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Virile, Yet Feminine: Sport, Gender, and Representation in Fascist Italy

Andrea Dlugos



The image above is one of many that were widely used to portray Benito Mussolini as the embodiment of Latin athleticism. He symbolized the ‘new Italian’ that all men should aspire to emulate, and through his use of incessant propaganda, created the myth of this ‘new man’ who was heir to the glorious ancient Roman culture, spirit, and empire.¹ The rhetoric surrounding the ‘new man’ inextricably linked the strength of the Italian nation and athletic prowess, which Mussolini capitalized on more so than any other leader before him. The power displayed through the promotion of the *Duce* as the ultimate sportsman is apparent through the writing of Fillippo Marinetti, poet and founder of the Futurist movement, who says, “physically he is built in the Italian way, outlined by inspired

¹ Gigliola Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body: Sport, Submissive Women, and Strong Mothers* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 15.

and brutal hands, forged and engraved according to the model of the masterly rock of our peninsula.” He then continues, “His imposing, square jaw and prominent disdainful lips...spit boldness and aggression onto everything.”² This type of admiration would not have existed without Mussolini’s self-promotion of his athletic ability and the characteristics of the myth of the ‘new Italian’, since he was not pre-eminently a man of sport or very handsome. However, many men, who believed he embodied the model of “virile beauty” and wanted to “imitate his physical appearance and life-style,” admired him.³

The image of Mussolini as the ultimate sportsman contrasted that of the *donna madre*, who was the embodiment of the ideal mother figure and was national, rural, and robust. She was responsible for the ‘fascistization’ of the family, as well as raising her children to be good soldiers who would sacrifice their lives for the rest of the nation.⁴ This woman is also called the ‘new woman,’ who, in reality, represented a shift back to traditional ideals about women. The types of ideals that often characterized the ‘new women’ of other countries were instead negatively reflected in the *donna crisi*, the crisis woman, who was skinny, urbane, hysterical, decadent, and sterile.⁵ Her caricature was designed to symbolize the dangerous effects of

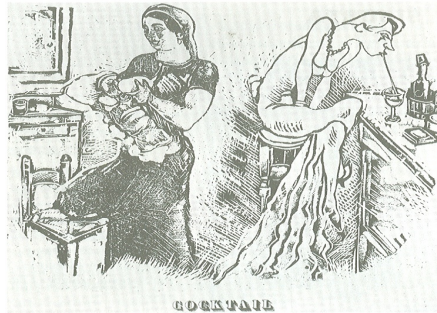
² Ibid., 25.

³ Ibid., 23.

⁴ Efharis Mascha, “Contradiction and the Role of the ‘Floating Signifier’: Identity and the ‘New Woman’ in Italian Cartoons during Fascism,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 11 (2004), 132.

⁵ Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 73.

modernization and the sense of independence it instilled in Italy's female population.



“Strapaese’s nemesis: the crisis woman, 1931,”
in *How Fascism Ruled Women*, Victoria
DeGrazia (Berkeley, University of California
Press: 1992), 216.

There is a third image, however, which fits into neither of these categories: the image of the female athlete. These images portray women as youthful, beautiful, graceful, and strong. While they were not the female equivalent to depictions of Mussolini, they were considered “virile, yet feminine.”⁶ This portrayal of femininity and women’s involvement in athletics is an aspect of Fascism that allows for an examination of gender roles in Mussolini’s Italy. The debates that surround women’s participation in sport shows that defining these roles was a fluid process that changed not only during the Fascist era, but continues to resonate in Italy and the rest of the world today.

The position of women in Fascist Italy was one of great significance, one that has become the subject of

⁶ Sarah Morgan, “Mussolini’s Boys (and Girls): Gender and Sport in Fascist Italy,” *History Australia* 3 (2006), 4.3.

much historical scholarship over the past two decades. Earlier work on Fascism rarely dealt with the social and gendered dimensions of the regime and simply sought to understand the political implications of the ideology. These older books do provide a great overview of Italian Fascism as a whole, Edward Tannenbaum's *The Fascist Experience* being most valuable.⁷ Another area that strongly influenced Fascist ideology and is crucial to gaining a thorough understanding of it is aesthetics. Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi's *Fascist Spectacle* and George Mosse's article "Fascist Aesthetics and Society: Some Considerations," deal with the aesthetics of power in Mussolini's Italy and argue that the search for symbols and forms to represent Fascism's political novelty actually created its own power.⁸

⁷ Edward Tannenbaum, *The Fascist Experience* (New York: Basic Books Inc, 1972); for more general information about Italian Fascism, see: David Forgacs, ed., *Rethinking Italian Fascism: Capitalism, Populism, and Culture* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986); Phillip Morgan, *Italian Fascism, 1919-1945* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995); Paul Corner, "Italian Fascism: Organization, Enthusiasm, Opinion," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 15 (2010): 378-89; Richard Jensen, "Futurism and Fascism," *History Today* 45 (1995) <http://www.historytoday.com/137richard-jensen/futurism-and-fascism>, Walter Adamson, "Avant-Garde Modernism and Italian Fascism: Cultural Politics in the Era of Mussolini," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 6 (2010): 230-48.

