, clothing choices, and other expressions of identity. However, people must be careful because for society to accept them, they should not transgress norms nor challenge authority (Reddy & Butler, 2004). They move within boundaries that constitute them as (worthy) subjects. Central to this conceptualisation is that men and women are assumed to be heterosexual, an idea often accompanied by the positioning of the gay (the 'feminine man') and the lesbian (the 'masculine woman') as objects of ridicule. About the body, Butler assumes that it is not a pre-existing entity but one, like gender, with a past (of conformity/docility and resistance). We can use bodybuilding to test her theory. The sport is perhaps a unique technology of disciplinary power which enlists players to produce the right body and gender. However, it can also lead them to do the opposite, blurring the lines between masculinity and femininity or rejecting them altogether. Women with bulky muscles defy public expectations. However, society can sensationalise the sexuality of their poses, reinforcing the notion that they exist not as rebels but as erotic spectacles for a male audience (Richardson, 2008). More examples are possible. Human basic biology is no different from other primates. There are marked sex differences in these species, which are mostly caused by testosterone. Women who take androgenic-anabolic Steroids (AAS), chemical replicas of the gonad/masculine hormone, symbolically and materially transform themselves and disrupt the common knowledge assumption that a specific (fixed) gender corresponds to a specific (fixed) body. For Schippert (2007, p. 158) and Richardson (2004), when observing Hollywood and bodybuilding superstar Arnold Schwarzenegger, it is not immediately evident how this extremely muscular man relates to fluidity within categories such as heterosexuality and homosexuality and the intriguing, unconventional aspects they encompass. However, there are instances specifically associated with him that indicate a slippage of masculinity into something else. The renowned film *Pumping Iron* (1977), which played a significant role in popularizing bodybuilding in the US, opens with scenes depicting Schwarzenegger and his gym buddy engaging in ballet, learning the art of presenting themselves in an ideal manner. In this paradoxical pursuit, the athletes strive to display their (heterosexual) masculinity while partaking in the (traditionally feminine) activity of posing. These scenes highlight one of the numerous intriguing ways through which indicators of sexuality become intertwined with these

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gendered gym bodies, presenting complex and ever-dynamic associations.

Connell (2005) calls 'hegemonic' masculinity the apex of male mannerism, and anyone who aspires to the top of the hierarchy must display heterosexuality, whiteness, physical prowess, and suppression of emotions. In this setting, 'complicit' masculinity is staged by those who may disagree with the framework but do not do much to rebuke it; 'marginalised' masculinity includes those who, despite subscribing to socio-cultural axioms, cannot fully achieve them due to certain negative traits they have; 'subordinated' masculinity points to persons whose features are opposite to those valued the most by the masses. Notably, all these archetypes are mere fiction (Connell, 2013). They only exist as ideological devices. As such, none can achieve them. However, they are still a standard against whom everybody is compared. The pressure is real, as is the prestige built on the perceived proximity to perfect manliness (Connell, 1995). 'Hegemonic' femininity is the reverse of the pyramid of manhood or the predilection for features historically cited as womanly such as heterosexuality (made manifest by the presence of husbands, boyfriends, children, and gender-specific genitalia), modesty, and thinness.

Connell's formulations can explain why bodybuilding falls between hegemonic masculine and feminine. Men of colour may go to the gym to assert their manliness and bravado in the face of racial stereotypes, while working-class persons can do it to navigate their status and assert the relevance of physical labour. For Women, the sport can be a platform to confront biases (placing them almost on the same level as people of colour). We can also utilise Connell's stances to inspect IPEDs. The consumption of substances to reach hyper-muscularity has primarily been linked to elite male athletes, whom the West portrayed as the pinnacles of manhood. Christiansen (2020) designed a classification system for fitness dopers, formulating motivations such as performance, power, adventure, risk-taking, knowledgeability, self-control, and more. On the other hand, women's adoption of IPEDs has often been treated as an abnormality in academic and public discourse (McGrath & Chananie-Hill, 2009). More recently, however, they have attracted sociological interest. Women who take IPEDs can assert novel forms of hegemonic femininity and defuse the stigma of lesbianism (Harris & Clayton, 2002), signalling that muscles (but also specific dress codes and mannerisms) do not belong only to men and what constitutes the apex for one gender (a perfectly defined physique and an iron-willed personality) can do the same for the other.

### **Research Design**

The author adopted an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to scrutinize female bodybuilding. The methodology originates from the philosophies of Phenomenology and Hermeneutics (Watney, 1994) and endorses semi-structured interviews, focus groups (albeit rare), documents and diaries. IPA recognises that sport is not just about physical and cosmetic actions but also involves psychological and emotional aspects, which must be integrated into all the stages of the research. The ideographic core of IPA leads us to realize that an event must be storied (be

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lived, told and heard) to exist. Examining how persons interpret their world generates novel and sometimes unexpected knowledge. Contrary to the belief that people prefer avoiding harm, Wainwright and Turner (2004) found that ballerinas deem pain and injury fundamental signs of their habitus. In data collection, IPA requires the interviewer and the interviewees to work together, sharing opinions and even preconceptions, without fear of judgment from both parties. Such a bifocality denotes interpersonal respect, facilitating trust in the sociological encounter. In IPA, a primary question can be: How do female bodybuilders in Italy conceive themselves, their sport and society?. A secondary question might be how they approach IPEDs, while a third can dwell on the impact of COVID-19 in their felt space and time. In data collection, IPA urges scholars to keep in mind that not everybody wants to share information; when it does happen, some might be unable or unwilling to express them correctly. Therefore, they must listen carefully and continuously verify the content of speeches and the arguments behind them (raw materials). In data analysis, IPA favours – once again – interaction between the researcher and the researched for discovering what matters the most to the stakeholders. IPA guided the author to enter what Rapport and Wainwright (2006) termed the hermeneutic cycle, moving from a phenomenological/insider to an interpretative/outsider position and back. He came to the interview texts with preconceived notions, biases, and a particular cultural and historical background. He then broke his assumptions into their constituent parts, shared them with the participants and bridged the gap between his and their convictions. Finally, the author used gained knowledge to inform his discussions with the women and the making of the manuscript. As an illustration, he realised that respondents interpreted IPEDs as means of socialisation. Specifically, some manipulated ingestion/injection episodes to fit in a specific subculture, thus proving that drugs are never neutral agents. He also noticed that due to COVID-19, many people felt the time was slowing down, but there was also an underlying sense of having limited time, not in matters of health risk but in the chances of training. COVID-19 also deformed people's perception of their surroundings. What were once familiar loci (e.g., the house) became hostile and suffocating. Like Mosley (2009), the interviewees discovered that in hospitals and clinics, the physician's voice often covers that of the patient(s), and that was disturbing (at least for them) because sense and meaning-making happen in the dialectical revealing. Thanks to IPA, they could reclaim their identities and connection to bodybuilding from the dominance of medical prognoses.

*“As a woman in bodybuilding, I have faced discrimination. Tough stuff. But guess what? Talking to someone about it has been a total game-changer for me. Therapeutic as heck. Having that person who listens without judgment? It's like a weight lifted off my shoulders. Now, here is the crazy part. Out of curiosity, I tried some weird stuff for bodybuilding. But I quickly realised it was not for me. I cut that out of my routine, no shame in admitting it”* (Maria, age 26, Rome)

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## Setting and Recruitment Procedure

The author conducted the research between 2019 and 2022. He implemented three methods to arrange the sample universe. He posted requests on social media platforms like Facebook and Reddit/bodybuilding. The messages contained a hyperlink or a QR-Code to an information sheet, general data protection regulation, and two informed consent forms (in Italian and English): one concerning being in the project and one about participants' comments being used for appropriate, specified scholarly purposes, from publications to presentations. People could also access online the inclusion criteria, which were age (18+), gender (female), the language spoken (English/Italian), and having trained for at least two weekly sessions for 12 months. During the interviews, the author politely asked the women if they could search for other candidates (snowball sampling). However, he made a judgment call as to whether to approach someone. Those who were or appeared uncomfortable with the prospect of contacting others were not confronted. This was done to avoid the minimal risk of discomfort generated by being expected to nominate people or do other things not mentioned in the participant information sheet. Furthermore, the author emailed athletes he knew with an informal invitation specifying that if they wanted to enter the survey, they should reply to him and that more information would come (direct approach). When individuals who decided to join failed to download the documents, did not read them or had doubts about them before and during the interviews, the author offered new copies and explained their content. Ultimately, the author enrolled 30 female amateur/recreational bodybuilders from Naples, Bologna, Milan, and Rome. The mean age was 29 years. Their body size varied, but they were muscular with low body fat. The average self-declared height was 170 cm, and the weight was 71 kg. Most were full-time employees, and the minority were university students (undergraduate and graduate) with part-time jobs. The jobs listed were high school teacher, researcher, banker, and seller. Ten were married, 16 lived with a partner, but four did not disclose their relationships. At the start of the meetings, the author explained that the conversations would be tape-recorded and anonymous (albeit not truly confidential, as quotations were utilised in the write-up). He also offered an accurate and fair description of risks occurring v. anticipated benefits.

## Data Collection Tools

The author organised semi-structured interviews, which lasted 40-60 minutes on ZOOM and SKYPE. Web-conferencing was cost-saving (no need to travel from Thailand to Italy and vice versa), eliminated in-person stress, and could be done during the pandemic. Before commencing data collection, the author made analytical memos to point up his and the interviewees' situated knowledge and life background. He also solved latent logical flaws and discrepancies inside the research's structure. After each meeting, the author secured the files in a password-protected hard drive in his Mae Fah Luang University office and the paper documents in a locked cabinet at home. The author identified people by pseudonyms, age, and city of origin. When he finished transcribing the interview texts, he

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submitted the participants a copy of the materials via email to review and edit, telling them that should changes be made, they must indicate them.

### **Data Analysis**

As typical of IPA, the author conducted a thematic analysis (TA). He began with open coding, as Blair (2015) recommended. He read the transcripts thoroughly and broke them into themes. He then moved to axial coding to synthesise and relate data together. The author concluded the process with selective coding to figure out core categories. In this context, NVivo software (macOS version) expedited data organisation, storing and reading. Participants' discussions coalesced around seven salient motifs: **[Subalternity]**: Women are treated differently than their male counterparts in sports and must cope with an aggressive/conservative environment. **[Pumping Iron]**. Bodybuilding uncovers how individuals can unite masculinity with femininity or invent something unique **[Juiced]**. Competitiveness, a desire to increase body mass or an obsession towards an imagined or actual bodily defect can set off MD and bring about experiments with IPEDs. However, the latter is not bad per se. Their dangerousity or goodness/effectiveness depends on how individuals select and combine substances with diet and training. Some chemicals are legal, while others are not. Some bring benefits, while others are detrimental **[Once You Step into a Gym, You Are Forever Small]**. AAS symbolise female empowerment because they make women feel better about themselves. However, they can also be a marker of male supremacy since consumption means masculinisation **[The Great Reset]**: In COVID-19, the monotonous life cycle of one confined to one's site quickly disrupts routines **[Down the Rabbit Hole]**. COVID-19 reveals how over-burdening space and over-signifying time can decenter (personal and group) identity and deform the perception of space and time **[Back to the Basics]**. From 2021 onwards the participants have begun living again and come up with narrative schemata to confront the past and move forward.

### **Reflexivity Statement**

The author conducted all the interviews for this study and has gotten involved with Italian sports communities. He has professional and personal connections with various bodybuilders. Throughout the project, he consistently reflected on the fact that although nowadays there is greater acceptance of females in sports in Italy, there still are limits as to how much athletic prowess and muscularity are socially acceptable.

### **Results**

In Italy, women have difficulty doing activities deemed masculine by the collective imagination. The participants claimed that femininity is a disguised code word for heterosexuality and that the real problem undergirding bodybuilding is the fear that it turns them into lesbians. To avoid stigma, most engaged in identificatory displays consistent with classical gender and body category expectations and in opposition to those connected to their sport. Having makeup, wearing skirts or being seen with boyfriends or husbands were strategies to reaffirm heterosexuality.

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In short, they tried to minimise or, in some circumstances, eradicate their selves to prevent being portrayed as deviant. Four interviewees confessed to taking anabolic-androgenic steroids (AAS), a subset of IPDEs, at least once to overcome stagnation in their muscle growth and cheat their way to a better body. The mean age was 21 when they consumed doping agents and did so in Southeast Asia, where they were available over the counter. They got lower dosages than men, generally taking periodic breaks to limit collaterals. This praxis was also evidenced by Börjesson et al. (2021) and Havnes et al. (2021). People who steered away from AAS did so because of a certain level of resilience to peer pressure and awareness of lingering risks, such as masculinisation or reluctance to purchase products overseas, in nations where the quality and legality of supplements might differ from their country. In Italy, AAS for sports are illegal, but anyone who buys them in authorised pharmacies but with a different purpose beyond cheating in a competition does not commit a crime. The law also punishes people who import ergogenic aids that the Italian Medicines Agency (AIFA) does not tolerate or authorise. All women took fat burners and metabolic stimulants (another IPEDs subset), such as medium to high doses of caffeine and guarana, and a pair tried pseudoephedrine (found in nasal sprays for cold relief).

