

## Engaging Women and Girls in Martial Arts and Combat Sports: Theoretical Issues and their Implications for Practice

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On the 5<sup>th</sup> of February 2016, the [Martial Arts Studies Research Network](#) held its first one-day seminar, on the theme of gender issues in theory and practice. Hosted by the University of Brighton, the day drew around 30 delegates, including academics from various fields of study and martial arts practitioners from a range of styles. The day featured discussion on a number of themes on the topic of gender; while a [short summary of these can be found here](#)<sup>1</sup>, this report focuses on the key points raised by delegates during the first of two plenary sessions, addressing the ways in which clubs and gyms might best improve women's and girls' involvement in martial arts and combat sports (MACS).

The importance of this discussion stems from the unfortunate fact that various, unique barriers to women's and girls' participation continue to exist in such settings, despite few (if any) clubs formally closing their doors to female members. As within many similar sports-promotion debates, these barriers come in different forms, and therefore require different strategies to challenge<sup>2</sup>. Some of these are local in nature, and thus can be relatively straightforward for club managers, instructors, and practitioners to tackle, while others may be the results of much wider social problems, and thus cannot simply be solved 'on the ground' or 'overnight'. In the sections that follow, we initially attempt to draw out the nature of some of these difficulties before addressing the manner in which they might be overcome, as discussed during the seminar's plenary session.

### Defining Problems

Early discussion among the delegates pointed towards the notion that MACS continue to be thought of as 'masculine' owing to their direct/indirect connection to 'fighting'. While the 'masculinity' attached to these activities is certainly open to question from the point of view of academics and practitioners, the fact that this assumption exists in wider society cannot be dismissed, and nor can the implications it carries for the potential exclusion of many women and girls. Being something of an intangible problem, and one that is woven into deeply embedded social norms outside of gyms and clubs, tackling this issue requires a certain amount of creativity on the part of promoters of MACS.

A second important problem centred on the day-to-day realities of many women's lives, and how issues such as childcare, work-life balance, affordability of training and other, related challenges create somewhat more 'real' or tangible problems for their involvement. Furthermore, a relative lack of role models in the mainstream media, along with the tendency for female martial artists to be sexualised<sup>3</sup> in movies and television shows, meant MACS may have little appeal for some women and girls. Considering also the general over-representation of men in many clubs, these issues can combine to create a less-than-inviting social environment for women, placing questions over

whether engagement is really 'worth it' next to the competing priorities they may be facing elsewhere in their lives.

The final key difficulty identified by delegates raises an important question over these other sets of problems, focusing on the need to differentiate between groups of women. While it is relatively easy to talk in highly generalised terms about the needs of women and girls – and to a certain extent, this remains a necessary step in overcoming some patterns of exclusion – the fact remains that differences within this group make effective 'one-size-fits-all' solutions tougher to identify or put into practice. For instance, group differences revolving around age, social class, and ethnic background, along with individual differences in motivation, prior experience, training goals, and so on, mean that steps taken to improve women's and girls' abilities to engage in MACS require careful implementation via close sensitivity to various forms of difference<sup>4</sup>.

## **Sketching Solutions**

In the sections below, we outline some of the proposed strategies for tackling these issues that were raised on the day. While some of the suggestions are simple and relatively low-cost propositions, others were difficult to envisage being implemented without time and money being spent. Yet, we argue that even the more problematic ideas are worth considering, if only to start thinking in some potentially positive directions.

### ***1 – Training Environments***

The first issue that was raised on this point centred on the importance of creating welcoming, safe and trusting social environments in MACS clubs, which (perhaps depending on the particular discipline) often tend to be numerically 'male-dominated'. It was noted by many delegates that casual, throw-away comments, or certain types of banter that might be heard in training settings, can lend unintentional support to the idea that MACS are 'manly' activities and that women and girls do not really belong within them.

For instance, telling students to 'man up!', or describing lighter forms of exercise as 'girl' versions (press-ups on one's knees as the clearest example) implies that being tough and strong are uniquely male qualities, and thus being weak and feeble are associated with the bodies of women and girls. This inference may not be deliberate, but its effects can still be off-putting, by reinforcing out-dated assumptions of female inferiority that hardly lead to the kind of positive, motivational climate gyms and clubs should provide for all of their members. Thus, instructors, coaches and club managers need to be mindful of how language can create climates of exclusion, and do what they can to discourage this form of sexism that often goes by 'under the radar' in typically male-dominated spaces.

Secondly, it was noted that creating environments wherein women and girls feel included and safe might also involve considering the physical spaces within which training takes place. While there may be a certain enthusiasm among some MACS practitioners for the stereotypical 'spit-and-sawdust' type of gym, it was also highlighted by several delegates that such spaces are very often

assumed to be associated with certain notions of manliness that can be quite unattractive to many women and girls (not to mention a good number of men and boys, too). During one of the seminar's earlier presentations, [Paul Senior of Eastbourne Boxing Club](#) had discussed how considering simple things such as basic cleanliness and hygiene, and improving the amount of natural light in the gym, had helped EBC gain a more welcoming and inviting image, enhancing its appeal to various new members, including many younger women.

Further considerations of the physical space in gyms highlighted the importance of having separate male and female changing facilities. Several female delegates shared stories of their own (or others') awkward experiences of joining new gyms and not knowing where to change, or being made to feel uncomfortable when men began changing immediately in front of them. While there was some discussion as to whether having separate changing rooms might be feasible for smaller clubs, or whether mixed changing was not, in some way, a positive thing for breaking down gender barriers, it was generally agreed that making (particularly new) female club members feel welcome and safe should be prioritised if clubs wanted to develop their female membership, and that private changing facilities could help accomplish this wherever they were possible. Indeed, when questions over some women's religious observances regarding personal modesty were included in the discussion, this provision became all the more important.

A final point regarding training environments drew attention to the use of posters and other imagery within clubs. Noting that some club spaces tend to be decorated with images of famous fighters, or motivational posters featuring images of martial artists, it was suggested that this presented a fine opportunity to challenge the assumed 'manliness' of MACS by deliberately using images of women alongside those of men. Adorning training spaces with images of champions such as Nicola Adams (amateur boxing), Holly Holm (MMA), or Jade Jones (taekwondo) gives visibility to women's accomplishments and provides a clear indication that women are welcomed and valued within training spaces. However, it is important that the meanings which might be attached to such imagery are also considered, such that photos highlighting women's athletic abilities rather than more stylised and potentially sexualised images would be preferred. This same principle might also be applied to a club's presence online – a vitally important space for advertising to potential new members.

## ***2 – Instructors and Instruction***

While training environments were considered a crucial part of the puzzle, the people that populate, manage and perform within them were argued to be just as important. In this respect, several delegates noted the value of having prominent female instructors within clubs. Few things stand to challenge the idea that MACS are 'by men, for men' better than when women take charge of training environments and possess some degree of ownership over practice. Some delegates noted that their own perceptions about women's involvement in MACS had been profoundly shaped by early experiences of training with and under other women, and so it was noted that encouraging women to take classes or coach fighters was a key strategy to challenge gendered misconceptions of the activity.

However, it was also noted that the types of roles women coaches are assigned in clubs needs careful attention. When women only ever coach other women, the challenge to gendered assumptions about MACS is limited, as there is the continued inference that men cannot really be taught anything about fighting by a woman, re-asserting old assumptions about male pre-eminence (this is similar to many professional sports, where men regularly coach women but very few women coach men).

Likewise, when women are only assigned to instructing young children and/or novice practitioners – which many delegates noted as a somewhat normal practice – this replicates gendered ideals surrounding women’s assumed ‘motherly’ nature and potentially devalues the contribution they could also make to the development of others, such as clubs’ more senior-graded members or competitive fighters. Therefore, it was argued that being aware of unconscious biases in distributing coaching roles should be a priority for club managers, whereby individual female instructors’ specific talents could be considered, rather than simplistic judgements based on traditional gender roles.

A second point was raised with respect to instructors, which centred on the importance of providing adequate education to those working within the various MACS disciplines. Grasping the nature of specific problems facing different groups of women and girls is not an easy proposition – particularly for men, who will not have personally experienced many of the problems outlined above. As the people who are arguably best-placed to affect the physical and social environments of clubs, it was suggested that a special responsibility falls on coaches and instructors, but also that this must be shared by those who regulate their practice.

Therefore, it was advocated that governing bodies of various MACS should consider implementing specific awareness training as part of their qualification schemes wherever possible, to help coaches and instructors affect positive change while challenging popular, gendered misconceptions as identified above. Given the weight of academic interest in this area, it is likely that the development and refinement of such coach development toolkits will be a fruitful project for scholars and practitioners within the Martial Arts Studies Research Network to collaborate on.

The last issue for instructors to consider was to think about what it might mean to provide differentiated styles of coaching and support to their female club members. It was noted with some concern by several delegates that, as is often the case in debates around women, sports and gender, individual women are seen as little more than a gender category, treated purely on the basis of their assumed needs arising from it. No matter how sophisticated or well-researched our understanding of women’s and girls’ needs become, it is vital that instructors remain mindful of individual difference and adapt their approaches accordingly.

In this sense, a sensitive balance between attending to gender issues whilst not assuming they are the only things that matter in women’s and girls’ lives needs to be incorporated into how instructors design sessions for, market to, and interact with the women in their gyms. Such nuanced understandings need to be built into any coach education programmes alluded to above, to enable effective provision across contexts and between different groups.

### ***3 – Segregation and Integration***

Building from the questions raised over differentiated coaching, the seminar delegates questioned the relative merits of 'women-only' training sessions. A common feature of some MACS clubs' programmes, as well as a regular element in many fitness centres and sports clubs, it was argued that creating the kind of welcoming, inclusive, safe spaces discussed earlier could be handily accomplished by providing exclusive places for women and girls to train.

While it is tempting to write off such an idea as a kind of 'reverse sexism' because it excludes men and boys<sup>5</sup>, the fact that many women find physical training in the presence of men to be intimidating needs to be seriously addressed. In so far as this form of provision does not significantly impact others' access to clubs, it can be a positive means of securing wider engagement. Furthermore, it was noted by one group of delegates that a sex-segregated environment can be particularly beneficial for women who take up training after having suffered from male abuse, as close physical contact and the experience of sparring a male partner might be potentially traumatic in such cases.

However, some meaningful criticism of this kind of provision emerged around the notion that women-only sessions risks creating a condescending atmosphere, with the implicit status of being 'second class' club members becoming attached to it. While by no means a guaranteed outcome, this possibility nevertheless raises the question of how steps taken to ease the process of inclusion might backfire in certain ways. As such, those in favour of women-only sessions argued that they are best used alongside regular, sex-integrated training sessions, to ensure that women still retain access to all of the same benefits enjoyed by their male club mates whilst also providing the aforementioned 'safe space' to ease their entry into participation.

A similar, connected issue arose towards the close of the plenary session, concerning the tendency for MACS to be marketed to women in specific, supposedly 'female-friendly' ways. Several delegates were particularly critical of the assumption that, as women, they must train for reasons connected either to self-defence or aesthetic, fitness-related goals – such as weight loss. While there is certainly no reason to disparage purposeful self-defence training or exercising for body management, women who want to become competitive athletes, or train for any other reason within their respective disciplines, are not well-served by the assumption that these reasons alone are why women train. Simply put, this feeds the belief that certain types of engagement (i.e., competitive fighting) are only for men, thereby silently working to deter women from the full range of participation options.

In this respect, it was suggested that marketing efforts aimed at attracting women into clubs should not disproportionately emphasise self-defence or fitness management, but also highlight other reasons for training and/or draw attention to the competitive achievements of women fighters in high-profile competitions. This was thought to be a positive step in challenging persistent stereotypes that place limits on how women and girls think about what is and isn't appropriate for them within MACS. While common-sense beliefs about apparently 'feminised' forms of practice being the best way to recruit female members to clubs may endure, it is important that instructors consider their impact on women whose goals and ambitions extend beyond them.