⁸ Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); George Mosse, "Fascist Aesthetics and Society: Some Considerations," *Journal of Contemporary History* 2 (1996): 245-52; George Mosse, *The Image of Man* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); for more about Fascist aesthetics and ideas of masculinity, see: Maschai, "Contradiction and the Role of the 'Floating Signifier': Identity and the Role of the 'New

George Mosse also wrote *The Image of Man*, which deconstructs the idea of Western masculinity and how it came to represent, among other things, physical beauty (exemplified through sport), courage, moral restraint, and a strong will. Understanding the aesthetic construction of this masculinity, which gained an even greater emphasis under Fascism, is necessary to fully analyze the evolution of Fascist femininity. The power behind aesthetics plays a crucial role in understanding the policies dealing with gender roles and the role of women in Italian society.

The most comprehensive work investigating Fascism's control over gender roles is Victoria De Grazia's *How Fascism Ruled Women*, which discusses how the Fascist regime defined the place of women and how they experienced Mussolini's rule. The underlying theme of this work is the conflict between ideas of modernity and traditional patriarchal authority in regard to women's role in society. The experience of women under Fascism is, according to De Grazia, marked by ambiguity and ambivalence.⁹ This premise

Woman' in Italian Cartoons During Fascism," 128-42; Michael Kimmel, "The Contemporary 'Crisis' of Masculinity in Historical Perspective," in *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies*, ed. Harry Brod (Routledge: Boston, 1987); Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Robert Paxon, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Knopf, 2004); Sandro Ballassi, "The Masculine Mystique: Antimodernism and Virility in Fascist Italy," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 10 (2005): 314-35.

⁹ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*; Robin Pickering-Iazzi, *Mothers of Invention: Women, Fascism, and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); for more about women and Fascism, see: Kevin Passamore, *Women*,

resurfaces in nearly every work examining women and ideals of femininity in Fascist Italy. Another book contributing to the dialogue of Italian Fascism and gender is Robin Pickering-Iazzi's compilation of essays in *Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Fascism, and Culture*. As the title suggests, this work specifically deals with the regime's enforcement of the idea of women as mothers and how this image was both reinforced and challenged throughout the Fascist era. Pickering-Iazzi seeks to provide a different approach to the debate about Fascism and culture through the essays included, which offer a contrasting view to the black and white categorization of women as either the *donna madre* or *donna crisi*. This approach follows the same tenet of ambiguity that De Grazia highlights in both Fascist ideals about women and their experience of the regime. However, the topic of women's involvement in sports is only briefly touched upon in either of these works.

Gigliola Gori addresses this issue much more thoroughly in *Italian Fascism and the Female Body: Sport, Submissive Women, and Strong Mothers*. Through examining the cultural context of the pre-Fascist period as well as during the Fascist era, she argues that women's participation in sports during the Fascist period supported a certain level of gender emancipation that is often overlooked in light of the regime's overwhelming suppression of women's equal-

Gender, and Fascism in Europe, 1919-1945 (New Brunswick: Manchester University Press, 2003); Victoria De Grazia, *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Alexander DeGrand, "Women Under Italian Fascism," *Historical Journal* 19 (1976): 947-68.

ity. Two articles further examine the effect of women's participation in sports: Sarah Morgan's "Mussolini's Boys (and Girls)," and "A Glittering Icon of Fascist Femininity: Trebisonda 'Ondina' Valla," also written by Gigliola Gori. Both of these articles discuss the success of the women who were a part of the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. This event was especially paramount for the Fascist regime because of its function as a political sphere to demonstrate their strength to the rest of the world. Through examining Italian press coverage of the 1936 Olympics, Morgan and Gori argue that the publicly broadcasted success of the Italian women made a huge contribution to the construction of gender roles under the Fascist regime.¹⁰ Investigating the influence of sport on gender roles in Fascist Italy has been a recent trend; this paper will further examine the extent of this phenomenon to show that although there were some liberating effects, participating in athletics was for the most part an extension of Fascist ideals of submissive women; athletes such as Valla served only as a symbol of a narrow and exclusive shift in gender roles that would not be a reality for most Italian women for decades.

