

Women in Taekwon-Do

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Taekwon-Do was developed in the 1940's as a method of hand to hand combat training for soldiers, all of whom were male, so it is somewhat understandable that it has an overall male focus. However, since most schools have female students as well as male, it is important for us, as instructors, and for the ITF as an organization, to acknowledge where bias exists in our martial art and take steps to address it.

Expanding Taekwon-Do approaches and practices to meet the varied needs of students of all genders will strengthen the ITF and will allow all students to make greater contributions and to feel even more empowered by their skills.

Each individual (female or male) brings a unique set of skills and strengths to their martial arts training, the greater variety of students we can attract and retain, the better off we will all be.

Incorporating women's perspectives and life experiences will allow Taekwon-Do to grow and become a fuller, more realistic, and, more modern organization.

This thesis will identify a number of the common issues that face women while training in Taekwon-Do and will propose some solutions and some areas for further examination.

Women's Perspectives on Taekwon-Do

Even though many gains have been made by the women's movement throughout the years, women still face inequality in most aspects of their lives. We live in a patriarchal society where every aspect of life is designed to favour males and the male point of view. Men hold economic, political, and social power over women. Traits that are identified as 'male' are considered strengths while traits identified as 'female' are considered to be weaknesses.

In many ways, Taekwon-Do reflects the attitudes of the world outside with the male considered to be the standard and the female the deviation. Women won the right to train in martial arts training halls in the 1970s, but they were expected to train in programs designed for male strengths and male bodies. While there have been some consideration of female perspectives and strengths in the intervening years, there is still a lot of work to be done.

In most Dojangs, women are outnumbered by males, the majority of instructors are male, and the positions of power are mainly occupied by men. If women do not get to see other women in positions of power, it creates the perception that women cannot hold power in these situations and that is detrimental to women's Taekwon-Do ambitions.

This situation is true even at the highest levels of the ITF organization where there are few women who serve on Boards of Directors. I, myself, recently made history when I became the first female to serve on the board of directors of the CTFI and this is 2017!

According to the ITF website there are no female Grand Masters. Out of 65 8th Dans, there is only one female. Out of 155 7th Dans, only 8 are female. Over the years I have attended many IICs but have never attended one where there was a female instructing with the Grandmasters.

To my knowledge the closest we came was when Annick Van Driessche of Belgium was to assist in Afghanistan, an event which was later cancelled. When I umpired at the World Championships in Argentina in 2009, I was one of only three female umpires. At the upcoming world championships in Dublin, Ireland there will be 12 female umpires and 82 males - that is only 13 percent female. Out of 701 competitors, only 262 (37 percent) are female.

Female participation is slowly growing but there is a lot of work still to be done. While there are those who place the 'blame' for lower female participation on the individual women themselves, that is a short-sighted approach to the issue. In fact, there are a variety of external factors and pressures that women experience that men do not, and those must be taken into consideration when trying to attract and retain more female students. Once we uncover and address these issues, our female students will have greater success and we will have stronger organization as a result.

Obviously, I cannot address all of the reasons for the underrepresentation of females in martial arts in this single thesis, but I would like to explore some of the more prevalent issues.

High Turnover in Female Students

Although there is generally a high turnover rate of martial arts students, the turnover rate for females is very much higher than that of males. Although many women begin training in Taekwon-Do, only 10 percent achieve their black belt. It is worthwhile to examine the internal and external reasons why this might be the case so we can find ways to help encourage and retain female students.

Most women join martial arts because they want to feel more confident, stronger and to be able to defend themselves. While men may have those same goals, their self-defence concerns are largely theoretical; women's concerns are rooted in the fact that 1 in 4 women will face physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. That, in itself is an intimidating factor in beginning any program.

For most women, starting a martial arts program is terrifying. They are usually nervous because they are afraid, they will look stupid or weak and they fear not able to perform the techniques. Although most everyone is nervous trying something new, it is especially more terrifying for women starting martial arts because they are not brought up to use their bodies in a powerful way. And any woman who does demonstrate physical strength is often condemned by her peers or by men for being unladylike or unwomanly.

The Role of Gender Roles

In martial arts, the biggest challenge that women face is overcoming prescribed gender roles. As a result of intense socialization placed upon females to be feminine, kicking, punching and being assertive do not feel natural. Girls are brought up to be nurturing, kind, caring, polite and non-confrontational. They are discouraged from being loud, assertive, or playing rough. Females are not used to hitting anything, so the movements new student are being taught are completely foreign to most females. Therefore, they will feel more uncomfortable, more self-conscious, and less confident than their male classmates who were socialized to play rough and be assertive. The movements, actions, and strengths required by martial arts fall neatly into acceptable activities for males, but not so for females. So, not only do they have the learning curve of the specific movements, but they have to undo a lot of conditioning and essentially be willing to see themselves as almost 'less female' in order to participate fully.

While this is a huge issue that will have to be dealt with over and over throughout a woman's training in martial arts, instructors can play a huge role in helping her address the problem. The first thing any instructor can do is to recognize that this issue exists and give the students 'mental space' to work through it. Some explicit mention of the fact that it may feel odd to tap into inner aggression or to express herself with this sort of physical motion can help bring the issue into the open and help the students to talk about it and find ways to overcome it. For younger women and girls, having female role models - instructors and older students who are comfortable with their

physical abilities- may be enough. For adult women, there may need to be direct discussion of the challenges and mental blocks involved.

The most important thing is for instructors not to deny the influence of the social expectations placed on women to be 'good' and 'gentle'. Women can overcome those expectations but not if we pretend that they do not exist.

An Example of Women's Challenges with Physical Confrontations

As a result of the social expectations described above, a woman's own self-image can sabotage her success - many women cannot see themselves as fighters.

In my Dojang, I remember one student telling me she loved the patterns but did not like the sparring. In fact, she was considering quitting because she had to spar.

It made sense to me that she didn't like the sparring as it can feel so unnatural for a woman who has been trained to think of herself as non-confrontational and gentle. I had to approach training this woman to spar differently than I would teach a male. I had to undo some things she had been taught all her life and teach her to feel comfortable being rough and hitting another person.

My first approach was to have her train in a safe environment, performing drills on the pads to develop her skills without worry of hurting someone. Later, once she was more confident with her skills, I'd had her perform drills with a partner and then spar with another female she felt comfortable with. Once she felt a little more confident and her skills developed, I'd have her spar a male who had good control in the ring, so she could understand her own power.

Over time she become more confident in her ability and was able to spar any classmate and enjoy sparring. If I had pressed the sparring too soon, the student's fear of getting hurt or, more so, a fear of hurting someone else, would have made her quit.

None of this means that women are inferior fighters; it just means that their path to success may be different than that of a man who already has the social expectation that he will enjoy and excel at physical combat.

Family Pressures and Obligations

Another reason women quit martial arts is due to pressure from family and friends. This pressure is expressed in a variety of ways, including ones related to the idea that women ‘shouldn’t’ fight as well as to the fact that women are often primary caregivers in their households, and it is difficult for them to untangle the various obligations that go along with that role.

Many people still have the perception that martial arts are only for men and a woman might get hurt so they discourage her from participating. Sometimes women quit because their spouse or boyfriend feels threatened by their training and places pressure on her to quit.

This is a difficult situation to address but recognizing that it can be a factor for many women will help instructors to understand the woman’s mindset. An understanding instructor can perhaps give her some different perspectives or conversational tools to help her make her own decisions rather than bowing to pressure.

When women are in a primary caregiving role, they have a lot of home-based commitments to their families and there is a lot ‘juggling’ involved getting everything done. If the family is under any time pressure, or emotional strain, women miss class because training is ‘time to themselves’ and they have been socialized to see that sort of time as selfish. So, when things get hectic, they miss class rather than inconveniencing their families or asking for cooperation from spouses. If that happens frequently, they fall behind, get discouraged and quit.

Also, because of this primary caregiving role, women often end up with sole custody of their children when a relationship ends. Single mothers who are training in martial arts not only have the pressures described above, but they often face financial challenges as well.

