

“The issue of weight is a personal responsibility” –
Demands for performing in gendered karate in the
Western neoliberal society

“El problema del peso es una responsabilidad
personal” – Exigencias para ser-y-rendir en el kárate
generificado en la sociedad neoliberal occidental

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Recibido/Received: 12-06-2023. Aceptado/Accepted: 27-11-2023.
Cómo citar/Citation: Turelli, Fabiana C.; Vaz, Alexandre F.; & Kirk, David (2023). “The
issue of weight is a personal responsibility” – Demands for performing in gendered karate
in the Western neoliberal society. *Ágora para la Educación Física y el Deporte*, 25, 140-
166.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/aefd.25.2023.140-166>

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Abstract: Even though its roots can be traced to an ancient past, karate was born as a Japanese martial art around a century ago. It went through a sportivization process both by being spread from East to West and by becoming a combat sport. In this dual process, karate in Western society

has retained many of its traditional practices, loyal to what is understood as its Japanese roots, at the same time that it became an Olympic sport (though only briefly), the apex of the sportive world. Then, karate mixes within itself a complex identity, combining elements of a martial art and a combat sport in a manner of a selective tradition (Williams, 1977). Besides that, karate can be described as a gender binary environment, where the original and hegemonic masculine ethos prevails. Women are allowed to take part in the martial culture, but not without cost. They participated in the Olympic setting as much as men, having the same number of categories for fighting, for example. Notwithstanding, this equality does not necessarily mean fair inclusion and equity. In this paper, we explore how a select group of women who were members of a karate Olympic national squad dealt with the embodied experience of pain and suffering, both somatically and sociologically, from training sessions and competitions. We expect to provide some evidence of how karate is adapted to the Western model of elite sport; how women are prepared to supposedly address demands of non-discriminatory policies in sport; how women thrive and survive in the Western neoliberal high-level sport model and, despite their highlighted performances, are not duly acknowledged by male peers neither receive training taking into account female specifics, such as menstruation. We researched the Spanish women's Olympic karate squad in their preparation for the Tokyo 2020 (2021) Olympic Games. We conducted an ethnographic project with auto-ethnographic notes from the first author since full completion of the original plan was not possible given the advent of COVID-19. We focus mainly on semi-structured interviews conducted with the team while considering the experience of the first author of the article, who has been a karate practitioner for several years, to question, corroborate, and deepen understanding of data collected. We reflect on the somewhat precarious situation of women in the hyper-masculine environment of karate and the conditions that need to be in place to ensure their full and valued participation. We found that *karateka* women face several challenges to conquer their space in karate, often negotiating in a way of resisting adversities, and giving in, in order to retain hard-won privileges. Therefore, while women fighters can represent a subversion of structures, they still face patriarchal diktats.

Keywords: Gender; lived experiences; martial art; combat sport; reflexivity.

Resumen. Aunque sus raíces se remontan a un pasado antiguo, el kárate nació como arte marcial japonés hace aproximadamente un siglo. Pasó por un proceso de *deportización* al extenderse de Oriente a Occidente y convertirse en un deporte de combate. En este doble proceso, el kárate en la sociedad occidental ha conservado muchas de sus prácticas tradicionales, fieles a lo que se entiende como sus raíces japonesas, al mismo tiempo que se convirtió en deporte olímpico (aunque sólo brevemente), lo que está en la cúspide del mundo deportivo. Así pues, el kárate mezcla en sí mismo una identidad compleja, combinando elementos de un arte marcial y un deporte de combate a modo de tradición selectiva (Williams, 1977). Además, el kárate se circunscribe a un entorno binario de género, donde prevalece el *ethos* masculino hegemónico. A las mujeres se les permite participar en la cultura marcial, pero no sin costo. Participaron en el escenario olímpico tanto como los hombres, teniendo el mismo número de categorías de lucha, por ejemplo. Sin embargo, esta igualdad no necesariamente significa inclusión justa y equitativa. En este artículo, exploramos cómo un grupo selecto de mujeres miembros de un equipo nacional olímpico de kárate lidiaron con la experiencia corporal (*embodied*) del dolor y el sufrimiento, tanto somática como sociológicamente, durante las sesiones de entrenamiento y las competiciones. Esperamos proporcionar alguna evidencia de cómo el kárate se adapta al modelo occidental de deporte de élite; cómo se prepara a las mujeres para afrontar exigencias de supuestas políticas no discriminatorias en el deporte; cómo sobreviven y triunfan las mujeres en el modelo neoliberal occidental de deporte de alto nivel donde, a pesar de sus destacadas actuaciones, no son

debidamente reconocidas por sus pares masculinos ni reciben un entrenamiento que tenga en cuenta las características específicas femeninas, como puede ser la menstruación. La investigación se llevó a cabo con la selección olímpica femenina española de kárate durante su preparación para los Juegos Olímpicos de Tokio 2020 (2021). Realizamos un proyecto etnográfico con notas auto etnográficas de la primera autora, ya que la finalización completa del plan original no fue posible debido a la pandemia COVID-19. Nos centramos principalmente en entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas al equipo, considerando la experiencia de la primera autora del artículo, practicante de kárate desde hace varios años, y con experiencia para cuestionar, corroborar y profundizar en la comprensión de los datos recopilados. Reflexionamos sobre la situación un tanto precaria de las mujeres en el entorno híper masculino del kárate y las condiciones que deberían existir para garantizar que su participación sea plena y valorada. Hemos encontrado que las mujeres *karatekas* han de afrontar varios desafíos para conquistar su espacio en el kárate, a menudo negociando para resistir las adversidades y cediendo para conservar los privilegios ganados con tanto esfuerzo. Por lo tanto, si bien las mujeres luchadoras pueden representar una subversión de las estructuras, todavía han de afrontar dictados patriarcales.