¹⁰ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*; Morgan, "Mussolini's Boys (and Girls); Gigliola Gori, "A Glittering Icon of Fascist Femininity: Trebisonda 'Ondina' Valla," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 18 (2001), 173-95; for more about Fascism and sport, see: Patrizia Dogliani, "Sport and Fascism," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 5 (2001): 326-43; Simon Martin, "Italian Sport and the Challenges of Its Recent Historiography," *Journal of Sport History* 38 (2011): 199-209; Jim Riordan and Arnd Kruger, *The International Politics of Sport in the 20th Century* (London: E&FN Spon, 1999); Jennifer Hargreaves and Patricia Vertinsky, *Physical Culture, Power, and the Body* (London: Routledge, 2007).

In order to fully appreciate the role that women's involvement in sports had on shaping gender roles, an examination of the philosophies that contributed to Fascist ideology is necessary. As both the leader and founder of the Fascist movement, Mussolini integrated numerous aspects from the dominant ideologies present in Italy at the time into *la dottrina del fascismo*, specifically Futurism and Aesthetics. When combined with other doctrines coursing through the European psyche at the time, such as nationalism and imperialism, visual culture became inextricably linked to the ideological makeup of Fascism. Fascist ideology has its roots in the Futurist movement, which promoted "values such as exaltation of speed and action, championing of violence and conflict, emphasizing youth, rebelling against the past and disgust with Italian cultural stagnation, championing of the industrial age, and the espousal of fervent Italian nationalism and imperialism."¹¹ Once Fascism turned to the right in 1920, the support of Marinetti and the Futurists for Fascism dwindled, and a final break between the two that same year led to Futurism becoming a literary and artistic movement while Fascism embraced totalitarian politics. However, many Futurist themes had by this time become ingrained in Fascist ideology, including the cult of anti-intellectualism, antagonism, virility, youth, speed and sport, and an innovative use of language in political propaganda.¹² Futurism had been gathering force among the petty

¹¹ Richard Jensen, "Futurism and Fascism," *History Today* 45 (1995) <http://www.historytoday.com/richard-jensen/futurism-and-fascism>.

¹² Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 12.

bourgeoisie since its creation in 1909, but it was not until the end of World War I and Italy's sense of frustration and disappointment with its aftermath that these ideas gained political momentum when they were paired with the newly created Fascist Party. The consciousness of the Italian intelligentsia at the time was focused on the notion that Italy was unable to compete with the European superpowers because it was stuck in the past; that "modernity remained just out of reach, forever beyond Italy's borders, and Italians could only 'look on and sigh with jealousy, from outside, with badly concealed rancor, like the poorest children who press their little red noses against holiday windows."¹³ In order to break this cycle and regain the former glory of the Roman Empire that many Italians, especially Mussolini, dreamed of, dramatic change had to be made.¹⁴ War, they concluded, was the mechanism through which this transformation would be accomplished, preferably through the establishment of aggressive colonial policies. War was seen as a necessary condition for the spiritual rebirth of the Italian people, and the rhetoric surrounding the new Italian nationalism centered on this Futurist idea of revolutionary modernization and completely breaking with the past and tradition.¹⁵ In order to achieve this goal, the Italian people would

¹³ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "Modernity is Just Over There: Colonialism and Italian National Identity," *Interventions* 8 (2006), 381.

¹⁴ This focus on ancient Rome is directly contradictory to Futurist ideology, which emphasized a strict break with the past. Furthermore, it shows some of the inherent ambiguity that Fascism was built on.

¹⁵ Jensen, "Futurism and Fascism."

have to be transformed as well.

The emphasis placed on creating a new kind of Italian, more specifically the “new man” but also the “new woman,” puts aesthetics at the core of understanding Fascist ideology and policies. Aesthetics is a philosophy normally attributed to art and understanding beauty, but its application to the visual culture created by Fascism highlights important features about its principles. Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, author of *Fascist Spectacle*, writes that “at the heart of totalitarian politics lies the idea of creation” while showing how Mussolini fulfilled the model of the “God-like artist-creator” through his desire to shape the masses into his idea of the ideal Italian man and woman.¹⁶ She further argues that this goal of creating a “new society on fresh ground and free of limits from laws, tradition, or ethical values” was contingent upon depersonalization and de-individualization; people were simply something that could be shaped without protest as if there was no sensory involvement.¹⁷ Mussolini was therefore not only the political leader of the Fascist regime, but was the physical embodiment of the ideology “isolated like a god on Mount Olympus,” responsible for transforming Italians into “a new aesthetic model incarnated by Mussolini.”¹⁸ This creation of a new people was not restricted to the borders of Italy; it also was directed towards colonial policy, where “the colonies would further projects of *bonifica umana* (human reclamation) by producing a ‘new type of human being,’ disciplined and full of

¹⁶ Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*, 13.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 17-18.

national feeling.”¹⁹ Colonial policy was aggressive, and this “human reclamation” was to be a laboratory for testing strategies of repression and governance.

George Mosse highlights an additional element to the understanding of Fascist aesthetics in stating, “the aesthetic of Fascism should be put into the framework of Fascism as a civic religion, as a non-traditional faith which used liturgy and symbols to make its belief come alive.”²⁰ The ultimate symbol and idol of this new religion was Mussolini himself, whose image became one that symbolized everything the new Italian man should aspire to, as he “encompassed the values that were already being exploited by the Futurists.”²¹ This “cult of the *Duce*” evolved into a cult of physical beauty, which not only associated the “good with the true and the holy,”²² but also with the modernity, progress, and strength of the Italian nation. The exaltation of this new Italian race and the images illustrating it were integral in developing the new sense of nationalism that venerated war and the creation of a new Italian empire. As these desires grew and the main purpose of the nation became defined by an armed and aggressive model, the aesthetics of Fascism took on a more militarized image, which amplified the role of sporting events and physical training.²³

The centrality of sport and the body to Fascist ideology and politics is thus apparent, as the image of the Latin athlete epitomizes the ideals Fascism endorsed. Because the regime wished to uphold the

¹⁹ Ben-Ghiat, “Modernity is Just Over There,” 382.

²⁰ George Mosse, “Fascist Aesthetics and Society,” 245.

²¹ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 16.

²² Mosse, “Fascist Aesthetics and Society,” 246.

²³ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 20.

image of Italy as the “sporting nation *par excellence*,” it was necessary for sport to have a high level of visibility.²⁴ Fascist Italy was the first European state to use sport for the purpose of political propaganda.²⁵ Participation in sports therefore became the tool through which Italians would be physically transformed into the image desired by Mussolini. Physical training was not only a means of staying healthy, but of projecting an image of “virility” that became a defining characteristic of the new Italian. Images produced by the regime focused on the beauty of sturdy Fascist men, “eternally young and powerful,” as compared to the ugliness of non-Fascist men.²⁶



“Shot-putters shown ready to throw, in a field in Sesto Fiorentino. In the background, among the crowd, a few black-shirts” Fratelli Alinari Museum Collections-Malandrini Collection, Florence, from Alinari Archives,
<http://www.alinariarchives.it/interal/Defaultly.aspx>

This focus on virility and the desire to transform Italy into a sporting nation propelled the development of

²⁴ Ibid., 147.

²⁵ Morgan, “Mussolini’s Boys (And Girls), 4.2.

²⁶ Ibid., 18.

sporting facilities and the increased involvement of students in physical education at school. In 1928 there were only 502 facilities and 180,000 students participating in physical education, but by 1935 these numbers had grown to 5,198 and 470,000 respectively.²⁷ This revival of sports enthusiasm and the depiction of virility and strength as the most defining characteristics of the “new man” stemmed from the overall crisis of masculinity that plagued Europe after World War I. The perceived threat of weakness was a result of the mass amount of casualties combined with the beginning of converging gender roles and changing social and economic structures created a “deep unease about the nature of masculine identity.”²⁸ Sport and physical prowess became a tool to reaffirm men’s place in society as the heroes and protectors of the nation, as well as displaying the superiority of the Italian “race” over other nationalities.

The crisis of masculinity resulted in the creation of the new Italian woman. While the model for masculine ideals paralleled the Futurist desire for a clear break with the past, the model of the ideal Fascist woman was much more ambiguous. The prevailing model of the *donna madre* sought to combine ideas of modernity with those of tradition, religion, and stability, and was inherently problematic and contradictory.²⁹ A trend toward female emancipation had been developing since the beginning of the twentieth century, and as was typical of all countries mobilized for war, Italian

²⁷ Ibid., 21.

²⁸ Kimmel, "The Contemporary 'Crisis' of Masculinity in Historical Perspective," 342.

²⁹ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 54.

women had gained many new freedoms during World War I. The innovative rhetoric of Mussolini during the early years of Fascism seemed to promote this trend, even suggesting women's suffrage, but once the regime was on solid ground, "the question of female emancipation was set aside in favor of manly hegemony based on traditional paternalism."³⁰ In order to harmonize this return to traditional values with Fascist modernism, domestic duties were painted as a way to take part in building the new Fascist state by bearing as many children as possible. In a speech given in 1932, Mussolini stated, "woman must obey....My idea of her role in the state is in opposition to all feminism. Naturally she shouldn't be a slave, but if I conceded her the vote, I'd be laughed at. In our state, she must not count."³¹ Increasing the birthrate became a primary focus for the regime, which set the tone for policies regarding women; restrictions were placed on female employment, families with six or more children were given financial assistance, and abortion was outlawed as a "crime against the human race."³² The Fascist regime had established the *Opera Nazionale per la Maternita ed Infanzia* (National Agency for Maternity and Infancy--ONMI) in 1925, which became an increasingly important institution in dictating policies aimed at promoting motherhood and aiding mothers in raising healthy children whose morality fit that of the Fascist regime's.³³ The propaganda produced by ONMI, including the image below, created a

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 234.

³² Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 62.

³³ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 62.

“myth of maternity” about Italian women, yet in reality these efforts were largely ineffective. The birthrate fell from 29.9 per one thousand people in 1921-25 to 24 per one thousand people in 1931-35.³⁴



“Poster for the National ONMI,” in *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945*, Victoria De Grazia (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992), 74.

Despite the regime’s largely oppressive policies directed towards women, sport also played a central role in creating the image of the ‘new woman,’ raising numerous issues regarding contradictory gender roles. Women’s participation in sport had been present in Italian society since the late 1800’s, but became the subject of criticism from both the Catholic Church and the Fascist regime in the second half of the 1920’s; sportswomen were, for the most part, considered

³⁴ Ibid., 63.

eccentrics.³⁵ Much of this criticism stemmed from the fear of a “masculinization of Italian women, a loss of feminine modesty, and a decline in women’s interest in family and maternity.”³⁶ It was also rumored that sport could make women infertile, and that the athleticism of women was “responsible for the decline in the population and excessive emancipation,”³⁷ but since the regime had encouraged women’s participation in sport in its early years, it was unable to officially oppose it. Another problematic area in women’s participation in athletics was the militaristic aspect of sport; the two had been “inextricably linked in Fascist Italy long before the Second World War.”³⁸ As Italy’s colonial policy became more and more aggressive and tensions throughout Europe grew, the athlete became synonymous with the soldier.³⁹ Sport was therefore a masculine domain, which further heightened fears of women becoming too masculine if they participated in sport.

The solution to this dilemma came when the regime gave scientists the task of deciding which activities were appropriate for women to participate in. The *Comitato Olimpico Nazionale Italiano* (Italian Olympic Committee) and the *Federazione Italiana Medici dello Sport* (Italian Federation of Sports Physicians) were therefore responsible for redesigning women’s sport based on a eugenic model.⁴⁰ Activities such as swimming, skiing, skating, tennis, basketball, and certain

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 157.

³⁸ Morgan, “Mussolini’s Boys (and Girls),” 4.4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 76.

athletics were deemed suitable for women's health and beneficial for preparing them to be mothers of strong, healthy Italians. More competitive and aggressive activities were unsuitable for women because they were seen as weaker than men and unable to handle the stress of more vigorous sports.⁴¹ As for the militaristic aspects that posed opposition, the Fascist regime began to change its stance as it saw the necessity in preparing the whole country for war. Justification again was rooted in rhetoric of creating good mothers capable of bearing strong, brave children who would defend the nation. Being confident in shooting was even seen as beneficial, since "children of a faint-hearted mother were sure to be cowards."⁴²

Despite the paternalistic approach and regulations that surrounded women's participation in sports, a noticeable shift in the portrayal of the ideal "new woman" can be seen in images produced by the Fascist regime. The more rural, traditional motherly figure was replaced by one strongly influenced by America: "sporty, tomboyish, nimble, and slender."⁴³ This transformation still had to accommodate traditional values, for if it strayed too far into the American model, it would share too many similarities to the *donna crisi*, the ultimate threat to maternity and Fascist ideals of femininity. For example, the regime had a "campaign against slim women," which promoted the idea that slimness was unhealthy. This stemmed from the need to "fight against the crisis woman," who was excessively slim and seen not only as unhealthy from

⁴¹ Ibid., 77.

⁴² Morgan, "Mussolini's Boys (and Girls)," 4.6.

⁴³ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 170.

“cutting down on meals or swallowing pernicious pills,” but also unattractive.⁴⁴ The image of the *donna sportiva*, therefore, is a compromise between the two: plumper than the fashionable American film stars of the 1930’s such as Jean Harlow, Katharine Hepburn, Myrna Loy, and Bette Davis, yet still strong and healthy.⁴⁵ The image below is one that highlights this compromise and was popularly circulated, as it was the winner of the Cremona Prize, which was awarded to “practitioners of militant art...aimed at a broad popular audience and totally at the service of Fascist ideology.”⁴⁶ The Cremona Prize encouraged the production of many paintings depicting sporting themes, which often included “shapely female athletes” who were brunette and had “obviously muscular legs, robust arms, strong shoulders and rounded breasts.”⁴⁷

In addition, fashion was an important aspect of this shift in the representation of Italian femininity. Pictures from the *Accademia Nazionale Femminile di Educazione Fisica* in Orvieto show how there was a change in dress; women were moving farther away from the rural depiction of the *donna madre* of the 1920’s and more towards that of the *donna sportiva*, which allowed athletic movement but was still modest.⁴⁸ The *donna sportiva* also became a figure of Italian beauty through her depiction as a swimmer, as this image was one that was particularly malleable, and could be constructed as “graceful and strong,

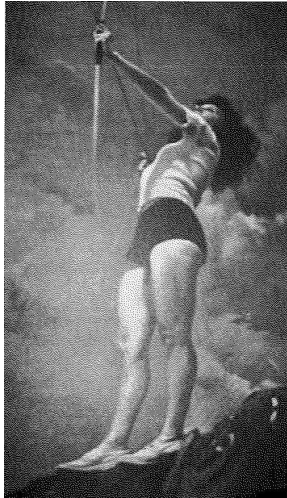
⁴⁴ Ibid., 171.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 179.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 178.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 173.



Bruno Amadio, "Artemide Mussoliniana," in *Italian Fascism and the Female Body: Sport, Submissive Women, and Strong Mothers*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

feminine and disciplined."⁴⁹ It wasn't an image of athletic success, but one of modernity, health, and glamour.⁵⁰ She avoided makeup and trendy, seductive clothing, and aimed to be "slender, sober, and strong."⁵¹ The term "virile, yet feminine" also came to define how the *donna sportiva* was depicted by the Italian press. Although there was still considerable debate over what sporting activities were appropriate for women, female athleticism was accepted as necessary for the regime to promote an image of an Italy

⁴⁹ Morgan, "Mussolini's Boys (and Girls)," 4.6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.6-4.7.

⁵¹ David Chapman, review of *Italian Fascism and the Female Body: Sport, Submissive Women, and Strong Mothers*, by Gigliola Gori, *Journal of Sport History*, Summer 2005.

that was modern and competitive in relation to other nations.⁵²

The ultimate arena for displaying this newfound Italian strength to the rest of the world was through the Olympic Games, which were viewed by Mussolini as a crucial demonstration of the success and power of his Fascist state and ideology. Fascist Italy needed wider international visibility in order to “exploit the results of its efforts to forge the ‘new Italian.’”⁵³ Italy had been very successful in 1932 in Los Angeles, finishing second in total medals behind the United States. This success was only that of the Italian men; Italian women had not been allowed to participate, as Pope Pius XI strongly opposed women’s participation in sport.⁵⁴ The 1936 games in Berlin, however, were a different story. Not only was Italy competing under a “flag of war, fresh from their imperial victory in Ethiopia, and eager to engage in another battle,”⁵⁵ but also, for the first time, Italian women were allowed to enter the field of Olympic competition.⁵⁶ Both Mussolini and the Italian public had viewed women participating in competitive sports in a largely negative light, but with the recent increase in international female participation in the Olympics, Mussolini saw the necessity of

⁵² Morgan, “Mussolini’s Boys (and Girls),” 4.3.

⁵³ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 145.

⁵⁴ Gigliola Gori, “A Glittering Icon of Fascist Femininity,” 177.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.4.

⁵⁶ The first Italian woman to technically participate in the Olympic Games was Rosetta Gagliardi, a tennis player, in 1920, but she did not actually qualify to play; instead, she was one of the bearers of the Italian flag. Therefore, 1936 marks the beginning of Italian women’s actual competition in the games (Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 149).

including Italian female athletes. If Italy was going to be viewed as a modern country by the rest of the world, Italy's athletic prowess would have to be displayed by both men and women. In the end, it was the women, not the men, of the 1936 Olympics who had the most success. In the 80-meter hurdles, Trebisonda 'Ondina' Valla became the first Italian woman to win a gold medal (the only gold medal the Italians won in Berlin), while her teammate Claudia Testoni finished in third.⁵⁷ These performances were decisive in Italy's overall third place finish, and also were "a relief for the Italian press after disappointing results from the men."⁵⁸

The positive response of the press to Valla and Testoni's success is evident in numerous articles published in Italian newspapers. The main headline of *La Gazzetta dello Sport* stated, "The tricolour of Italy on the highest flagpole of the stadium with the victory of Ondina Valla in the 80m hurdles," while other articles on the first and second pages in the issue contained stories of Valla, speaking positively of her "superb technique" and "powerful action," and naming Testoni as a "worthy opponent."⁵⁹ *Lo Sport Fascistas* Olympic edition gave even higher praise to women athletes by listing their results before the men's, and describing Valla and Testoni as "daughters of the strong Romagna--the Duce's birthplace--and they show in their physiques, powerful in muscles and harmonious

⁵⁷ This third place finish was originally disputed and Testoni was awarded fourth, but after further review she received third.

⁵⁸ Morgan, "Mussolini's Boys (and Girls)," 4.7.

