

**“A boy is always going to be superior to a *girl*” – The ideal of *fighting like a man*
or accepting inferiority for women *karateka***

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Abstract

In a gender binary environment such as karate, oriented by a traditional martial pedagogy (Cynarsky et al., 2012), the way women express themselves is often seen as disconcerting and irrational. For many men, women are far from achieving the ideal of a fighter, what is around a high-performance male model, not attainable even by most non-alpha men. The idea of one-size-fits-all turns into one-size-fits-men. Often, *karateka* women seek to model themselves on men in order to conquer a space in the challenging environment (Turelli et al., 2022a). However, the way they express themselves has differences in relation to the way men do it, given the gendered social embodiment (Mason, 2018; Young, 1980). There are in place bodies' expressions and beliefs, leading to the subject of women's masculinization, in addition to internal martial differentiations in positions occupied by *kata* and *kumite* athletes. In this paper, we will explore these ideas seeking ways to disrupt the hegemonic masculine domination experienced. We researched the Spanish women's karate team in preparation to the Tokyo 2020 (2021) Olympic Games. Athletes interviewed offered narratives of uncomfortable situations they identified related to power and machismo, helping to provide insight for possibilities of subversion.

Keywords: Gender, Martial arts and combat sports, Embodiment, Tradition, Patriarchy.

1. Introduction

Fighting is not a degendered practice. The embodiments of gender we do throughout life are brought to the karate mat as well. Masculine embodiment though has always been privileged in

martial arts and combat sports (MACS) history. With a few exceptions, MACS were created by and for men, and, even today, they remain as male preserves (Matthews, 2016; Theberge, 1985). Male preserves are spaces where *men can be men* by socializing forms of masculinities linked to violence and exclusion of other genders, those others often taken as inferior (Miller-Iddriss, 2023; Turelli et al., 2022a; 2024a). MACS environments usually follow a traditional martial arts pedagogy (Cynarsky et al., 2012) in which gender binary is assumed as the norm and is reproduced and perpetuated in the name of (selected) tradition (Williams, 1975). This is the scenario found in karate, even in its sports format. Despite the migration of martial arts to the West and their conversion into competitive sports, the invention and maintenance of certain features as traditional roots, such as aggression and domination, benefit the hegemonic patriarchal order (Connell, 1995; Hobsbawm, 1983). Karate therefore reproduces a traditional gender binary, as our research provides evidence of, with privileged positions for men while women struggle to achieve recognition of their abilities while craving belonging (Turelli et al., 2023a; 2024b; 2025). Women *karateka* in the Spanish Olympic team reported to us in interviews how they need to deal with demands to perform in a high level which seems to be, however, never good enough because they cannot equal to men, as they were born *girls* (see Young, 1980). They are part of a high-performance team, and as such need to comply with requirements of excellence. Notwithstanding, the point is that they are in constant unfair comparisons with their male peers as fighters. This is considered unfair by us, the authors, because they were all socialized as girls (Mason, 2018; Young, 1980), yet they joint karate under a traditional binary pedagogy. In this binary context, women and girls are not taken seriously by men but remain *chicas*, with the subliminal understanding of them as weak and predisposed to crying and other feminized actions (Turelli et al., 2023b). Thus, they did not receive specific training to potentialize their uniqueness, which is often unknown by trainers (Turelli et al., 2024b). Despite this, they are challenged to emulate men, while never being allowed to do so. A series of mechanisms such as not training them properly and using resources that always inferiorize them, prevents their success in the endeavour of emulation, which is, first and foremost, unnecessary (the constant competition to prove value). However, a competition made of constant comparisons is always there, as a way to supposedly prove male superiority, accusing women of over masculinized, for example, if they get too close of such superiority. Thus, masculinization is used as an offense mechanism. In other words, in this binary world, *men can just be themselves*; women, instead, should be ashamed if they *perform like a man*, and, on the other hand, if they are *too delicate*, they would definitely not be made for martial arts. What we see in the wider contemporary society, despite all advancements of feminism, is not mere coincidence. Disguised manipulation and domination under neoliberal approaches (McRobbie, 2015) are currently undeniable with right wings gaining so much room around the world (Miller-Iddriss, 2023).

In the following pages we present data collected with the women athletes composing the team at that moment, and their coaches who were all men. They spoke to us about the ideal of fighting like a man or accepting inferiority, about accusation of masculinization of women, and yet uncomfortable situations they face and witness on power and machismo. We will report these conversations; before presenting the data, we will briefly present the methods we followed to carry out the research.

2. Methodology

The research was conducted as a doctoral study of the first author of this paper. She is a karate practitioner for more than 30 years now and was a former athlete, training and competing in a number of countries of the Global North and Global South. This is relevant to mention as the motivation for the research came from her wondering about being herself the problem or if the things she faced were shared among women from more developed countries and at high level performance. Fabiana is originally from Brazil and competed vastly in an amateur context. Thus, she embarked on a journey, as carnal sociology (Wacquant, 2015), of experiencing on and in her body and soul the pleasures and pains of training, living and speaking with people in Spain, Scotland, Italy, Australia and most recently, Canada. In her process of discovering she had a voice, she learned how to speak in other languages while strengthening such a voice, to the point that she could say she was carrying out an autoethnography, as she realized what she was speaking about was relevant and important.

The initial goal, though, with the Olympic Spanish team, was to conduct an ethnography. As COVID-19 hit, the plan was disrupted. Fabiana lacked confidence and so her supervisors at the time played a fundamental role in supporting her to tell the story of what she was witnessing through her karate life. This paper is a report of data collected with the women interviewed in the study, not entering the storytelling that was stimulated at that moment, leading Fabiana to broader *conscientizacão* (Freire, 2005) of other things that she became able to reflect on, connect and speak about (see Turelli & Joseph, 2025). Considering the adaptations needed, eighteen people, fourteen women athletes and four men coaches, were interviewed twice each to speak about their experiences of karate athletes/coaches in high performance sport and how this had affected their embodied subjectivities. All participants are identified through pseudonyms. Other sources of data were utilized, such as video analysis of the women's karate performances (Turelli et al., 2022a), (participant) observations (Turelli et al., 2021; 2022b), and as mentioned, autoethnography (Turelli et al., 2023c). The total of 36 interviews, amounting to approximately 45 hours of recordings in Spanish, were transcribed and translated into English. The coding process grouped themes leading to categories specified in Turelli (2022). In this article we focus on the topic of the ideal of fighting like a man or accepting inferiority, as will be described next through sharing and discussing participants' testimonies. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Universidad Autonoma de Madrid, under approval code CEI-102-1930. The stance taken by authors in conducting this study was social constructionism combined with critical feminism, later strongly influenced by intersectionality, specifically.

3. Findings

Women often get asked why they want to be where they are not welcome; at the end of the day, wouldn't it just be easier to be in spaces that welcome them? This leads us to state that being in spaces that are not comfortable for women challenges the status quo. Instead of asking women

why they take on such struggles, we should be congratulating them, because they are the reason change can happen, and things are not worse. They resist, and fight. They may adapt to some things to be able to remain and gain room; but their presence in itself is disruptive. However, their presence in unwelcoming spaces by no means is to say that all is sorted out. The process is arduous, as those benefiting from patriarchy do not want to lose their benefits. So women fighters face overlapping difficulties in the pursue of their goals. We share first their struggles related to the ideal imposed as the real-deal-fighter; then we discuss the accusations of masculinization that women *karateka* are subjected to; and conclude with them telling us a bit about power and machismo felt on the flesh.

3.1. *The ideal of fighting like a man or accepting inferiority*

To be able to be in the martial arts environment and have high level athletes' positions in the karate team, women fighters engage in negotiations often submitting to the stipulated models. They crave acceptance in the team and recognition for their abilities, a pursuit that may end up in the reproduction of comparisons that are not fair to themselves. Athletes and coaches made comments in this direction. Athletes perhaps want to be included, or have embodied common masculinities composing the martial habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), as can be seen in the following comment from an athlete:

The man's body... really... Although many times the girls say that there is no such issue, the man's body is stronger as a general rule. They can hit harder and come out faster, because they have it innate. (...) We, maybe other things come out better for us. (Afrodite, athlete, Interview 19 (2), 24/08/2020).

Coaches, on the other hand, are giving the standards to be followed, and positioning people according to traditional martial arts pedagogy, in a hierarchical gender binary manner. They shared their views, as follows:

It will be due education, it will be due whatever, boys have fought their entire lives and girls not so much. (Hermes, man coach, Interview 30 (2), 17/09/2020).

At the minimum danger is put to us, the secretion of testosterone, growth hormone, adrenaline and others, is much higher, because we had to be aware of taking care of ourselves and the survival of the whole group, the herd. (...) The girls, all the perseverance, all the work, the sacrifice they make can come a little from the maternal burden of having to take care of children, of having to take what is a family forward. (...) What happens is that the boy will always have more testosterone, he will have more muscle mass, and he will look superior. (...) A boy is always going to be superior to a girl. I don't think there is any possibility of... (Apolo, man coach, Interview 27 (1), 25/09/2020).

Women still have a deficiency in hunting methodology. If fighting is a hunt, they don't hunt well. Some yes, but almost all, no. Look, the shark is said to be a perfect weapon for killing. Well, a shark decides to kill you, and it kills you. Well, a karate competitor has her prey in front of her and many make a lot of mistakes. I believe that 80% of them or 90% make mistakes. Of the boys, 80% do not make mistakes and 20% do. More or less. (...) So it is not that there is a specific way of fighting for girls, it is that they are not at the level of the great male predators. I mean, if this were a predator thing. But not because I could be *machista*, just because you've been less years (as

fighters). (...) I take the Spanish national team, none of them knows how to sweep, none. (...) In our Western culture, there is that equality, but if they give you the same bicycle as to the boys, and the female gender don't measure up. (...) Is there a female way to fight? Yes. It has less level than the masculine one. Period. Period. The woman who gives the masculine level you no longer know if she is a boy or a girl. (Hermes, man coach, Interview 32 (3), 21/09/2020).

Comments bring up and prioritize biological and genetic aspect of performance. It is stated that fighting is a practice intrinsic to masculine nature and artificial for women, in addition to a cultural and genetic heritage of men since prehistory. Yet, hormones would explain and impose superiority, having the coaches in agreement with the “biology-is-destiny formulation” (Butler, 1990, p. 12), disregarding epigenetics and the influence of the environment (Bedregal et al., 2010). The patriarchal dividend (Connell, 1995) clearly benefits men allowing them to rely in supposed merits inherited from the past, in solemn recognition of what someday someone was, e.g., a great hunter who does not make mistakes. However, in the current society most men are not as prepared as hunters were in prehistory, although their testosterone levels are still higher than women's. Karkazis and Jordan-Young (2018, p. 7) corroborate this by pointing out that,

T [testosterone] makes men athletically superior to women” feels like a truth, despite the fact that millions of men the world over have vastly more T [testosterone] than do 95 percent of elite women athletes, yet are not as fast or as strong as those women.

Although testosterone exerts influence on human performance, it is necessary to consider biological, psychological, social, political and cultural aspects and their complex interaction (Schultz, 2019). For example, testosterone levels in children do not differ in boys and girls, but girls overall receive an education that makes them believe in their physical inferiority to boys. Roth and Basow (2004, p. 249) argue that “Femininity discipline begins working upon females during childhood (perhaps even infancy) by transmitting to children a mental connection between femaleness and weakness and by forcing girls to embody that weakness in their bodies”. