


### Transgender women and physical activity: fabricating the female body

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This paper discusses the relationship between physical activity and the process of “fabricating” the female body by transsexual women. Ten trans women participated in this study. They answered a socioeconomic questionnaire and took part in a semi-structured interview. The information gathered was analyzed based on Bicudo’s phenomenological proposal<sup>1</sup>. The research participants’ reports show that some trans women practice physical activities for acquiring increased gluteal and leg muscle mass and get six-pack abs. The results also show that those who do not work out indicate the following reasons: being afraid of masculinizing their body and/or having suffered prejudice.

**Keywords:** Transsexual women. Physical exercise. Body.



## Introduction

Global impact trends related to fitness, such as losing weight, stiffening, strengthening, defining the body, and hypertrophy in body building, have become a preference in the population. Furthermore, in the last decades, they have also been emphasized in the media and in social networks. The interests of men and women in shaping their bodies in gyms and in other urban spaces is unprecedented, with emphasis on hypertrophy<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, more and more resources – e.g. products, techniques, knowledge, information, and technologies – are offered to people so that they can speed up the process of “fabricating” the desired body<sup>3</sup>.

The term “fabricate” is inspired by Viveiros de Castro<sup>4</sup>. According to him, in the Yawalapíti culture, “The human body needs to be subjected to intentional, periodic, fabricating processes, (...) being the cause and the instrument of transformations regarding social identity” (p. 31). Thus, for the Yawalapíti, fabricating the body is an ongoing process from birth to death, involving both the notion of person and action on/of the body for building the identity in contemporary societies. Such action can occur from physical activity practices to going on diets, undergoing aesthetic procedures and even reaching the currently popular surgical procedures.

New possibilities and purposes related to physical activity have also emerged parallelly to this range of resources<sup>(f)</sup>. Such objectives meet the new social demands and follow the flow of a subject individualization process in which the need for differentiation goes hand in hand with the need for belonging. In this scenario, it emerges the transsexual, who is seen as a way to be transformed<sup>5</sup>.

Transsexuality<sup>(g)</sup> is one of the gender performativity possibilities. Jesus<sup>6</sup> explains that there is no consensus in Brazil for the terms used to “define” these performativities. We have decided to use Jesus’s approach<sup>6</sup>, which includes the existence of two main terms in gender classification: cisgender and transgender. The first term refers to people who identify themselves with their birth gender category, the cisgender men and women, whereas the second one contemplates people who do not identify themselves with their birth gender category. Transsexuals belong to the second category.

Transsexuality is neither related to medical nor to pathological aspects, and it goes through the body<sup>7</sup> not only for being the way the individual is and interacts with the world, but also because it carries the influences and codes to which the person has been subjected to throughout her/his life. In this study, we understand transsexuality as an identity issue, characterized by the search for the subject’s social recognition in a gender opposite to that at birth. We can identify two experiences regarding transsexual people: trans men, who are born female but aim at having social acceptance and recognition in the male gender; and trans women, who are born male but look for social acceptance and recognition in the female gender<sup>8</sup>.

In the discussion presented here, we aim to relate the fabrication of the transsexual body to the social issues involved in this process, understanding that it goes through spheres and needs that overcome the experiences lived by the contemporary Western cisgenders. Among the cisgenders’ specificities, we could mention the search for their daily lives’ transformations, which leads to changes directly (hormones consumption, plastic surgeries and physical exercises) or indirectly (haircut, clothing and accessories assigned to one or another gender) inscribed over the body in building gender identity.

<sup>(f)</sup> The present study was funded by CAPES (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel) – Master’s, Doctoral and Post-Doctoral scholarship program.

<sup>(g)</sup> We have chosen to use the terms “transsexuality” and “trans women”, as they are the most adopted ones by the respondents, even though the term transgenerity has emerged in recent years as a possible alternative in gender discussions. We believe that this self-denomination is linked to the context and represents the way the participants identify themselves.



Concerning this issue, we can mention the binders that cover the breasts of FTM trans<sup>(h)</sup> and the use of artificial nails as indirect changes, in contrast to the masculinizing<sup>(i)</sup> mammoplasty and silicone implants as direct changes. They are resources used by the transgenders to change their bodies, acquiring centrality in gender performance.

Many times, garment and haircut changes are the first gender production practices carried out by trans men. That lead us to take into account a hierarchization of body modification practices in which those that do not produce direct inscriptions in the body occupy less prominent spaces, even if they are relevant to gender production<sup>9</sup> (p. 9).

Changes inscribed directly onto the body are seen as primary in the process hierarchy of building identity of the transgender men and women<sup>9</sup>, who are generally responsible for gathering references on masculine and feminine with the tools they possess.

At the heart of these changes, technological advances have greatly added to the range of possibilities for body modifications, thus rejecting the concept that nature is immutable, enabling anatomical sex changes through surgical techniques<sup>10</sup>. Complementing this idea, even though physical exercises are neglected in innumerable studies that place greater emphasis on effective public policies of gender transition<sup>11</sup>, it is impossible to deny its use as an accessible resource for the body construction<sup>7</sup> in search of a style that is believed to be feminine.

This study, by connecting the body change that seeks feminine style and physical activity, aims at discussing the relationship between ways of body shaping adopted by transsexual women, with emphasis on physical activities, and the process of “fabricating” the female body. That was conducted in an attempt to match an analysis based on the understanding of body modifications as changes in society and vice versa with a critical position in the Western culture marked by hypertrophy, consumption and the dichotomous position between men and women<sup>12</sup>.

## Methodological approach

This is a qualitative exploratory research with an interpretative phenomenological approach. It studies the meanings of phenomena, facts, manifestations, experiences, ideas, and feelings for believing that they can answer the objectives raised in this paper<sup>13</sup>. The research subjects were ten trans women who received care at the Comprehensive Ambulatory Care Center for Transvestites and Transsexuals (TT Ambulatory Care Center), located in the annex of the NN Hospital (which was founded in July 2013 by the State Government).

The Ambulatory Care Center consists of the following healthcare professionals: gynecologist, endocrinologist, psychiatrist, speech therapist, nutritionist, social worker and psychologist. It provides healthcare services exclusively to transvestites and transsexuals who seek to undergo the transsexualization process, understood as a set of healthcare strategies towards the process of changing the sexual characteristics of transsexuals and/or transvestites<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>(h)</sup> Binders (a term that we translate as something made of elastic fabric and attached to the body) are a type of compression strap. They can be used by transgender men (trans, transsexuals, female-to-male/ FTM, etc.) as an alternative to bands that hide the breasts.

<sup>(i)</sup> Recently adopted term to designate bilateral mastectomy.



The analytical corpus of this study is composed of a socioeconomic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The latter presents a set of previously defined questions based on the research objective, but which allows new questions to be added according to the demand of the research field<sup>14</sup>. Only those who were attended at the Ambulatory Care Center and identified themselves as trans women took part in this study.

Meeting the demands of the Resolution no. 466/13 of the National Health Council, this study was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee (REC). After getting its authorization, we conducted individual interviews and applied questionnaires in a reserved room at the Ambulatory Care Center.

The interviews context reminds us of the potential risk of prior elaboration of narratives underlined by Esteban<sup>12</sup>. That may happen when the research participants already have some knowledge of social criticism, which is quite common among the transgender public that attends support centers. That risk was reduced both in the resumption of relevant topics in the interviews and through questions on the individual trajectory of the respondents. With that, we tried to avoid institutionalized elaborations, in spite of recognizing that this is a methodological fragility of the research.

We used Bicudo's proposal<sup>1</sup> for carrying out the research subjects' speech analysis. It seeks to evidence the senses, synthesize meaning units, and investigate the utterances through units of analysis. Bicudo's proposal suggests that four steps be followed: the first step is the careful reading of the statements collected, making connections between the utterances and the phenomenon studied; the second one refers to evidencing the senses from the needs of the researched matter; the third one relates to defining the meaning units, connecting the meanings that are in evidence; and, finally, the last step requires establishing the networks of meanings. The analysis of the questionnaires provided the interviewees' profiles and an overview of their socioeconomic status.

## Results and discussions

Aiming at drawing a more comprehensive picture of the research participants, thus facilitating a better understanding of the speeches analyzed, the table below (Chart 1) summarizes the information collected from the application of the socioeconomic questionnaire.

**Chart 1.** General Table of the Interviews

Interviewed subjects	Age	Marital Status	Education	Profession
E1	37	Married	Elementary School (incomplete)	Cook
E2	37	Single	High School	Hairdresser
E3	22	Single	Technical Education	Radiographer
E4	22	Married	High School (incomplete)	Student/ Cleaner
E5	26	Going stead	Technical Education	Nurse Technician
E6	32	Single	Elementary School (incomplete)	Hairdresser/ Cook/ Embroiderer
E7	29	Married	Graduation (incomplete)	Student
E8	35	Single	High School	Hairdresser
E9	40	Single	High School (incomplete)	Hairdresser/ Maid
E10	45	Married	Technical Education	Housewife

Source: Research Data, 2019.

After analyzing the material that had been collected in the semi-structured interviews, we established a network of meanings, as shown below, in Chart 2.

**Chart 2.** Categories from the Data Collected in the Interviews

I do/ I want to do		Objectives		Place	
Dance	Jogging	Butt enlargement	Reduce my belly fat	On the Beach	At home
Pace walking	Bodybuilding	Be healthy	Get curves in my body	At the gym	
Yoga	Functional training	Have social acceptance	Thicker legs	Prejudice	Price

Source: Research Data, 2019.

Chart 2, above, illustrates the physical activities (running, yoga, bodybuilding, walking, dancing, and functional training) reported by the interviewed trans women, who indicate motivations related to the fitness segment, as they either aim at physical conditioning (according to the practice objectives) or are related to health and social acceptance (which is here understood as a product of the body changes achieved, since the training by itself does not imply in insuring acceptance).

As shown in the column “Objectives” of Chart 2, most of the reports collected are related to the emphasis on some specific part of the body. They are elements that can be associated with the socially constructed “female body” patterns based on naturalized ideas. Hence, it is not only an issue of the *female body* fabrication based on culture, but also of the possibility of joining a biopolitical system that discards bodies located in the “liminaries” -- that is, in the midst of binary classifications -- or that is placed out of the normal patterns<sup>15</sup>. That happens because the gender is not separated from other social and cultural issues; therefore, its consequences directly influence global issues of a structural and economic nature<sup>16</sup>.

Despite all the existing discussion available in the literature, this system goes on reinforcing distinctive characteristics/signs between what is considered feminine and masculine - as in the case of muscles, body parts to hypertrophy, or even garments. Even though a garment, a haircut, a physical trait, a body technique<sup>17</sup>, and other elements can be shared by men and women, they remain, in many cases, as specific male or female elements. To illustrate this point, when a man wears pink and continues to be accepted by his peers as a man, in many Brazilian contexts he can still be seen as a man wearing a “female color”. In this sense, we can notice that “The gender acquires life through the garments that compose the body, the gestures, the looks, that is, through a style designated as suitable. These external signs, set in motion, are the ones that stabilize and give visibility to the body”<sup>7</sup> (p. 90).

With regard to trans women, the search for this “appropriate style” is driven by the wish to be socially accepted as a woman and/or to be recognized by their family as such. That motivates them to pursue ways to “fabricate” the female body<sup>10</sup>. Such a search aims not only at achieving the condition of being a trans woman, but of becoming one with as much of the characteristics as she can think of as female.

Taking that information into account, we understand that the trans women who participated in this study can, like the people of any other social segment, use the benefits of physical activities not only for maintaining their health conditions, but also for issues related to their empowerment, their own desires, their social acceptance, the recognition of their status as women, among others.

In pursuit of a way of elucidating such statements, the interviewees’ narratives are recalled to illustrate how the desire to practice some physical activity is related not in a declared way to the reproduction of patterns, but rather with conditions of belonging in agreement with the cisnormative patterns of the body, which may even lead to health implications. When questioned about the physical activities, few research participants stated to practice them, like E3 and E4. Nevertheless, many of them reported the desire to perform them, as we can see in the excerpt from E2: “The first step will be to start attending a gym and look like Gisele’s body, and [get] a 400 ml silicone [implant], almost half a pound.” Among those who work out, the body fragmentation into parts exposes a body to be manipulated, shaped, fabricated according to the desire of those women.