⁵⁹ Luigi Ferrario, "Giornata di Passione allo Stadio Olimpico," *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, 7 August 1936, 2.

in form, the signs of an unmistakable Italianness.”⁶⁰ Articles published in *La Stampa* call Valla and Testoni “the stars of the big event [the Olympics],”⁶¹ include Valla in an article about Italy’s strongest athletes,⁶² and invite the public to express their gratitude in person to Valla, the “greatest attraction” of a meet-and-greet event organized by the Athletics Federation at Mussolini Stadium in September 1936.⁶³ Images taken of Valla, such as the one below, also show how the public received her warmly and enthusiastically, and how she (and Testoni) became “instant celebrities and national heroes.”⁶⁴



Archiv Freidrich, “The Italian athlete Trebisonda Valla known as Ondina, Olympic Champion of the 80m hurdles at the Berlin Olympics in 1936,” From Alinari Archives, <http://www.alinariarchives.it/interal/Default.aspx>

⁶⁰ Bruno Zali, “Bilanico dellXI Olimpiade. Il Passo avanti dellatletismo italiano,” *Lo Sport Fascista*, September 1936, 4.

⁶¹ “Ondina Valla and Claudia Testoni: Protagonists of the Grand Reunion,” *La Stampa*, 25 September 1936, 5.

⁶² “Ondina Valla and the Strongest Italian Athletes,” *La Stampa*, 27 September 1936, 4.

⁶³ “Ondina Valla and Claudia Testoni: Protagonists of the Grand Reunion,” *La Stampa*, 5.

⁶⁴ Morgan, “Mussolini’s Boys (and Girls),” 4.7.

Mussolini himself also responded very enthusiastically to the success of the Italian women in Berlin. He congratulated Valla in Rome with the other members of the Italian team, and he awarded her a gold medal for athletic valor. In an interview with her about her gold medal experience, she said, "Everyone was trying to approach Mussolini, but the *Duce* said, 'I want Miss Valla near me!'"⁶⁵ This marks a definitive shift in how Mussolini viewed female athletics; instead of just participating in pre-approved activities that would make women better mothers, a select number of sportswomen could contribute to "spreading the image of Fascist sportspeople all over the world."⁶⁶ From 1936 on, Fascist propaganda clearly supported the enrollment of girls and young women in youth sporting organizations, whereas before it had taken a more cautious approach to the matter.⁶⁷ The view of the Vatican also shifted after the 1936 Olympics; Valla had a special audience with Pope Pius XI, who congratulated her and said, according to Valla's interview, "Well done, our compliments!"⁶⁸ It has been argued that because of this shift in opinion by Mussolini and the Pope, a "breach had been opened in the masculinist wall erected against women's emancipation by the highest authorities in Italy."⁶⁹ While the Olympic success of Valla and Testoni did result in a more accepting view of female athleticism by the press, the Fascist party, and the country's two most important leaders, these women were mainly symbols

⁶⁵ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 189.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 186.

of greater freedom that did not really exist in Fascist Italy. In fact, the new emphasis on women's participation in sports still contained ideals and rhetoric that maintained the pre-existing gender roles promoted by Fascism.

The selective process by which women were chosen to participate in competitive sports at a higher level is one of the main reasons women's sports were not as liberating as has been assumed. This was the case for Valla and Testoni, who were selected at a very young age to be trained for competition. Those girls who did not demonstrate the potential for impressive athletic ability were required to follow the declarations of the Italian Olympic Committee and the Italian Federation of Sports Physicians, and were thereby limited to undemanding activities that would "preserve female grace and modesty."⁷⁰ For the few who did compete at a national or international level, second-class treatment (in relation to that of male athletes) was typical; Valla recalls having to endure "horrible trips by train...sitting in a cheap, uncomfortable, second-class carriage...and poor accommodation and meal subsidies."⁷¹ Italian male athletes, on the other hand, received first class travel tickets, accommodation, and subsistence. Furthermore, female athletes were not given their own official uniforms or good quality shoes for competition; moreover, these uniforms and shoes had to be returned once an event was over.⁷² These disparities reflect the dominant patriarchal views held by the majority of Italian

⁷⁰ Gori, "A Glittering Icon of Fascist Femininity," 178.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁷² *Ibid.*

society, which not only viewed sport as the “pre-eminent expression of the strength and virility of the Italian male,”⁷³ but also saw the competitiveness and muscularity of some sportswomen as dangerous to traditional masculine hegemony.⁷⁴

Preserving the dominance of Italian masculinity was at the center of much of Fascist policy, as can be seen through the policies of Italian Olympic Committee and the Italian Federation of Sports Physicians. These organizations put men in charge of determining the appropriate leisure activities and physical education that women could participate in, further defining femininity according to patriarchal values. The message was that they were “allowing” women to partake in athletics. Although women’s involvement in physical activity did increase under Fascism, it was much smaller and more marginalized than official statistics, publications, and propaganda declared. Compared to other countries, Italian sportswomen’s achievements were actually inferior.⁷⁵ It is also important to note that all of the media was under the control of the Fascist regime, therefore the positive reception and recognition of women’s athletic success has to be viewed more as a political tool and less as accurate portrayal of public opinion or response. The participation of not just women, but men also, was mandated by the regime; authorities noticed those who failed to partake in what was seen as necessary for building the Italian people and nation.⁷⁶ The

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 185.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 166.

⁷⁶ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 164.

purpose of this mandatory participation was to create a false image of a nation that had “voluntarily become a sporting people.”⁷⁷ Many articles emphasize that the sports victories were “admirable Fascist results” and were the product of “extraordinary courage and love for the Fatherland.”⁷⁸ Athletics were, therefore, another way for the regime to exert control over the Italian people while promoting an image both domestically and internationally that was much more myth than reality.

Although female athleticism did not have an overall liberating effect on women, the emphasis placed on visual culture and the political motivations of depicting Italy as a sporting nation, women’s participation in sport and the debates surrounding it provide an excellent window into the examination of gender roles in Fascist Italy. Moreover, it demonstrates how this process was fluid and full of ambiguities. The marked shift in opinion after the success of the women’s team in the 1936 Olympics shows that elite female athletes were thought of as national celebrities, yet the majority of women were still subject to the belief that motherhood was the ultimate goal of all women, and that it was the responsibility of all mothers to train their families to serve Fascism and the nation. Even Valla was used to promote this model; when she became a mother in 1940, the news was used as evidence that “sporting competition and maternity were not incompatible.”⁷⁹ While this may have had the effect of decreasing the rigidity of the

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Gori, “A Glittering Icon of Fascist Femininity,” 192.

rules governing women's participation in sports, it still emphasizes the fact that women were ultimately viewed as mothers. Although gender roles did shift remotely throughout the Fascist era, protecting motherhood remained at the center of these changes. This enduring patriarchy ensured that women's involvement in sport did not dramatically challenge the existing gender roles so central to Fascist ideology.

This lasting role of patriarchal ideals is one that would remain engrained in Italian culture long after Mussolini lost his charismatic sway over the populace and Fascism became an unsavory part of the past. Even though the totalitarian control over Italians' lives ended with the victory of the Allies in World War II, patriarchy remained a dominant force in the construction of a post war Italian identity. As in the United States and other western European countries, the reintroduction of Italian men into the workforce emphasized the traditional model of women staying home and raising children and letting men handle the working world. However, a major victory for women in the years following the fall of Fascism was getting the right to vote in 1946, in Italy's new Constitutional Republic, and then two years later participating in voting to formally ratify the new constitution.⁸⁰ This new constitution included articles aimed at promoting gender equality, for example, Article 3, which declared, "all citizens possess an equal social status and are equal before the law, without discrimination to sex," Article 37, which states, "working women shall be entitled to equal rights and, for comparable jobs,

⁸⁰ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 204.

equal pay with men,” and Article 51, which says, “all citizens of either sex shall be eligible for public office and for elective positions on conditions of equality.”⁸¹ However, these provisions were not fully applied in practice, both in the professional world and the sporting world. In theory, competitive sports were open to all women, but recruitment was obstructed by the same prejudices that marked the Fascist era. The few women who did compete in international competition through the 1950’s were those who belonged to the elite group trained under the Fascist regime.⁸² The international feminist movement of the 1970’s finally sparked the true process of female emancipation in sport and other areas of life in Italy, which has been slow and continues to be held back by the patriarchal roots of Italian society; Italy still has one of the lowest female labor participation rates of any developed country, and ex-Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi’s sexist and often derogatory statements and policies have significantly altered the course of women’s rights in Italy.

The sluggish process of female liberation was often encumbered by Italian women themselves; their self awareness was “strongly affected by traditions that considered women to be inferior creatures capable of only being sexually promiscuous ‘demons’ or docile domesticated ‘angels’.”⁸³ This can be partially attributed to the influence that the Catholic Church had both on official government policies as well as public opinion in Italy. Although the Christian Democratic

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 206.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 205.

party, which used to represent the Vatican's interests in politics, collapsed in 1994, the latter part of the 2000's saw the return of the direct influence of the Church in Italian politics.⁸⁴ This prevailing influence of a patriarchal mindset explains why women's participation in sport produced little liberating effect among the general female populace both under Fascism and in the years following. Although some women such as Trebisonda Valla gained immense national prestige through their athletic abilities, this small elite would remain a political icon; a symbol of "congratulation but also confrontation, contradiction and paradox."⁸⁵ These contradictions were not only an aspect of the symbolism of the female athlete, but also an inherent part of the construction of Italian gender roles as a whole.

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⁸⁴ "By Hook or by Crook: A Resurgent Vatican's Influence in Italy," *The Economist*, 31 May 2007, <http://www.economist.com/node/9259081>.

⁸⁵ Gori, "A Glittering Icon of Fascist Femininity," 173.