Palabras clave. Género; experiencias vividas; arte marcial; deporte de combate; reflexividad.

INTRODUCTION

Karate is a multi-faceted sport. It is a martial art loaded with “tradition”, which is invented as is all tradition, according to Hobsbawn (1983), where rituals and protocols prevail (Segalen, 2002). In this traditional approach, *karateka*¹ often refer to Karate’s Eastern martial roots (Aguiar, 2009) in order to build a sense of honour, discipline and respect through hard work and establish a relationship with the martial philosophy that guides a *karateka* lifestyle (Lautert et al., 2005). Another facet of karate is that of self-defence (Krug, 2001). Supported by films promoting a popular view of martial arts (Bowman, 2010; 2013; 2017), this form of karate focuses on combating violence, even though at times it can become contradictory. These two facets often mix with one another. Moreover, karate has become a sport since its transition to the West (Chan, 2000; James & Jones, 1982; Macedo, 2006; Maclean, 2015). Many *dojos*² are dedicated to this competitive sports version of karate. It prioritizes competition but it is not capable of completely abandoning tradition, recalling it at convenience (see Williams, 1977). Tangled up in these interwoven facets of karate are the women fighters. In a martial art

¹ Karate practitioners.

² The martial practice location, in Japanese, which is equivalent to a gym in western terms, without the idea of a path (*do*) though.

designed by and for men, as much as is sport in the wider context (Theberge, 1985), women in themselves add another facet to karate. They can be both disruptive of the male space (Matthews, 2016; Theberge, 1985), and conforming to the hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) carried out in *dojos*.

We conducted a study with the Spanish women *karateka* squad in preparation to compete in the Olympic Games. Karate was included as an Olympic sport for Tokyo 2020 and faced issues from the COVID-19 pandemic which postponed the Games to one year later. Nevertheless, differently from boxing (Tjonndal, 2016), *karateka* women received the same number of weight categories as men in karate’s debut in the Olympic Games. This could indicate equality being achieved, but certainly, the matter is far more complex. In order to explore such complexity, we dedicate this paper to presenting the scenario of Olympic karate as well as to situate the women in the martial-sportive practice, specifically looking at their experiences of pain and suffering as challenging. In so doing we expect to provide some evidence of how karate is adapted to the Western model of elite sport; how women are prepared to supposedly address demands of non-discriminatory policies in sport; how women thrive and survive in the Western neoliberal high-level sport model and, despite their highlighted performances, are not duly acknowledged by male peers neither receive training taking into account female specifics, such as menstruation. It means, while women fighters can represent a subversion of structures, they still face patriarchal diktats.

In this direction we follow McRobbie’s (2015) thoughts on neoliberal times. She argues that, in the maintenance of existing power relations, “male dominance is carefully disguised through the *dispositif* which takes the form of feminine self-regulation” (p.3). The social context leads to the embodiment of a constant persecution for perfection, and a consequent difficulty to admit and deal with failure, which ends up in a harsh process of self-blaming. In addition, this neoliberal social structure rests on individualism and permanent competition, even away from sports environments, with western women holding the apparent status, though under disguised manipulation, of complete free choice and self-definition with total control over their bodies (McRobbie, 2015).

Our respondents are from and live in a part of the world supposedly advanced in terms of feminism, they are women from a country of the Western Global North. We use the standpoint of the first author of this article, who is a woman karate practitioner for almost 30 years, as a sort of

compass for our analysis blended with the other authors' of the paper criticality in a manner of triangulation. The first author is originally from Western Global South but has trained in karate in different countries from the Global North, yet missing, though, training in the East. Notwithstanding, her experience allows the analysis of karate's adaptations of martial art into an Olympic sport and the fit of women in it. In the future, such analysis can be expanded with training being taken in the East. For now, we start reporting the panorama of karate on its way to the long-awaited Olympic status, even if it was temporary and challenged by COVID-19 (see Bowman, 2020), read from the perspective of a woman practitioner. After that, we describe some methodological notes of our research. Next, we present data offered by athletes' testimonies that evidence how they are forged to be fighters through overcoming, somatically and sociologically, pain, suffering, weight challenges, and complying with neoliberal Western sports standards. Such standards stipulate demands on attesting value as fighters able to win and assuming the blame for all kind of failures.