One of the ways that Taekwon-Do schools already address the ‘primary caregiver’ issue is by offering childcare and/or offering family programs where the children can train with the parents.

In our school, our family program is immensely popular and many families state how nice it is to spend quality family time training together rather than just sitting and watching the children train. We find that the program is beneficial to both the child and the parent as students. The parent can help the child practice at home, and they can motivate each other. Also, the desire to be a good example often prevents the parent from quitting when things get challenging.

As for financial obstacles faced by single mothers, schools can offer discounts or scholarships and they can help those women identify

community programs that may sponsor children to train in martial arts. In that case it might be possible to then charge only a small fee for the mother's training.

'Friendly' Sexism

It can be very intimidating for a female to join in a mostly male martial arts class. Not only does she have to overcome the gender stereotypes described above but she often has to face 'friendly' sexism within the class. Because Taekwon-Do was designed for men and, in many ways, still envisions the typical student as male, women are seen as an exception and are not treated as just another new student. They regularly receive condescending comments on their skills and on their bodies and it creates an unpleasant environment that makes it hard to focus on training. Mostly, the men who make these comments are teasing or trying to be friendly, but they do not realize the impact having to listen to these comments over and over has on the female student.

While the intent is not always malicious, there is a cumulative negative effect and feeling of exclusion that comes from hearing repeatedly hearing sexist comments like "You fight like a girl.", "You look cute when you spar.", "Those girls won the prearranged sparring competition because they looked pretty." Enduring sexist comments should not be a price women have to pay in order to train. Instructors should shut those sorts of comments down immediately upon hearing them to set the proper tone in the school and should make female students aware that it is safe to protest that kind of treatment.

The perception that women are not 'up to par' that is created by the sort of comments listed above is also reinforced by some aspects of instruction. For example: descriptions of less strenuous ways to do things are often given a female designation. Pushups from the knees are called 'female' pushups when there is nothing inherently female about them; they are just a steppingstone toward full body pushups.

Women may need that steppingstone more often because they may not naturally have upper body strength. Men may not have the same struggles with pushups because the majority of their body weight is above their waist and male bodies tend to have natural upper body strength. Males tend to be less flexible than females - and flexibility is an asset in Taekwon-Do - but we do not tell men that they can do a male version of touching their toes (only reaching their fingertips to their shins), we just do not mention it. It

would be better for us to spend time coaching all of our students in ways to increase body strength and flexibility and just leave gender out of it.

An Example of Friendly Sexism

At a recent testing I heard about, a slim 15-year-old female was told she could plane down her boards to ½ inch because her bones were small. The instructor was acting out of kindness, with no intent to belittle her ability but this was an act of sexism.

When it was brought to a female instructor's attention the girl was told she should attempt to break the ¾ inch board as designated by the testing criteria for someone her age. The female instructor felt this was appropriate because the girl should have confidence in the skills she had learned. After all, no attacker will give her a break because her bones were small. She needed to be able to be able to defend herself.

On the day of the test, she easily broke the proper boards. What the initial instructor did not see was that, by expecting less from the female student, he showed that he didn't believe she could do it. The student would have felt no accomplishment from breaking an easier board than was required. He would have inadvertently robbed her of the feeling of confidence she got when she successfully broke the boards.

Instructor Responsibilities Regarding Sexism

Whether sexism occurs blatantly or innocently it has a negative impact on women. It is off putting and makes them feel that they are perceived as inferior.

As a result, they either get angry or they may start to accept that they may never be up to par and get discouraged.

This 'friendly' sexism does nothing to instill confidence in women, it has the opposite effect. And it is a contributing factor to why many women quit before they earn their Black Belt.

Instructors should examine their language and approaches to ensure that they are not accidentally contributing to the problem, and they should be willing to speak out against sexist attitudes and behaviours when they occur. The instructor should present him or herself as an excellent role model by acting against misogyny and sexist behavior to set the proper tone in the school.

Now that I have discussed some of the social factors that affect women in Taekwon-Do, I would like to discuss some of the other realities of women's Taekwon-Do training and how we can better empower female students to participate and find value in our training.

Women's Self Defence courses offered in Martial Arts Schools

From self-defence aspect men usually want to learn how to protect themselves from a stranger: a mugger with a weapon, a carjacker, a drunk in a bar, or just because they have to walk through a neighbourhood where the crime rate is high.

However, as mentioned above, males are much less likely to have to face an attacker than women are. (Unless, of course, he is in law enforcement, has chosen a risky lifestyle, or happens to live in an exceptionally dangerous neighbourhood.)

When women sign up for martial arts classes and women's self-defence classes it is because they want to be able to protect themselves, mostly from men, for fear of being sexually assaulted, raped, or abused. Sadly, this is a realistic and, almost likely, fear for women.

While men are privileged enough to freely go about their day without fearing being attacked, women must watch what they wear, watch where they walk and how they walk, and beware of even casual conversations with strangers who try to engage them. Most women, even those not in martial arts, have a few defence strategies in mind at all times and are frequently on their guard.

Therefore, what women are seeking from self-defence is the ability to live their lives with more freedom and confidence. This is a vastly different perspective from men's approach to self-defence as men are looking for skills for an extremely extraordinary situation and women are looking for confidence for ordinary situations as well as skills for those extraordinary ones.

Most martial arts schools offer women's self-defence courses, and those classes are largely taught by men. These courses often offer physical training to defend against a "stranger" attack, which is the most common attack a male would encounter. However, the biggest risk of attack for a woman is not from a stranger but from someone she already knows (husband, boyfriend, family member, classmate, or co-worker). These are the worst forms of attack because they are more emotionally complex. It would be really difficult for most women to physically hurt someone they

know and as a result, there is a lot of internal conflict regarding their self-defence skills and when they would be willing/able to apply them.

The situation is made even more complex by the social pressures put on women, some of which were described above. Women are taught to ignore their instincts and put aside fears in order to be perceived as 'nice' or 'good.' A woman who acts on her fears and does not engage with a stranger who speaks to her might be verbally or physically attacked for being aloof or 'stuck-up.' In addition, in situations where she might need to defend herself against someone she knows, the training to ignore her instincts leads to her second-guessing her fears and trying to explain away danger signals. As a result, she becomes unable to judge when would be an appropriate time to use her skills or to extricate herself from a dangerous situation.

These complex and emotionally charged situations need to be addressed within self-defence training so women can re-learn how to trust their instincts. It does not serve our martial art well if the self-defence we are teaching does not actually allow some students to defend themselves against the attacks they are most likely to face.

Many times, a woman's self-defence class is offered as a way to recruit students and that is the main goal. Because most schools are run by men, they have no personal stake in learning the in-depth approach of teaching women's self-defence classes. In fact, it may not even occur to them that these other factors may exist because it is not part of their life experiences.

It is easier for instructors to teach the physical defences because they are familiar with them, and, even if it occurred to them to include other aspects, it would take a lot of time and effort to research and develop a program which contains psychological information. Many school owners would not feel they would reap enough monetary reward for the added effort.

An effective self-defence class for women should be based on the kinds of assaults women most experience and should promote assertiveness, self-confidence, and self-worth. Instructors need to understand why women are so often attacked and how that is part of a bigger problem of sexism in our society.

Therefore, self-defence for women needs to include much more sociological and psychological information, as well as the physical skills involved in defending themselves. We have to undo some of the socializing that has been placed upon women and remind them that women are just as valuable as men. We have to teach women that it is ok to be aggressive and impolite sometimes. It is ok to say no. It is ok to put your safety above

possibly hurting someone's feelings. It is ok to be assertive and stand up for yourself. Truly, the best place to start with teaching women to defend themselves is by teaching them to recognize the early signs of abuse and mental manipulation, i.e. undermining self-confidence and self-worth, controlling behaviour, and possessiveness. The best line of self-defence would be to have the knowledge to spot the red flags that signal a potential abusive situation and eliminate the risk before anything can happen. If martial arts schools do not address the psychological aspects of self-defence training, they fail the people who need it most: women.