I dislike having a belly. Therefore, I run on the beach, I walk on the beach, I run on the sand. (E3)

Right at the beginning, I have already started to work out. I have never worked my top part; I have always enjoyed working the bottom part -- legs/butt, things like that (E4)

When questioned on the reasons that make them want to perform some of the physical activities they had reported, one can observe the following discourse, which is recurrent:

The belly. Have a six-pack abs and butt enlargement. (E1)



I do bodybuilding to get body parts look hard and muscular. (E2)

To get lots of curves, lots of curves! Because this is the most important, especially [around] the waist. The waist is the G-spot, isn't it? (E3)

I want to work out more my legs and belly, to lose the belly fat, because I'm too fat, right? (E5)

I want to have wider hips and butt. (E6)

I'd like to have bigger breasts. I'd like to have a larger butt. I'd like to have thicker thighs. I'd like to have more of everything else. (E8)

The interviewees' narratives show their desire for getting an ideal body type that for them represents the feminine: a body with thick legs, wide hips and thin waist. This body type pattern corroborates Goetz et al's study<sup>18</sup>, which investigates the body social representations that are conveyed by the print media in nationally circulated magazines and identified that cisgender women emphasize exercising the body in specific parts, such as the belly, thighs, arms, waist, back, and legs.

This discussion leads us to the concept of passability, which is expressed by the idea that transgender people can get physical characteristics and express gestures that do not identify/classify them as such, thus allowing them to "be accepted" as a person known as "cisgender"<sup>19,20</sup> (a term whose applicability has been discussed in the literature), therefore echoing the gender performative character. Although it is possible to analyze the research participants' narratives under the term passability, we have not prioritized this category because it was not a key part to our discussion about the tools used by women to shape a (trans)female body, since it lies much more in the field of motivations (and desire) than of an individual action.

The fact of being socially recognized as a person of a gender consonant with her/his sex can prevent many forms of (physical, psychological and social) violence in contexts that are marked by prejudice and transphobia – which is by itself a troubling fact, as it determines the existence conditions for transgender men and women.

[...] the effects that body modifications guarantee are acceptance and protection, beyond recognition. To construct a man's body that does not carry or that express signs known as feminine avoids a series of violence in several contexts, especially the public ones<sup>9</sup> (p. 5).

From this context, some questions arise: Which female bodies assure acceptance, have a value and/or passability? From this questioning, we reflect upon both body classifications, based on the notions of socially constructed feminine, and the relationship nature/culture, whose dichotomy can already be questioned from the idea of body fabrication presented at the beginning of this paper.

The term passability has several possible interpretations. Among them, it means incorporating signs and techniques attributed to one or another gender to gain acceptance and legitimacy through the body, which, in turn, prevents violence and

prejudice<sup>19</sup>. This should neither be understood nor reinforced here as a more or less valuable utilitarian strategy. Nevertheless, the contact with the research participants showed us that striving to minimize the differences – which, apart from gender, represent the difference between human lives - means trying to transpose the condition of “a precarious life” with the tools those women possess<sup>21</sup>.

Previous studies, as the one conducted by Teixeira and Caminha<sup>22</sup>, although not encompassing the transsexual universe, have already addressed the relationship among body, biopower and physical exercise. It is not a novelty the statement that the body endowed with physical characteristics considered healthy and/or aesthetically strong (definition, rigidity, robustness, power, etc.) is seen as a body endowed with biopower. It is also known that the fabrication of this powerful body is a form of inclusion in social groups marked by belonging to the hegemonic model. On the other hand, punishment (exclusion, segregation) is firmly related to the non-possession of elements that are characteristic of the existing biopolitical standards as well<sup>15</sup>.

With reference to the biopolitical strategies issue in the body fabrication, in our present society “there is no gender empowerment that does not imply this body hypertrophy, this hyper-objectification”<sup>12</sup> (p. 249-50). On the grounds that the body, regardless of its form, is an important element in gender production, in the subject constitution gender characteristics are reproduced and reproduce the socially inherited structures, so that many of them have already been naturalized even by some of the transgenders.

In the same way it happens in relation to the cis women, the trans women already have media representatives who have gained national visibility. By doing a quick Web search, we can find on various Websites articles about trans women that are in the media reporting how they have shaped their female bodies through physical activities<sup>(i)</sup>. In these cases, physical activities are used as a way of conquering idealized physical attributes based on culturally constructed stereotypes<sup>23</sup>, which aims at, among other things, “not being different”, as reported by E6:

The issue of thigh and gluteus will be positive for both myself and socially, because I have understood that either you are a man, or you are a woman and you fit into the social context. I don't want to be seen as a freak, as someone different. I don't want to be like that. (E6)

From E6's statement, we can guess that the cis woman's female body fabrication process differs from that of the trans woman not in relation to the level, but as to the perspective regarding the steps in the search for modification. Although both women may strive to be accepted in their specific context, the cis woman, even if she does not modify, transform or claim a female status, she will be more easily accepted as a woman, even if she uses a biologist argument. In contrast, “the transsexual needs not only to be the ideal woman, but also to have the ideal body, which is the necessary condition for her to remain in a place that is also ideal in the culture in which she is inserted”<sup>10</sup> (p. 128). In this way, and following the speech of the research participants, the physical activities act as a technique that produces meaning, transforming and, at the same time, inserting these women into some groups that had previously segregated them.

<sup>(i)</sup> See the article by Anny Ribeiro for the Website Extra, titled: “Transexual Thalita Zampirolli tells us how she sculpted the body that has conquered Romário.” The article was retrieved January 10, 2017, from [www.extra.globo.com](http://www.extra.globo.com).





From an ethnomethodological perspective<sup>(k)</sup>, the adaptation effort to belonging to certain groups is known as the notion of member, which Coulon<sup>24</sup> describes as the adoption of certain ways of acting by someone who, “having embodied the ethnomethods of a particular group, ‘naturally’ exhibits the social competence that affiliates her with this group, allowing her to be recognized and accepted” (p. 48). This can be done as a strategy of acceptance and adequacy by deviant subjects.

Interpreting research participants’ statements with the support of ethnomethodological studies<sup>25</sup>, the notion of member can be illustrated by Agnes’ case (a 19-year-old transgender woman), which has been described by Garfinkel<sup>26</sup> and become one of the most controversial reports on the conflicts between the female transsexuality in the 1960s, gender production and social determinations.

Among the various information on Agnes’s case, one indicates that taking hormones and lying about her body and her sex was one of the resources she used to be “a member”. She - who was particularly proud of her breasts - could do this by aggregating feminine symbols to her body and counting on the binary classification limitation used by the people with whom she had contact at the time. In other words, despite having male traits, her context was restricted to the male or female binary classification, and everything in Agnes - except her male genitalia - pointed towards a cis woman.

In the same way we are addressing here, other gender classifications have been globally discussed in the last decades. These new classifications, although surrounded by political and economic implications, back the resistance of transgender women like Agnes. This implies that the gender construction processes are dynamic, historical and contextualized, being bodies and culture also in movement, just as the transgenders, thus opening space for diversity<sup>16</sup>. In this manner, the reports shown in this paper translate a specific moment, as previously indicated, of valuing the body, the physical activity and the search for body characteristics that contemplate a specific feminine pattern, but which are, once and for all, reports of constructions that are likely to occur.

Still concerning the matter ethnomethodology, even though within its restraints, Garfinkel<sup>26</sup> concluded that Agnes’s need to be a member represented stronger social issues, as for example: the social values balance regarding gender and sexuality; the response significance in society; the pursuit for meeting people’s expectations on gender identity; and, finally, the rationalization in social practices.

Garfinkel’s<sup>26</sup> discussion on rationality, though complex, describing Agnes’s transition, represents the case of a transsexual who, since her teenage years, fabricates a body that she believes fit into her gender and which gives her the feeling of belonging. In the same way, trans women may reject characteristics or practices that may be “associated with men”, as noticed in some of our respondents’ reports:

From the moment I assumed that I wanted to have a female body, if I do bodybuilding now and lift weights, I’ll look awful, like those muscular women, and I think they’re ugly. (E5)

In my opinion, a female leg is a female leg, and not a turned leg that already has male features. I like it as natural as possible. (E7)

<sup>(k)</sup> Sociological current first developed in the United States in the 1960s by Harold Garfinkel (Parsons’ student), and which has been gaining ground in Brazil in recent years in areas like Physical Education and Early Childhood Education.

As previously mentioned, some respondents reported not performing physical activities because they would not be satisfied with the results, as they related them with male bodies. In their reports, hypertrophy is associated with man for representing strength and virility. The narratives indicate that if women develop their musculature more than the accepted limit - the limit according to their opinion -, they can be disqualified as women<sup>27</sup>. The fact that the respondents were born as “male bodies” benefited to such care being potentialized in the framework of body practices because of the shared fear of developing “male traits” (arms or shoulders hypertrophy and shaping legs).

It is a must to present one of Esteban's<sup>28</sup> corporal itineraries<sup>(l)</sup> to discuss the relativization of the masculinized female body notion. It addresses the construction of gender identities and the possibilities of resistance. Esteban presents the case of Ana (a 24-year-old and weightlifter cisgender woman) who, as highlighted by the author, is aware of the conscious fabrication<sup>(m)</sup> of her body as an everyday accomplishment, but likely to be lost at the slightest sign of carelessness. Ana's case understands the “physical exercise as a confirmation of existence”<sup>28</sup> (p. 155), and it is noteworthy because of her relationship with her body. At various times, she demonstrates her admiration for muscular definition (which she attributes to men), while acknowledging that she has no typical female body, but she also reaffirms her daily desire for her own body, which is a personal idea of being feminine. In spite of that, Ana reports being the victim of looks and comments due to her deviant anatomy.

Among the various conclusions of this “corporal itinerary”, we highlight one: that which emphasizes that people are often confronted with conflicts between what they desire and what the male and female representations expect from them. Esteban<sup>28</sup> even translates Ana's feelings as that of “a rare animal” (p. 159), given that although she wears typically feminine props, her body references appoint to men, questioning the dichotomy between genres and pointing it out as the target of her criticism. As for Ana's case, her heterosexual cisgender woman status and her gender performativity<sup>29</sup> allow her to be better welcomed within some groups because of “what she does and not for what she is”. Such issues give us with a more comprehensive understanding of the dilemmas faced by transgender women, and which lead them to seek certain patterns to be socially accepted.

Some studies that address the gender theme discuss how it is problematic accepting the difference in societies that value homogeneity, either by the bias of criticism in relation to the reproduction of fixed body patterns or by the bias of reflection upon patriarchal ways of marking speeches. Although the validity of the proposal to accommodate other possible femininities<sup>30</sup>, including in the transit of the own subject, there is still much to be done towards the deconstruction of patterns, notably in societies in which the gender issue is related to politics or to the status of the class<sup>12,31</sup>.

With reference to the possibilities of body fabrication, when investigating the places where the trans women perform or will perform physical activities, we have verified, through their narratives, that they work out at the gym, on the beach or in their residence. The last option was mentioned in the interviews as the main alternative when they cannot afford to pay the tuition charged at the gyms. This fact is directly related to the class condition, the families' rejection, and the difficulty in entering the labor market faced by this group.

<sup>(l)</sup> Body itineraries are spatio-temporal biographical reports of both third parties and from the author herself. They bring the body to the core of the social action analysis. It was an adopted theoretical-methodological orientation that dialogues in some moments with the Wacquantian “corporal works”.

<sup>(m)</sup> A term adopted by the authors of this paper that replaces the *achieved body* of Mari Luz Esteban.



Hormones are a bit expensive, got it? Then, I had to choose the hormones and not to work out. Either I opted for one or the other, but I wished I could do both, as they'd help quite a lot my health and body. (E4)

Our data showed that prejudice was another reason that drove the interviewees away from gyms. Prejudice and transphobia are a reality in the everyday life of transgender women, as pointed out by E1 when justifying the wish, but also the lack of possibility, to attend a gym:

Because they point at me, they look at me! And there are gym machines that we don't fit, that we don't feel well [when using them]. There are gyms only for women that don't accept us, but only women. They don't accept trans and transvestites. It's very complicated to use a standard gym. You have to use it on a very empty schedule because people (mainly men) look at us, point at us, and that bothers us. We don't feel good working out, right? (E1) [And what if there wouldn't be such prejudice?] Ah, for sure! I would be working out every day. I wanted to do aerobics, located exercises and circuit. (E1)

The prejudice reported by E1 is endorsed by E8, when she says:

I lived in a neighborhood that had a gym only for women, and I went there to sign up. The woman said: "No"! I couldn't work out there because she wouldn't put a man together with a woman. Then, I replied: "I'm not a man, I'm a transsexual." A trans like me has to be suited for the gym to receive her. Otherwise, it doesn't welcome us. (E8)

Transphobia is a daily reality and here understood as a prejudice directed towards the transgenders. It is linked to the lack of knowledge and respect for the gender identity experienced by our interviewees, impairing the transgenders' basic right to move around. These women, watched and punished for not meeting the gender identity expectations, are a sign of both deviation and resistance.

The trans body overturns the binary sex order by deconstructing representations that standardize body, gender and sexuality, casting doubt on what the medical knowledge grants as normal. Consequently, it is a body that is not thought-out acceptable for spaces with rigid cisheteronormative rules of belonging<sup>32</sup>.

There is a central paradox for the development of this study concerning this item, and with which it intends to cooperate: the negotiations between what medical knowledge acknowledges as normal and the desire that pervades the process of fabricating the body itself. These are, finally, tensions between a "normal" model, established on the basis of indicators and binary beliefs, and the construction - or fabrication - of a female body that has already "been born" with stigmatization and struggles for existence conditions.

Trans women, like others belonging to any other social segment, have interests and motivations that are built in their life trajectory, and therefore influenced by the social, historical and cultural context to which they belong. Bearing this in mind, we argue that we do need to be critical in relation to culture<sup>12,30</sup>, which implies discussing



hypervisibility in body hypertrophy and its risks from another perspective, as well as, to identify elements that can be thought and modified in gender studies, elements that may act as an empowerment lever.

It is worth noting that trans women's experiences concerning physical activities can be positive and beneficial. In fact, they are a way of both building bodily identity and signifying and re-signifying the self-identification process while promoting women's knowledge about their own body. Notwithstanding, this experience, in imminent prejudice contexts, can also be stressed by prejudice and trauma that favor the marginalization of these "deviant" identities.

## Conclusions

The human body, in the current scenario, underlined by a supply and demand increase of physical activities, has been losing its rigidity and becoming flexible, changeful, adjusting and building itself together with the historical context. The body, beyond a set of anatomical-biological components, is made of what dresses it up, the interventions it undergoes, the image that is produced from it, the technologies that adhere to it, the senses that are incorporated into it, and the signs marked on it.

Whenever people change their bodies, they reconstruct discursive elements in social life, advancing their physical form to what they identify as close to their identity, and develop arguments for being part of some groups. Following this line, the trans women we interviewed for this study looked for physical activities as a possibility to potentiate the female characteristics in their bodies, having as reference what they consider ideal body patterns (legs, buttocks, abdomen, grimaces, gestures, techniques, etc.). On the other hand, there was also a trans women group that associates hypertrophy with masculinity and avoids performing any activity that may eventually contribute to the masculinization of their bodies.

For that reason, the relation of trans women to their own bodies and the "fabrication" of the female body is not merely the (re)production of a woman-body discourse, but rather acting on the gender relations/identities, given that this assures them to be socially accepted and to be able to transit between spaces, suffering the least possible (physical, verbal or psychological) violence, and their right to live in dignity guaranteed.

With regard to the hypothesis raised towards the physical changes accomplished through physical exercises, it is imperative to emphasize that seeking cis-normative gender patterns is a drawback in the transgenerational understanding<sup>9,20</sup>. In the process of building gender identity, following patterns is not a choice, but one among countless possibilities. Therefore, the attempt to invoke the expression fabricating the female body (which is the title of this work) is much more to bring to light the desire of the women interviewed for this study - for what they believe to represent a female body, according to their own social and historical context - than to reproduce dichotomies or patterns.

Finally, we would like to emphasize the need to eliminate any form of prejudice in public or private spaces. This study has focused on investigating the relationship of trans women and physical activities in the female body production

process. Nevertheless, the reports for this study were collected outside the practice environment. For this reason, we suggest the need to carry out further studies within those spaces with the participation of professionals and students, so that other factors that add up to the result of this research may be observed, thus providing additional tools to society so that it can deal with the new social demands.

### Authors' contributions

All authors participated actively in all stages of preparation of the manuscript.

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