## Conclusion and Further Reading

The plenary session discussed in this report provided a brief but highly productive forum for generating debate around several key issues that make up a complex problem for those working in, practicing, and studying MACS. The issues raised, along with practical solutions suggested for them, should provide a meaningful starting point for anyone interested in thinking through and trying to work out how to promote and develop their provision for women and girls. However, while many of the themes outlined above resonate closely with academic research on women and girls in MACS (and sporting activities more widely), one 40-minute discussion among 30 people cannot adequately cover this topic in as much detail as we might have liked, nor provide much depth of evidence to support the claims and suggestions made.

Indeed, there was little discussion of how best to develop competitive opportunities for women, which some delegates identified as a key problem in their own participation; there was only minimal discussion of non-contact or fitness-oriented martial arts classes, which appear to be marketed mostly to women and girls; and among yet other issues, the question of exactly how far clubs and gyms stand to benefit from improving their appeal to female members was not dealt with. To that end, we conclude this report by pointing towards several useful sources that can expand upon this discussion and open further important topics of debate. These are likely to be of interest to instructors and practitioners, and also academics and students, for whom improving or simply better understanding women's and girls' engagement in MACS is of interest:

1. Martha McCaughey's book, [\*Real Knockouts: The Physical Feminism of Women's Self-Defense\*](#), is an excellent starting point for researching this phenomenon. Her ideas are frequently used by other researchers in this field, and her blog (with Jill Cermele), [See Jane Fight Back](#), offers frequent commentary on the politics of women's self-defence training.
2. Kai Morgan's blog, [Budo Inochi](#), includes several thought-provoking posts and helpful resources related to women in martial arts. Her ebook, [How to make your Dojo more Female-Friendly](#), is free to access online and provides more depth on many of the practical points that are touched on here, addressing several more besides.
3. L.A. Jennings's recent book, [She's a Knockout! A History of Women in Fighting Sports](#), tells a detailed story of women's competitive involvement in boxing, wrestling, MMA, and other combat sports. Her blog [Total Knockout](#) (with Alissa Rudloe) discusses fitness, fighting, fashion and feminism.
4. Our own most recent contribution to work in this area can be found in the edited book, [Global Perspectives on Women in Combat Sports: Women Warriors around the World](#). Many of the individual essays can be sourced for free from the authors with a little online searching ([our introductory chapter sits here](#)).
5. Eileen McDonagh and Laura Papanno's book, [Playing with the Boys: Why Separate is not Equal in Sports](#), discusses issues around integration and segregation in sports in much detail. While not concerned strictly with MACS, their arguments are well worth reading to follow up on the topics touched on briefly here.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As well as [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)...

<sup>2</sup> For further details around barriers to women's and girls' participation in sport and related activities, please visit the [Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation](#) website.

<sup>3</sup> This refers to when women appear on screen, or in still images such as those used in adverts, in ways which over-emphasise their sexuality. This is most often directly connected to their supposed appeal to heterosexual men. It risks making women's abilities as martial artists (or athletes, etc.) seem non-existent or trivial, or at least far less important than their attractiveness.

<sup>4</sup> A similar point was raised concerning generalisations about MACS themselves. Here, some delegates argued that particular disciplines were inherently more inclusive while some 'lagged behind'. However, others pointed out that differences between clubs were more important, such that a 'macho' environment could just as well exist within a karate dojo as a kickboxing gym, for instance. The point here is for instructors of all disciplines to think critically about what they can actually do to enhance inclusion, rather than assume that their art is naturally welcoming to all.

<sup>5</sup> In our experience, this is a common complaint from (some) men whenever female-only spaces are created – either in sports or elsewhere. What this criticism fails to register is that far greater opportunities exist for men in spheres where female-only spaces are needed, most often shaped by intangible cultural forces as identified earlier in this piece. As such, we reject the majority of these claims over their limited appreciation of the wider realities of gender-based exclusion at work today.