In other aspects of our martial arts training, we are taught to be aware so that we can recognize a difficult situation before it turns bad and try to avoid fighting. This is the same teaching that should be done in a women's self-defence course: only in this case we are avoiding being attacked. Self-defence classes should teach a set of different scenarios for when the attacker is known. These should be practiced with realism so that if it were ever needed the exposure is there and the self-defence training would kick in.

In my Taekwon-do training I feel there is a deficit in the area of women's self-defence. I think that the IIC's could offer more training in self-defence, especially women's self-defence. The skills and information women need to defend themselves are not being taught in class or in self-defence courses. After all, Taekwon-Do is a self-defence martial art and women need the training the most.

This would also be of benefit to males because they will be better equipped to instruct all their students and it would help to make them aware of some of the social issues they do not necessarily notice, and they could be part of the solution for stopping this sort of behaviour among other men.

Other issues unique to women

Women's and men's bodies differ. Despite what our society tells us, (and our martial art sometimes implies) this does not mean that men are automatically stronger, and women are automatically weaker. Instead, it means that we will have different strengths and skills and it would benefit Taekwon-Do if we recognized that and worked to incorporate that variety of skill and strength into our practice. It would be especially useful for us to include fitness training that acknowledges some of the disparity and makes some corrections rather than disparaging one group or the other.

That being said, there are some specific physiological challenges that women face in Taekwon-Do and it would be a good idea to acknowledge

and address them rather than pretend they do not exist. If we act as if these challenges are not present, we leave women frustrated and feeling ashamed of their bodies and that is not acceptable, especially in a sport that prides itself on physical training.

Doboks and Sparring Gear

Women's bodies are shaped differently than men but all Doboks are designed for the male form. As a result, women are often left feeling uncomfortable in the uniform in which they must train, or they have to make a variety of adjustments to their Doboks. This adds an additional feeling of exclusion because even the uniforms are telling them they do not belong.

For many women, their hips are larger than their upper bodies. Their torsos are usually shorter and their legs longer than men's. Because we have a unisex dobok which is actually suited to men's bodies, many women have trouble in getting the dobok to fit well.

Often, to get the pants long enough, the waist is too big, and the top is too long. If the woman has large hips the pants will fit but the top will be too big. While it might be too complex for a dealer to bring in a whole separate line for women, a simple solution to help women find a good fit would be to sell the pants separately from the top.

A similar problem exists with Taekwon-Do sparring gear, because most women seem to fall in between sizes and as a result have poorly fitting gear. This again is probably due to the fact the sizes are measured for men. This problem could be alleviated by offering a few more sizes with smaller increments.

Martial arts shoes have similar issues. I have not been successful in finding a pair that fit properly; every pair has been too wide. I suspect this is another example of assuming that males are the standard, so everything is being made to accommodate them.

If we want to attract more women in martial arts, simple things like having a greater size range in equipment would remove some barriers.

Women's Bodies

Women have breasts and menstruate. This might be is the last thing a male instructor wants to think about, let alone deal with, but it is a reality for women and must be acknowledged. Obviously, there are privacy issues to consider and instructors must be aware that it is unacceptable to comment on a woman's breasts or to attribute her mood to her menstrual cycle.

It would be better for instructors to just recognize that at any given class there are females who are dealing with issues related to their bodies. This may mean they require additional trips the washroom, or they may not be comfortable taking some stances or executing some kicks at certain times. It can be difficult to distinguish ordinary reluctance from a reluctance related to menstruation, but it is better to err on the safe side and not make too big a deal out of it rather than embarrass someone unnecessarily.

Also, since each woman experiences these things differently, both male and female instructors should be aware that female students can be in a lot of pain during menstruation. That pain will vary in location and intensity from woman to woman but is generally focused on the breasts and abdomen. When asking students to perform drills such as practicing punches in the chest, or kicks to the stomach, this can be exceptionally painful. The best way to deal with this is not to draw attention to students who may be menstruating but offer an alternate exercise, giving all students more than one way to accomplish the same drill. This way all students are practicing the drill at their own preference without any attention being drawn to the situation.