1. KARATE'S JOURNEY, OLYMPIC GAMES, AND A PANDEMIC

In the Rio 2016 Olympic Games, it was announced that karate would be added to the next edition of the Games, to be celebrated in Japan, the birthplace of karate. For many *karateka*, it was a sort of dream to be able to participate in karate at the Games, which was the case of the first author. However, that was becoming less and less possible for her given the advancing age and athletic performance drop. Nevertheless, on hearing the news in 2016, she decided to resume training and research since, in an ethnographical journey of hers, both things were connected. Her previous research did not focus on gender though, once she was adapted to often being the only woman among men, be it in childhood, adolescence, or adult life. Due to that, at the beginning of her research career in Brazil, she and the second author researched masculinities in karate and pedagogy of body fights in sports karate and other martial arts of philosophical background (e.g., Turelli & Vaz, 2011; 2018)

Notwithstanding, her situation as a woman (Young, 1980) within a (hetero)normative³ space guided by strict gender binary roles and

³ We adopt a queer positionality in addressing a normative social order which, thus, encompasses gender binary and traditional sexuality. We make it clear that we do not

traditional martial pedagogy (Cynarsky, Obodynsk & Zeng, 2012), kept claiming for her positionality on gender matters. Even though she conquered a place as a karate black belt, she faced several challenges in the masculine environment for her condition as a woman, to the point of abandoning karate for a while. Such felt-in-the-skin challenges later turned into the motivation to resume training, a few competitions, and research, and verify if what happened to her was somewhat isolated issues or shared by other women at higher sports levels and more developed countries. In her international ethnographic trajectory between 2018 and 2022, she trained in karate in Spain, Scotland, and Italy during her PhD, and in Australia in her post-PhD. In addition to several conversations with international *karateka*, her embodied experience is used by us to question, corroborate, and deepen our understanding of data offered by elite athletes researched here.

Regarding karate’s inclusion in the Olympic Games, that was a brief, non-permanent condition. It was unknown to us at the beginning of the research, generating preoccupations about the study’s feasibility when we became aware of such temporality, but later on, ended up being a kind of differential that provided the research with an undeniable singularity. Karate is out of the 2024 Paris edition of the Games, although it can come back to the Olympic scene at another moment. Despite all critiques we have of sport as part of the entertainment industry with the Olympic Games working as the culmination of sports exhibitions (Amâncio et al., 2019), we advocate in favour of the inclusion of karate in such a scenario. From our point of view, this is a way of making the hierarchical combat sport to some extent open and watched by sports regulators’ bodies, a situation that can be uncomfortable to established men masters or *sensei*, as they are called in Japanese, but can hopefully be positive for women insiders.

Karate beyond the elite level was strongly affected by taking part in the Olympic setting, as data evidenced (Turelli, 2022). On the one hand, for so-called traditional karate, opening up to the Olympic scenario would represent a loss of value for the martial art. The advocators for purist (taken as) original Eastern or traditional karate usually do not support a unified

agree with such (hetero)normativity, instead, we criticize it. We want to clarify our queer approach though, following lisahunter’s (2017, p.1) definition as follows: “queer theory seeks to dismantle categorical notions, challenge the heteronormative perspective, and move beyond sex, gender and sexuality categories”. In addition, we are describing the traditional *karateka* environment, which is supported in and follows the heteronormative order.

approach to karate, a stance which they hope will prevent neoliberal features of reaching their structures. The outcome of this is a plurality of schools and styles of karate, following different masters and often claiming the right to certain pure ancestry or direct heritage from the tradition (for a wider view of the matter, see the interesting work of Miller-Idriss, 2020). It seems to be that karate took a long time to rise the Olympic status due to disagreement among the different bodies responsible for the forms of karate in the world which generated some disorganization and insubordination.

On the other hand, for fans of karate as a combat sport, becoming an Olympic sport represented an opportunity for expansion. There were karate world championships since 1970⁴ and international competitions establishing a ranking of competitors, but opening karate broadly to the Olympic context seemed to confront its purist side, recalling ideas of *amateur* sport (Gay, 1995) versus its despised commercialization (Vigarello, 2008). An international karate governing body named World Union of Karate Do Organizations, WUKO, was created in 1970 seeking to address “the different styles of karate, diversity of the rules and lack of unified protocols that govern any type of competition”⁵. In 1992 it received a name update, becoming the World Karate Federation, WKF, the one in charge of Olympic karate, when it occupies such position. According to the WKF website (data from 2014) and Rios et al. (2018), approximately 100 million people take part in competitive karate.

The advent of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, COVID-19, caused the postponement of the Games for one year, something unprecedented in the history of the Olympic Games, Modern and even Ancient. The *karateka* debut in the Games scheduled for 2020 happened in 2021. It again attributes singularity to our research even though at the time of data collection such uncertainty generated preoccupation. The first author had planned to follow athletes to Tokyo as part of the ethnography. However, on March 20, 2021, the Five Parties (the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG), the Organising Committee Tokyo 2020 and the Government of Japan) announced that the Games would be held without a foreign audience. Athletes would need to comply with a series of measures to be able to participate without causing health complications.

⁴ <https://www.wkf.net/thebook/>, accessed on 26/07/2021.

⁵ <https://www.wkf.net/thebook/>, accessed on 26/07/2021.

Therefore, the research plan needed to be reviewed and adapted as will be described in the methods.

The period of total confinement lived in Spain in 2020 evidently affected athletes' fighting performances but it also was reported as a necessary pause in the intense travelling and competing pace. They resumed training as soon as possible and had national competitions yet in 2020, wearing masks to compete, and being watched by no public. Internationally, competitions resumed in mid-March 2021, with the Premier League in Istanbul. In the next section of the chapter, we will summarize the methodology used, which is an outcome of the necessary adaptation to a challenging time but taken as an opportunity to explore and creatively build something new and trustworthy.