The participants seldom hung out often with their friends and loved ones not to compromise their athletic skills. Moreover, the discomfort caused by weightlifting was preferable to the affliction caused by missing a session. The respondents could go to hospitals and clinics whenever needed but complained about medical hegemony in the patient-physician relationship, contributing to their accounts' partial or complete neglect. Two-thirds of them reported some impact of COVID-19 on their bodybuilding regimens, with one-third being affected intensely. Those with negative situational perceptions endured more depressive thoughts, increased anxiety, and mood swings than subjects who adapted to the pandemic. During COVID-19 aesthetic quality of the interviewees' surroundings, the type of personal space and privacy, and the amount of stimulation all affected adaptive tasks and choice of coping responses. Although the participants hoped to change Italy for the better, they conceded that they could not do it alone – as they are niche actors in a niche sport - and that the process of social metamorphosis requires an investment of time, the mastery of a set of techniques, and the acquisition of specialised knowledge that, not many possess or are willing to obtain.

## Limitations

The author found consistency in the answers he received to his questions. Nevertheless, the participants might not have been the best to access the knowledge he hoped to acquire. The sample consisted of women from only four Italian cities. Hence, the generalisation of the findings should proceed with appropriate caution. Furthermore, a life narrated from the present backwards can quickly appear inevitable, and with a direction, it did not necessarily have when it was experienced. Web-conferencing is a promising strategy for conducting research across geographically

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dispersed people. However, incompatibility between the method and the technical competency of the individuals could have prevented otherwise eligible candidates from getting involved.

## Discussion

### Subalternity

Sports outline how gender and body are objects and agents of change. Female athletes often receive fewer media attention than males. More disturbing is that pregnant women can be sanctioned for not informing their colleagues and coaches of their status or even the intention to become mothers, as in the case of Italian volleyball player Laura Lugli. Importantly, this condition is not limited to Italy but diffused among most Western countries. American Kerri Walsh Jennings, an ace in beach volleyball, was famously told by her sponsors not to have a family to avoid compromising her career (Coche & Tuggle, 2018). The participants acknowledged that corporations view children as a distraction to the extent that women can be uncomfortable voicing their opinions for fear of reprisals. Most internalised the labour culture and adjusted their lives to it (Sexton & Bowman-Upton, 1990). In Italy, few professional leagues are open to women. All this leads to a series of remarkable discriminations. For instance, unlike men, female players do not have (complete) social security and (many) ad-hoc insurances. The circumstance inevitably obliges them to reinvent their careers after perhaps many years of complete dedication to sports. There is also an under-representation in the technical leadership of teams in the institutions that make decisions and among managers, illustrating the urgency for better-targeted and better-resourced gender equality programs (Cibibin & Leo, 2022). Many interviewees laughed sceptically when questioned about what the state and the public can do to get women into positions of responsibility. The good news is that there appears to be lately a positive turnaround. Companies are starting to see support as an investment, not a moral duty (Lorenzini, 2020), and since 2022, women have been paid to play soccer in major leagues.

*“So, I just gotta vent for a minute about the major nonsense we face in sports in Italy. It is frustrating as heck! As a female athlete, I cannot help but notice the glaring disparity in resources, opportunities, and recognition because of our gender. But I refuse to let this hold us back. I have got a vision. I see a way out through inclusivity. We need to invest in women's sports, demand equal media coverage, and break those darn stereotypes that hold us back”.* (Giulia, age 33, Rome)

*“Italy has this messed-up notion that women should fit into some narrow, predefined box. Well, let me tell you something. Despite the constant judgment and prejudice, female bodybuilders are out here proving that strength is not just about muscles. It is about determination, discipline, and pushing our limits. It is about embracing our power and owning our bodies, no matter what others say”.* (Elena, age 27, Naples)