Another consideration when women are training is that many women who have had children, particularly those who did not have a long-standing fitness regime, are likely to have pelvic floor issues. This means that they can suffer from something called stress incontinence - their bladder leaks during high impact activities. So, performing bouncing exercises, jumping jacks, or other plyometric drills might cause them to experience bladder leakage. Generally, the woman is prepared to deal with the situation but should a woman have an 'accident' it would be best not to call attention to it. Also, it would be kind to be aware of the possibility and alternate plyometric exercises with lower impact activities or to offer an alternate choice of exercise.

Finally, instructors should be aware that women can train while they are pregnant. Obviously, this is dependent upon permission from her doctor and some accommodations may have to be made but overall, the female body is amazing during reproduction and the fetus is very protected in the womb. I had a female student who trained right up until one week before she had the baby and returned to class three weeks after the baby was born!

Conclusion and Some Guidelines for Creating a Woman-Friendly School

Taekwon-Do, as a traditional martial art, was designed for men and, in many ways; it still holds men as the standard and treats women as a deviation. I would like to see Taekwon-Do grow and expand to include a wide recognition of the skills and life experiences that women can and do bring to the martial arts.

I am not asking for special treatment for women, I am asking that our unique experiences be part of the information that is used in program design. I think that including information about women's lives, their experiences, and the way their bodies move and operate in our instruction and planning will make Taekwon-Do richer and more valuable for everyone.

If our goal is to increase our membership and to retain our students, it is especially important that we recognize the needs of ALL students and make an effort to meet them.

As part of that goal, I have prepared a preliminary list of guidelines to help instructors make their schools more welcoming for female students.

Guidelines

Whenever possible, schools should have female instructors in the same level of authority as male instructors, not just teaching small children and beginners but teaching higher ranks as well. This would provide strong role models and help female students to feel that it is possible for them to reach those higher ranks.

Instructors should educate themselves in awareness training for women, understanding some of the issues women face in their lives and in class. This would enable instructors to be more effective in training female students and provide them with a more useful martial arts curriculum.

Instructors should create a safe environment for women to train, this includes ensuring that sexist commentary is not permitted and that women are encouraged to work to their full potential.

In order for women to be encouraged to continue training and reach a black belt level, they must be able to see examples of women 'like them' who have reached that goal. This can be achieved through an increase in female

include successful female martial artists, diagrams that include female figures as well as males, and in general, having promotional materials that depict women in a non-sexualized, and extraordinarily strong way.

Whenever possible, treat students in a gender-neutral way.

Do not use female terms for the easier ways to do exercises, i.e. Don't say that pushups from the knees are women's pushups

Insist that all students treat each other with respect. i.e., don't tolerate any sexist remarks, i.e., you kick like a girl, you look cute when you spar. You will win because you are pretty.

Do not tolerate any harassment or bullying, i.e., a male sparring a female without concern to control the techniques just to prove he is stronger.

There should be separate change rooms for males and females. If that is not feasible there should be one or two small private change rooms.

Be conscious of how often you call on women to do 'housekeeping' tasks like sweeping or getting water or organizing social events. Making these tasks 'women's work' encourages gender stereotypes. Ask a boy to sweep and ask a girl to lift the pads back to the storage.

Invite women to demonstrate techniques and patterns as often as you invite men to do so. Women *might* be less inclined to step forward to demonstrate but it is important that they learn that they have the same skills - even if they are nervous about it.

This could be valuable for all students - consider having resource sheets that students can access (online or in person) that address some common issues for martial artists. Some suggestions could be upper body exercises, flexibility exercises, balance exercises, core exercises, and exercises for the pelvic floor.

Development and implementation of a "Women's Committee" by the International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF). We already have many female role models with excellent leadership skills within our organization and the Women's Committee would be an excellent avenue to implement the guidelines that I have proposed in this thesis.

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