2. METHODOLOGY

Our perspective starts from historically and culturally informed social processes, thus social constructionism is the foundational paradigm for this research (Krause, 1995). It is also supported by critical feminist theory, taking inspiration also from critical pedagogies (Freire, 2005; Kirk, 2020). Our initial plan was constituted of an ethnography of the women's Spanish Olympic karate squad using as tools for data collection observations, some participant observations, interviews, discussion groups, and attending the Tokyo Games. The circumstances forced us to change this plan, thus we relied on the first author's experience internationally as a woman karate practitioner and amateur athlete, combining her auto ethnographical notes with qualitative techniques of data collection, mainly becoming, though, an interview-based study, combined with a video analysis of the styles of fighting of the *karateka* women (Turelli et al., 2022) and auto ethnographic notes allowing triangulation of data collection techniques.

In March 2020 we started observations of the national meetings of the squad in Madrid, which usually happened previous to their travels to compete abroad. Notwithstanding, the observations were disrupted by the COVID-19 lockdown as much it was not possible to carry out participant observations with the team⁶, and nor could the first author travel to Tokyo. We kept the planned interviews of the Spanish women athletes and their coaches, having to turn them into online interviews. So, in order to have

⁶ Participation in amateur training sessions was continuously carried out. With the lockdown that was disrupted as well, of course.

interviews providing highly valuable information, we decided to carry out two with each of the participants (Hickey & Roderick, 2017). The first interview focused on respondents' karate profiles in a manner of approaching and establishing a sort of bond with them. The second interview was directed to the topic of research more properly, on gendered karate and embodied subjectivity (Turelli, Vaz & Kirk, 2023). This approach indeed led the interviews to provide highly relevant data. Due to that, and considering the pandemic situation, discussion groups were not formed. We turned to another source of information, which was the mentioned analysis of the style of fighting of the women through analysing videos of their best-performed championships (Turelli et al., 2022).

Information used in this article is derived from open-ended semi-structured interviews (Hammer & Wildavsky, 1990), which were conducted in Spanish between June and September 2020 and later translated into English. Men authors in the paper worked as experts in the sociology of sport questioning the first author's perceptions as an insider and triangulating researchers. Interviews were coded manually, answering to and re-elaborating an inductive system of categories previously thought of, which can be found in Turelli (2022). Participants are addressed through pseudonyms which can diverge among publications, although the study is the same. We have done that in a serious attempt to protect athletes' anonymity given their to some extent public positions. Our study received approval from the Ethics Committee of the Autonomous University of Madrid in 2019, under code CEI-102-1930. Regarding auto-ethnographic notes, we considered the work of Delamont (2019) but especially followed Standal and Bratten (2021) on the concept of embodied self-knowledge, and Landi (2018), who argues, and we agree, that auto-ethnographies "challenge the objectivity of a silent researcher" (p.6). In taking this approach, we are positioning ourselves while discussing data, which is presented next.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we report evidence of how *karateka* women comply with the requirements of a martial art turned into a combat sport in the Western context. Karate was not thought of as entertainment, but as a way of efficiency in fighting with unarmed hands (Lautert et al., 2005). Considering this turn, karate can be added as part of the civilizing process (Elias, 1992) by becoming a sport, with the regulations for violence that it

implies. Violence can still be found in sports for sure, and perhaps even more in combat sports, but the fact that there are several rules regulating violent excitement (Elias & Dunning, 1992), it is socially accepted, considered civilized, and even praised.

Then, karate as a combat sport is organized in weights to seek the proposed fairness in sport, especially in the Olympic context. It also opens to women, maintaining the binary gender order advocated in Western sport. We acknowledge that this is better than practices that simply exclude women, as it is reported happening in some societies from the East and the Western Global South. However, just allowing women to join consolidated structures is clearly not enough since there is a necessity for structural change, equality needs to be complemented with equity, and binarism⁷ itself is outdated asking for attention and equitable regulation. Nevertheless, for women’s participation in the Games, categories of weight for fighters were put together, and only individual *kata*⁸ was included. *Kumite*⁹ women Olympic categories were -55kg, -61kg and +61kg¹⁰.

Athletes’ trajectories in karate asked for a lot of them, leading them to integrate as a team in preparation for the dreamed Olympic experience, even if in fact they do not reach positions to go to Tokyo; and blaming them, in accordance with neoliberal times, when success was not achieved, which tragically is most of the cases. We expose data on these points as follows. We clarify that our stance is on an embodied, monist conception of being. Nyberg (2015) adopted a language that addresses the somatic of a whole being through the concept of embodiment developed by Merleau-Ponty (2005). We share her view. However, we are reporting the general dualist perspective of the sports environment, thus often using “the body”.

Challenges from pain, suffering, and sacrifice in sport

Becoming a *karateka* may be a painful experience, as much as it is reported in other combat sports (e.g., Green, 2011; Spencer, 2012;

⁷ We note that our claim is not related to inconsequently opening up competitions to be taken among genders. We would prefer advocating for a more plural and equitable categories system, working thus in favour of a not harming and even dangerous inclusion.

⁸ A choreography of martial blows against an imaginary opponent.

⁹ Fighting, which is structured by weight categories, usually -50, -55, -61, -68, and +68kg.

¹⁰ <https://www.wkf.net/olympics>, accessed on 03/02/2021.