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## Pumping Iron

Eugen Sandow, born in the late 19th century, pioneered bodybuilding. In 1891 he organised the first major competition called the Great Show in London (Chapman, 1994). In 1901, the first National Physique Committee (NPC) contest was held in the US, marking the beginning of bodybuilding as an organised sport. In 1965, brothers Ben and Joe Weider founded The International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness (IFBB). In the 1970s, Arnold Schwarzenegger's athletic and cinema career further popularised the institution. Today, the men's divisions encompass Physique, Classic Physique, and Bodybuilding, while women have Bikini, Figure, Physique, Bodybuilding and Fitness. These categories are divided into classes by age, height, weight, novice, and open. Italy recognises bodybuilding but considers it a niche occupation, more so when women are implicated (Schwarzenegger & Dobbins, 1998). The diffidence is comprehensible as soon as we realise that for the Italians, bodybuilding is at best a manifestation of male narcissism (which is not great but still acceptable as being tough is a characteristic of manhood) and at worst a tool to queer women in that it can make them have simultaneously masculine and feminine characteristics (axiomatic sexuality is a dogma in Italy, a Christian country), troubling the ascribed gender and body limits. Curiously, as pointed out by the interviewees, absolute dimorphism does not exist in nature. There are differences in skeletal muscle kinetics, muscle volume and the distribution and quantity of adiposity, but the type and number of muscles are the same across the sexes.

*"With bodybuilding, I have become a strong, muscular woman. And yeah, it's been fantastic to feel empowered and confident. But, there is a flip side to it. People have made assumptions about me, called me names, and even questioned my femininity. It hurts. Well, guess what? I am proud of myself, and their opinions do not define me".* (Maria, age 29, Naples)

*"Sports can help women realise their dreams and win their over-dependency on men. Furthermore, practice can improve a person's health and mood, especially when encountering like-minded people. Erica and I often travel abroad together and like exploring the bodybuilding scene outside Italy. We are keen on learning new techniques or smoothing the ones we already know. Last year, we went to the USA, and it was incredible. We befriended so many persons and forgot the problems of our country".* (Laura, age 30, Rome)

*"There are sexists, and we should not be surprised to meet them. I believe that gender stereotypes can erode a woman's confidence, so we should stop paying attention to naysayers and focus more on lifting weights or running, and the day will not seem so bad. Women face too many hurdles that have little to do with their ability and everything with their gender and body. We are supposed to speak, dress and look in a specific way, and when we say enough with these constrictions, then hell comes".* (Maria, age 22, Milan)

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Richardson (2004) asserted that different types of built bodies exist. The physique of martial artists results from numerous fights. Likewise, one of the swimmers is the product of years spent in the water. However, although muscular and sturdy, they lack something. In bodybuilding, aspect rather than strength is essential. While muscles must be large, achieving the desired look requires something more, specifically an extremely low body fat percentage, giving a paper-thin effect on the skin and promoting vein visibility, or what people call being ripped or shredded. Symmetry from top to bottom and right to left is also necessary because it improves overall functional fitness and reduces injury. Furthermore, for bodybuilders and their aficionados, it is much more appealing to the eyes than having one part that stands out (Steele et al., 2019). Arnold Schwarzenegger was known for his exceptional equilibrium between muscle groups and proportions. Most people argue that his dimensions were so great that it was like putting a mirror down the centre of him (Schipper, 2007).

The interviewees emphasised their passion for bodybuilding in all their speeches. Sometimes, they risked injury partly because they enjoyed it too much and did not want to stop sweating. Furthermore, they recognised the feeling of camaraderie shared with their friends, and the pleasure of having it kept them returning to the gyms. Social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram provided a safe space to connect and learn from one another. Because gender cannot be located within, it must be displayed on it. This can be done through clothing, makeup, and hairstyles. All the informants told the author they rebuked stereotypes, but paradoxically most reiterated, though perhaps unconsciously, traditional visions of beauty, respect and womanhood. Another fact that struck the author was the apparent indifference to competition. On almost every occasion, his impression was that these women did not want to earn money or glory. They appreciated bodybuilding because it taught them to set goals, follow a structured workout program, and adhere to a healthy diet. They gained psychological and emotional resilience as they progressed and demonstrated pride in their accomplishments (despite some contradictory attitudes). Through the years, and after many confrontations, the interviewees learned to talk with people they disagreed with more effectively. They corrected misconceptions and, crucially, made compromises. They realised it is easy for someone to refute facts but harder to refute experiences.

*"We want visible muscles, but we do not wish to become men. Perhaps some of us in our community are lesbians, but most are heterosexual women who want to be fit. In my case, I always wanted to be attractive. However, when I was younger, I thought about leaving bodybuilding because of the critics I received from my siblings and relatives, but my boyfriend suggested I keep training and trust in myself. When I did it, I made him immensely proud of me. He told me that he loved the way I was".* (Laura, age 28, Bologna)

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## Juiced

Bodybuilding and cosmetic surgery are close to one another because they both lure practitioners into a quest for aesthetic perfection. Flawless noses and lips are the most sought-after products in a surgeon's office, just as large biceps and pectorals are the most coveted goals in a gym. The bodybuilder has a 'body puzzle' and a 'signature body' because each part is complexly fashioned in 'the way of'. Athletes at the elite level can offer programs for those muscles that give them the most notoriety. Their physiques are 'sold in pieces', but unlike those made by the surgeon's chisel, they cannot be bought. They can only be obtained with strenuous effort or with the help of substances which is why the doping industry is booming. Originally, image and performance-enhancing drugs, or IPEDs, were primarily associated with competitors seeking an edge in their respective sports fields. However, their market has expanded to recreational players (Hutchinson et al., 2018). There are several types: (1) Stimulants like caffeine and ephedrine reduce tiredness and fatigue. (2) Human growth hormone (HGH) makes more energy available by stimulating the breakdown of fat. (3) Beta Blockers halt adrenaline, slowing the heart rate, reducing blood pressure and muscle tremors, and inflating the ability of a person to concentrate. (4) Diuretics assist in weight loss and permit other substances in the system to be flushed out of the body more quickly. (5) Anabolic-Androgenic Steroids (AAS) mimic the effects of testosterone and thus enhance muscle growth (Nøkleby & Skårderud, 2013). AAS are taken in the same dosage for 10 – 12 weeks at maximum in a scheme known as cycling. It is an on/off technique because users can abruptly quit substances at the end of a cycle and give time to themselves to recover. There is also the stacking approach, where people get more than one type of AAS and several other drugs simultaneously or take the same ASS via oral and injectable pathways. Furthermore, individuals can opt for pyramiding or the strategy of initiating with a small dose of AAS and increasing that over time (until they reach a peak at mid-cycle) before diminishing the intake (gradually tapering off the dosage to zero) (Lippi & Guidi, 1999) which allow them to adjust to high doses. Unlike cycling, pyramiding lets subjects taper off gradually.

AAS disrupt the delicate hormonal balance, leading to various health problems. Potential risks include liver damage, cardiovascular issues (e.g., heart attacks, strokes), kidney dysfunction, high blood pressure, and hormonal imbalances (Monaghan, 1999). AAS can also masculinise women (testosterone is produced in their ovaries and adrenal glands, though in far smaller amounts than in men), and those injecting them can contract human immunodeficiency virus or HIV if they share needles (Underwood & Olson, 2019). As with any medication, they should be taken under the guidance and supervision of experts. Underwood (2013) agreed with this portrayal but contended that normality might be continuous with pathology, rationality with irrationality, and choice with compulsion. König (1995) pointed out that huge differences in the price of IPEDs are standard, with the

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cheapest being a fraction of the most expensive. Such a gap hits persons with limited finances and heavy dependency (Kolt, 2012). Italy opposes doping under law b. 376 of 14 December 2000, but it criminalised it only in competitions. It also forbids selling and buying AAS and other drugs outside official pharmacies.

Four informants recalled taking AAS briefly while vacationing in Southeast Asia a few years before the meetings with the author. With the aid of online chat forums and their partners, who were also bodybuilders, they searched for information regarding cycling, stacking and pyramiding. They took AAS out of curiosity and stopped consuming them when they became concerned about their toxicity. They mentioned to the author that where they had holidays, there are less strict quality standards outside Italy and the European Union (EU) (Callery & McArdle, 2011), and it is not always evident if buyers get real products or counterfeit items. Moreover, since AAS for sport are unlawful in Italy, there were no official guidelines to help them decide what to get and refuse. Due to the differing implications of shame versus guilt, capturing the distinction between these two emotions was crucial in the project. The first centred on a non-moral negative self-judgment. On the other hand, the second is the awareness of having done something wrong to others. The interviewees felt guilty for putting themselves at risk of harm but did not feel humiliated. Like many others, they acknowledged that their drive for bodybuilding made them miss socialisation opportunities, embrace doping and have their families worried, but they did not think they failed to meet their moral standards. They were angry, confused or depressed at some point but never conceived themselves as truly bad (as friends, mothers, or wives). In other words, they separated their behaviours from what they were as persons.

*“While chilling in Southeast Asia with my boyfriend, I got caught up in the steroid craze for that perfect physique. I tried a few times, and It was dumb, and I feel guilty for that. Am I ashamed? No, I learned from my mistakes and moved on. I also told my friends at home to be careful when they travel and not just buy whatever they can because some products are fake while others are too dangerous. Better safe than sorry”.*  
(Nadia, age 31, Bologna)

All women commented on muscle dysmorphia (MD), an ailment where individuals display an excessive fixation with their looks (Cerea et al., 2018). Unsurprisingly, those with it train and diet more than average and can also go after IPEDs for faster and better results (Olivardia et al., 2000). Whereas the participants did not admit having MD, they assumed that gendered social control and power relations (including verbal and sexual abuse) that many women negotiate daily could easily trigger mental disorders. Furthermore, they noted how medical hegemony in clinics and hospitals compromises doctors' relationships with their MD patients. The issue was raised when some interviewees remembered that their physicians relied more on second-hand information

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(e.g., previously formulated charts and notes) than their first-hand accounts. This is not to contend that there is no place for formal therapy in Italy; rather, the reflections pointed to the worthiness of accepting more empathic arrangements.

### **Once You Step into a Gym, You are Forever Small**

AAS have masculinising properties as they derive from the male hormone testosterone. Women exposed to them can reach hyper muscularity while suffering from hirsutism (increased facial hair), the loss of the menstrual cycle and a deeper voice, among other things. AAS-induced gender and body transformation can be short-term, long-term or permanent, covert or overt, depending on the quantity and quality of the products. Some athletes consume AAS because they are a shortcut to better gym performance. Others want to win muscle growth stagnation, expedite fat loss, and thus refine their looks. Some compete in bodybuilding, but many are just amateurs. AAS can be taken as pills or injections (Havnes et al., 2021). Most users follow a single mode of administration despite the high prevalence of stacking (van de Ven et al., 2020). AAS are a mainstay among persons designated female at birth (DFAB) and wish to become male (transmen) (Moravek, 2018). Cisgender/heterosexual women under ASS therapy have more impaired psychosocial functioning and greater negative experiences in social relationships than those who do not take ASS, likely driven by stigma and invalidation. One reason is that these individuals took possession of a medical procedure not meant for them and whose final objective, the complete transgression of gender and body, they do not want to achieve. Another problem is that AAS are addictive. As soon as one cosmetic goal is achieved, a new one appears. Every muscle can be bigger or better shaped. Moreover, media offer audiences a distorted reality where everybody is perfect, thrusting individuals to compare themselves against fiction (most images and videos are edited). Even if media affect both men and women, the latter tend to be more positively and negatively influenced (Grabe et al., 2008). The participants who got close to AAS agreed that tv programs and sports and fashion magazines could fuel drug abuse and glorify consumerism. Once decried as an abomination, low-rise jeans are repopulating Italy. Most gyms have seen an uptick in women enrollees, which owners and coaches attribute to a desire to obtain a fat-free abdomen. The informants also insisted that the politics of bodies and gender is a battleground for distinguishing social strata. More money means better bodybuilding studios, healthier food and safer drugs. On top of that, being fit broadcasts to people that a woman has the time and capital to take care of herself.

### **The Great Reset**

The measures Italy took to slow down the spread of COVID-19, such as arrests and lockdowns, undermined the enjoyment of sports in a way never seen before (Svensson & Radmann, 2021). Between 2020 and the beginning of 2021, most international, regional, and national events were cancelled or delayed. COVID-

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19 is a humanitarian disaster per se, but it is also a crisis that radicalises gender and body vulnerability, as evidenced by the growing amount of violence against women (Anurudran et al., 2020). Upticks of harassment were reported soon after announcing stay-at-home orders (Lundin et al., 2020). Italy adopted the EU digital COVID-19 certificate to reinforce the vaccination campaign, making it difficult, if not impossible, for persons without it to do anything (Barbara et al., 2020). The participants stopped going to the gym to avoid exposure to or transmitted COVID-19. Being stuck at home without a clearly defined plan caused uncertainty about the future, excessive body checking, unexplained laziness, and a somewhat inability to focus. The respondents had to live closer with some persons (e.g., family members and siblings) and further apart from others (e.g., lovers). They also had to aid frail and elderly relatives. Ironically COVID-19 put men and not women in double jeopardy. Society considered them deviant as caregivers if they offered types and amounts of care that differed from women and deviant as men if they cared in the same manner as women. Unfortunately, downgrading male participation placed an unfair burden on women. Russel (2001) delineated this performance stumbling block in her probe on older men who live with wives with dementia.

*“COVID-19 interfered in my everyday life. I am quite an independent girl, and being unable to do what I like, including going to the gym with my friends, pushed me to the verge of depression. Please remember that I am not complaining about spending time with my family. However, Covid-19 demolished my routines and exacerbated problems between my younger sister and me”.* (Marta, age 24, Bologna).

### **Down the Rabbit Hole**

The disruption of the average-everyday linearity initiated by COVID-19 led in many participants to an expansion and a reduction of (subjective) time, coinciding with alienation and disquietude. The women were at home but could not do anything because they had to assist their families or did not have the necessary equipment. If they were worried about being estranged from their loved ones (inevitably due to the time spent with bodybuilding) before the pandemic, now they grieved the excesses of connection. Time was split before and after COVID-19. Frequently minor annoyances quickly became big problems. A common adage in Italy says that loneliness mainly strikes older and sick people who feel time spilling out of them, and it surely does. However, it can also assault the young and healthy, and the pandemic demonstrated exactly that. Moreover, it showed that people could also be lost among their kin, and the time dedicated to navigating the stark loneliness of imposed physical togetherness can be unbearable. Before 2020, the interviewees considered buying IPEDs, but when COVID-19 struck, many switched to anxiolytics. Some interviewees contended that following online bodybuilding classes was better than nothing but still quite boring. COVID-19 also altered the perception of space, morphing what were once safe environments into emotionally, psychologically and, in rare circumstances, physically dangerous ones. For many interviewees, the home became a

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fortress against the virus and then a prison, as they could not leave it. The analogy is credible because the police patrolled the streets. Moreover, echoing what happens in a detention facility, inside their places, women's bodily and gender agency shrunk often at the command of the 'male partners'. Whereas real prisoners have been known to scratch tally marks into the walls of their cells to keep track of the days they have spent outside society, the interviewees checked their smartwatches and played with their smartphones. They tried to adapt to confinement by remembering bodybuilding life lessons and stepping into cyberspace (full of possibilities and essentially hollow) to meet and chat with people and follow online workouts. Most were successful and found a small amount of solace, but a few could not because the toll was too great. It is the same with the real incarceration. Inmates have two choices: adjust to or succumb to a four-walled existence (Favril et al., 2020).

### **Back to the Basics**

After there was no longer a national emergency, the respondents tried to rebuild their lives. There was a consensus among them that the pandemic left an emotional scar, maybe bigger than the psychological and physical one. They were COVID-19-free but not free of COVID-19 as they had fallouts, including economic, financial and legal sequelae. Sadly, for some, looking inward at one's pain was so unsettling that they avoided it. However, others could reframe the past as a learning opportunity and take small but decisive steps towards healing. They did not view themselves as powerless victims but as powerful survivors. Returning to the gym permitted the participants to share their stories and discover a resource for educating and inspiring those more vulnerable to COVID-19. Whereas they previously thought their lives were flattened into one-dimensional forms often unrecognisable from another, they now rediscovered boost and mood.

### **Conclusion**

The participants enjoyed bodybuilding because it gave them an almost limitless body and gender development. They did not want to be identified as freaks but simply sought to merge the notion of womanhood with the one of muscularity. Though they faced prejudice and controversy, they noted a positive shift in behaviour toward them and bodybuilding over the years. Four individuals tried AAS but did not do it for long and did not harm themselves. One contended that it is strange that the drugs are unlawful in Italy, but hundreds of Web sites buy and sell them. COVID-19 was traumatic for everybody, but some responded better than others to the dramatic lifestyle change. These people embraced a holistic way that reflected the emotional injury while moving beyond it. Whereas the memories of themselves before the pandemic typically prompted frustration, they could hang on to positive emotions and the teachings of bodybuilding, from perseverance to patience and readiness to make sacrifices. Per contra, those who struggled with self-esteem and could not apply what they learned in their sport failed to achieve a new equilibrium.

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