Wacquant, 2002). Somatic pain is felt in training sessions, competitions, and in the general dynamics of *karateka* life. Possibly due to karate's roots in a martial art considered traditional, the way of looking at pain often is like a sort of purifying element, almost capable of purging defects. In addition to the background of a martial art that can be supported by ascetic philosophical origins (Aguilar, 2009), such an association with purification also resonates with the religious roots of sport (Pich, 2020). Many martial arts develop in a way that approaches religious practices (Brown, Jennings & Molle, 2009). Then, consciously or not, martial arts and sports people embody pain and suffering as part of their *duty*, finding in this pedagogy of pain and suffering (Turelli & Vaz, 2006) the way to transform their bodies into a polished instrument (Wacquant, 1998).

In a mixture of scientific knowledge of sports training with mythical beliefs of tradition, pain ends up being athletically praised. In the researched environment, *sensei* or coaches are able to apply punishment with the authority of experience and knowledge of the body's mechanisms of self-protection:

If you train alone, you feel tired, you stop. Your training has arrived here (signals a medium stage). If you train with someone who demands more of you, you don't stop and you get higher. Sure. Because the body protects itself. (...) By yourself, up to here (medium stage), you stop. The body can go higher if there is someone with a whip, cheering, motivating. (Hefastos, man coach, Interview 37 (2), 30/09/2020)

From this perspective, the hard, demanding, strenuous work that required sacrifice is what was worth it and dignifying. Sacrifice can become a peace-making element of athletes' internal disturbances. An athlete exemplifies this point:

I love that they are demanding, hard workouts, that when I finish I say "well, I've done my best and I can't even move." I mean... after 10 minutes I'm fine, but I love the workouts that are demanding, that I end it with the feeling that I have given everything and my body was no longer enough. (Minerva, Interview 1 (1), 29/06/2020)

Women athletes have no difficulties in enduring the strenuous dynamics of training, asking for that as pointed out by Minerva, in a way of feeling that there are no debts related to all they could do, in an attempt of avoiding neoliberal guilt. Such ability in enduring the toughness is

usually considered a sort of syllabus or basic martial art and combat sport requirement. Another *karateka* pointed out:

I believe that I am a person who tolerates pain quite well. (...) Many times I train with boys, and when they hit, they hit hard. Well, I never had to stop. For example, when you do these training sessions that you say "I want to die", well, I will die, but I will be there until the end. I have always thought that it was one of my strengths, to hold on like "I'm here until death." (Atena, Interview 5 (1), 21/07/2020)

However, to perform in the top-level sport, *karateka* need to go through a movement of differentiation from amateur athletes, embracing the scientific side of sports training to detriment of mythical beliefs of tradition. In amateur *dojos*, narratives of painful episodes often become almost heroic deeds, leading people to feel honoured due to their pain endurance. Amateur fighters may consider they "have at their disposal a rich 'motif vocabulary' that allows them to face pain (...) not through silent denial, but through personal valorisation and collective solemnization" (Wacquant, 1998, p.82). On the other hand, at an elite level, even though somatic pain is an inevitable element, it should not be worshipped or desired.

As an inevitable element, athletes end up embodying pain as something natural to their activity (Green, 2011), attributing less importance and mysticism than it finds in amateur *dojos*, despite that training tends to be more demanding at a high-level. Some athletes' comments evidence this naturalization of painful experiences:

Before training in the afternoon it is difficult for you to start or even do some movements with stiffness, but (...) against fatigue, the only thing that can cure it is to use willpower. (Diana, Interview 4 (1), 21/07/2020)

I have the pyramidal, the psoas quite loaded. (...) When I saw myself with the pain that I can't take it anymore, that's when I go (to the physiotherapist). When I know I can manage that, I forget. (Hestia, Interview 6 (1), 22/07/2020)

You live with pain; you have to live with pain. (Artemis, Interview 23 (1), 03/09/2020)

But athletes are seeking results, therefore pursuing that while feeling pain, for more honourable it could appear, is something not worshipped or

desired. This makes them take part in a transition process, that of a traditional tough martial art to a supposedly scientifically prescribed sport, as an athlete reported:

I always had the concept of "well, you have to hold on a little more", but sometimes it's the other way around. (Vesta, Interview 8 (1), 25/07/2020)

Vesta is showing that she learned how to endure and keep going even if at her limits, but that by being at high-level the dynamics change and she may need to stop on occasions in order to preserve a condition allowing her to compete. For sports training, the use of the technique aims to shape the body to progress increasingly to the maximum (Vaz, 2005), demanding it through doses of measured stress, following the principles of sports training (Dantas, 1998). Thus, in order to achieve results, pain must be managed to allow a planned use of the body. Coaches explain their procedures:

They will improve doing karate and if they cannot do karate because they are injured, they will not be able to improve. So my main objective is that they can do 100% of the karate that is proposed to them, by all coaches. (...) I do focus a lot on not having injuries. (Apolo, man coach, Interview 27 (1), 25/09/2020)

I am one of the coaches who think that less is more. Less is more as long as you do it well, and know what you are doing. If you want, you can do more, more, more, but having understood what you are doing, not doing for doing's sake. (Hermes, man coach, Interview 28 (1), 15/09/2020)

The objectives are set; the competition is set in which you want them to perform at 100%. (Apolo, man coach, Interview 27 (1), 25/09/2020)

Since pain does not replace results, the mythical sacrificial logic of the martial artist loses meaning in elite-level karate, a reason for critique from purists. An experienced athlete explains how to proceed and manage pain to achieve results:

Training is more complicated when you feel pain, if different negative parameters come together and in addition to feeling pain from an injury, there is a moment when you get frustrated, when you cry, and... You have to know how to control yourself, know your body and control what you can control. (...) Know when you have to stop and know how you have to train. (Ceres, Interview 7 (1), 24/07/2020)

Notwithstanding, even though there is present, to some extent, the scientific way of applying sports training, be it applied by coaches or by athletes themselves, it still happens in a process of bodily laceration. We mean, an impersonal process is in place, a sort of disembodiment of oneself, probably due to the need of one to become the aggressor of themselves. Following this reasoning, the way painful injuries are viewed draws attention (see Spencer, 2012). There is a normalization of the body shattering in high-level sport (Vaz, 1999). Athletes deal with their bodies as objects. They depersonalize and create a certain distance from themselves, as in these examples:

This little finger I broke in a championship, but I kept fighting and then I was third. With the black finger, but I competed. (Hera, Interview 9 (1), 27/07/2020)

The European (championship), I will always say, I won by the head I have. (...) When I started in the semi-finals I was crying because I couldn't hold my leg, I was already dragging my leg. And I said, “look, if I break my leg, well, I will break my leg, but I will win.” And well, I won. (Venus, Interview 3 (1), 14/07/2020)

On Sunday I decided to fight for bronze. When I fought that day they bandaged it (her foot) very hard, and then I lost, but well... I needed to be there with the spotlights, it was my moment, I had gained that moment. Everyone told me no, not to fight. Except the coach, of course. He was also interested in the medal, let's say. And me too. We said *ahead*, I train to fight. I don't train to... "I've been injured, what a shame, I'm going to recover", no. I'm going... If my foot was going to break, let it break completely! (...) When I arrived in Spain I had many problems, I was stopped for almost a month and a half. Or more. To this day I have not recovered my ankle. I have it without mobility. (Artemis, Interview 23 (1), 03/09/2020)

Sports training takes care of the somatic (Nyberg, 2015) to an extent so that it can perform to the maximum, at the same time that it is mistreated, also so that the body can perform to the maximum. The punishment inflicted on oneself is justified since it shapes the body and transforms it in the sense of power through technique, even though it is repressed in spontaneity. There is in place a sort of pedagogy that combines traditional martial binary view (Cynarsky, Obodynsk & Zeng, 2012), pain and suffering (Turelli & Vaz, 2006), toughness and attrition

(Rodrigues, Turelli & Kirk, in review), and yet demands over the way of fighting for women (Turelli et al., 2022). These criteria work in the direction of domestication and dressage of the body aiming at its higher athletic performance, even though such training impacts the person as a whole.

We consider that sports methods like these can count on the development of contradictory feelings and emotions towards oneself, in a sense of love and hate at the same target. Horkheimer and Adorno (1985) characterised this exactly as love-hate for the body. To stay in athletic progress, athletes learn to deal with themselves, or their embodied selves, in a reified way (Adorno, 1995). We envision that such a reification, for athletic tasks, can be a necessity; otherwise, athletes could not be able to submit to making violence to themselves. However, this submission to intense training or aggression against oneself in the name of athletic progression takes its toll. It produces imbalances that, as in a cycle that feeds it back, lead to pain and suffering.

The suffering due to deprivation and restriction is easily found in weighting. Although it is something operating at a somatic level, it also has impacts from a sociological point of view, strongly impacting women's lives. For many athletes, it is common to live in one weight and compete in another for different reasons. They gave testimonies on that:

I have always been gaining weight. When I entered the national team, I was -47kg. (...) Cadet I did in -47. Junior, -53, and under 21 (years old, U21), -55. (...) When I went to the senior European (older than 18 years) I was at -61, and in the U21 (championship in the same year), at -55. (Diana, Interview 4 (1), 21/07/2020)

My biggest problem is weight, always. I... can... I mean, physically I'm fine, technically I'm very good, but the weight yes, I'm... I'm out of the *kata* standard. The *kata* girls we usually are, they are small and the weight is between 50 and 55kg. On the other hand, I am 65. 67... 65. So, of course, they are always "you have to lose weight, you have to lose weight, you have to lose weight." (Proserpina, Interview 2 (1), 12/07/2020)

What I like least are the weight-ins. Without any doubt. Also when I am within my weight I always have the stress of "and if the scale, if it weighs less than mine?" When I go anywhere "and if I get fat on the airplane, and if I don't fit (the weight), and if I drink this glass of water?" It is a chaotic topic! (Atena, Interview 5 (1), 21/07/2020)

Right now I weight 55kg and I fight -50. (...) I have been so hungry, I love to eat, like everything. Before, maybe, I didn't want vegetables, now I eat everything because I have been very hungry. (Artemis, Interview 23 (1), 03/09/2020)

The preseason training, when you come with +3kg and you have to start to shape yourself, they blow you up, and it is disgusting how ungrateful the body is. You are off two weeks and your body seems to have forgotten everything, that makes me feel terrible. (Demeter, Interview 10 (1), 27/07/2020)

Weight represents a challenge for athletes because they cannot just move among categories according to their comfort but either remain in a category where they build a career, or to play with weight according possible needs of the team. In addition to these sports challenges, weight control relates to relevant aspects of contemporary society and construction of traditional femininity (see Bordo, 1997), again relating to the neoliberal load imposed on women and its demand on achieving standardized canons of perfection (McRobbie, 2015). The privations the athletes need to impose on themselves are considered their exclusive responsibility despite several social and marketing appeals. They repress themselves in order to tame the body and ultimately to achieve their goals in sport and life projects, but end up facing dissatisfaction by the need of imposing several limits on themselves, not being able to address some drives. This can lead them to experience intense love-hate for their bodies. In addition to the given situation, the subject of weight may yet be increased by menstruation. All athletes have something to say in this regard, from stories and complaints to claims:

Being with the period is very, very difficult. It affects me a lot in terms of fluid retention. And the level of stress that this generates when competing! Because it is no longer just being aware of your pressure to lose, to win, not to I don't know what... You also have to be aware that your period is affecting you because it is retaining fluids and you need to lose weight and everything that entails. To have the period and not be able to eat, and have to train hard, it generates a horrible level of fatigue and is overwhelming. (Minerva, Interview 1 (1), 29/06/2020)

As soon as (the period) comes to me I am more tired. Also, yes, the weight, even if it is 1kg more, it is there. And... we are wearing white, well, be aware if you have stained or... (Vesta, Interview 8 (1), 25/07/2020)

One: there is the first day that you do not like anything, but nothing, nothing, nothing. And two: you are clumsy, you sweat more and you are very clumsy technically speaking. Physically maybe not. But technically, you are clumsy, super clumsy. (Ceres, Interview 7 (1), 24/07/2020)

I think we should make a claim asking for more margin in weight-ins. Because this is something that is so... if they want proof, you could prove that you have the period. (...) They leave 200 grams, I understand that leaving +2kg would be a savagery, but imagine if it was 500 grams. And even so... I think that a bit more would be fairer than the same for everyone, because it is not the same for a boy to fit the weight than for a girl. (...) We meet girls at the weight-in, "how are you?", "I'm with my period, imagine." When someone says that, they usually have the face of "I have not eaten for four days." That's not fair. (Atena, Interview 5 (1), 21/07/2020)

In addition to the comments made, with extremely demanding training and the need to lose weight abruptly, it is not uncommon for women to face amenorrhea, as athletes reported:

I had a very irregular period, I did not get the period until I was 16. At 16 I was weighting 47kg and training four hours a day, then the amenorrhea set. (Diana, Interview 4 (1), 07/21/2020)

With the weight problem, when I would have my period and I have a weight-in, as my body is suffering so much because I do not eat and I don't drink, it does not come. So I have to weight, and only after a couple of days (I will have the period)... Until then, it does not come, until my body recovers a bit. (Artemis, Interview 23 (1), 03/09/2020)

The population average for menarche is 12.6 years old according to Takada and Lourenço (2004), while Diana said she had it at the age of 16. According to Rogero, Mendes and Tirapegui (2005), menstrual dysfunction will present itself when the body fat index is below 22% and is combined with exhaustive exercises, a situation to which, in *karateka* athletes' case, can be added the stressors around sudden weight loss.

We consider that *karateka* women need to deal with several difficulties to prove their value for the Western-turned combat sport that was brought from an Eastern martial art context, which they undeniably do. They face the challenges, and find ways to overcome them, not without a cost though. The search for success in the project of becoming an elite athlete is demanding, making requirements at athletic and personal aspects of life. Women athletes comply with that showing their fit for the positions

despite all adaptations they need to undergo and the self-responsibilities they take. In the neoliberal society that we are in, people are expected to control all aspects of their lives under the risk of being blamed if things go wrong (McRobbie, 2015). We provide some evidence of how it is affecting *karateka* specifically in weighting matters:

I also believe that those who suffer because of that (weight), I believe that they are not as responsible as they have to be, or as professional as they have to be. (Hermes, man coach, Interview 30 (2), 17/09/2020)

They are elite and then they have to be in the best (weight) situation. (...) Note that if they change their category, they could not participate in the Premier (League). "I weighed that four years ago and it was very good and now I got stronger, more muscle mass, stronger..." Also with age... +2kg... These are a lot of kilos for high competition and if they lose that category they no longer have scores to continue fighting in a Premier League. Well, it's one of the punishments of high performance. (Ares, man coach, Interview 34 (1), 29/09/2020)

Each person has to comply with the weight that corresponds to her. In the squad, they have a certain weight and they have to take care of themselves. It's a compromise. They cannot relax and two weeks before a championship to be with +5kg. This is real and it has happened to us. (...) Then they usually go dehydrated at the weight-in. Do you think that a person in that condition can give 100% the next day? Not at all. It's a mistake. It is a commitment of the athlete. (...) In the end of the day, the issue of weight is a personal responsibility. They know they have to fit the weight; they have to stay as close to that weight as possible. Two weeks before to be with +3, +4kg, do not eat... then in the competition they are a shame. (...) In the European Championship, I had a girl (heavily) dressed in a sauna for 40 minutes. She had run for an hour, she had +1kg to spare and she wouldn't lose it. (Hefaiostos, man coach, Interview 36 (1), 30/09/2020)

The blaming of women becomes acceptable if they do not manage and control aspects of their performance. There is a broad common sense understanding spread socially that periods and weight, as much as the pain and suffering coming from these, are under women's good or bad administration of their hunger and hormones. In addition to market appeals mentioned earlier leading to people's excitement, there is still not enough exploration of women's specifics in a satisfactory direction with knowledge on this clearly missing. The point on menstruation, once again, is not completely controllable as it can be thought by some. As showed

throughout the last testimonies, women athletes not controlling this aspect of their lives is taken as lacking professionalism. However, several factors around this, even in medicine, are currently not specific but wide, revealing, from our point of view, how women specifics are erased, denied and ignored (Joseph, 2021), applying general standards to them inappropriately.

CONCLUSION

Our aim in this article was to explore how a select group of women who were members of a karate Olympic national squad dealt with the embodied experience of pain and suffering from training sessions and competitions both somatically and sociologically. We presented the scenario of Olympic karate by situating the position of *karateka* women in the martial-sportive elite Spanish team, specifically looking at their experiences of pain and suffering as challenging. Karate was and is adapted to the Western model of elite sport, demanding of athletes and requiring infinite progress of them in a mechanical reifying process; women are included into the martial environment, a masculine site par excellence, though this does not mean that they belong or are considered true fighters. Their inclusion may address demands of non-discriminatory policies in sport since they are not equitably looked at but need to pursue standardized models, being blamed for not accomplishing high standards. Despite the researched women's group showed they face demanding training as much as cisgender men athletes do, they do not get equal recognition. By saying that we mean that women meet the criteria for high-level *karateka* in how they stand to pain and suffering from the martial environment as much as men, even facing other challenges than them, given that women can have issues such as menstruation and social demands of how to perform as traditional women. They embody sacrifices to the point of naturalizing them, usually accepting the pain and suffering from their craft without considering other ways of performing. This embodiment of a tough way contributes to a certain reification, which is to some extent a needed reification in sport, but that makes people less sensitive to pain, suffering, sacrifice, and, at times, even to abuse.

This situation could be increased for women considering that there can be in place a request for proof of value for performing as a fighter, leading women to respond to demands in order to attest they are as capable as men of fighting. Not responding to tough trials or complaining about them

could show fragility and act against women’s suitability for martial art since it supposedly evidences that they are performing tasks not suitable for them. With that, it would be women’s own fault if they suffer, given that it is due to their stubbornness, due to their nosiness on matters not proper for and of them. This can seem complex reasoning, however, the simplification of concepts and advocating for an objective and straight way of approaching things is in relation to a kind of masculinity that ends up being shallow, limiting and rude. Subjectivities are made by several aspects and are far more complex than something of easy and fast definition, in addition to the disguising of the way of power relations are maintained in society.

Blaming individuals for their misfortunes is an expanding way of acting in society. People assume that they are fully responsible for the good and bad things in life which frees governing bodies and institutions from taking some part of the responsibility. Everybody has a parcel of responsibility and protagonism in taking action, however, we refer to situations in and by which people are led to feel guilty even though they are partially victims. Western neoliberal societies are supporting, at the same time that they are supported by, competitive sport in a way that being defeated causes feelings of unsuitability, inferiority, unworthiness and others of similar nature, not considering that a competitive system allows only one person to feel “adequate” by being the unique champion. It means that the problem is in the established structure, being a matter of a systemic shortcomings and not of individuals. Athletes are led, then, to surrender everything they *are*, inflicting the hardest punishments on their embodied beings in order to achieve goals, often as their life projects. With that, if they fail, which will undeniably happen to most of them in this model of sport and society, there is a sort of life failure that they often need to face alone, given the individualistic competitive approach. Therefore, pain, suffering, and sacrifice are seen as justified for pursuing the achievement of the perfect goal. We argue that this situation is yet increased in women’s situation, once they are not a beneficiated parcel from patriarchy’s dividend (Connell, 1995), with the female sport being taken as not “real” sport in terms of performance due to the constant comparison to the male sport, a scenario that is similar or worse for women within martial arts.

We consider that *karateka* women have found a form of negotiation to make their presence in the karate martial-sportive environment. This sentence contains at least two different interpretative perspectives. The first is that women indeed are fighting to enter and conquer a tough space.

To do so they obviously are strong and able to make their points, resisting forms of power and domination over them. On the other hand, to do so as well, to be able to occupy such a space strongly established as a male preserve (Matthews, 2016; Theberge, 1985), they *need* to give in and adapt to demands in order to remain in elite teams. This is a form of negotiation probably shared by women in other sports. The second perspective for the first sentence of this paragraph is that of a negotiation in which women benefit from but also are a means to comply with policies for inclusion more than inclusion in itself. Undoubtedly, from our point of view, such policies, e.g., an equal number of weight categories for men and women athletes considering the binarism of karate, are necessary. Notwithstanding, we cannot help noting that women can be *used* to address rules without being taken seriously in positions, be it as athletes, referees, members of assemblies and governing bodies, and so on. We advocate that affirmative actions (Moraga-Contreras, 2020) need to be taken and expanded, otherwise, some women's posts would be ignored.

Finally, despite the Western model of elite sport holding a face of progress, it is known that the dynamics of such sport is based on exploitation, distancing from fair, inclusive, and equitable practices. Athletes can be aware of that to some extent, but possibly not fully informed of the neoliberal (self-blaming) approach. Sport is kept as a terrain that privileges men, though putting on *masks* of equality, which makes, specifically in the martial-sportive context of our focus as a hyper-masculine environment, the situation of elite *karateka* women somewhat precarious. We note that so many divergent opinions on women's sport and constant comparison to men's, may cause bewilderment and lead them to a certain confusion in their agency, despite they are indeed forged fighters who overcome pain, suffering, weight challenges, and comply with sports standards of neoliberal Western society.

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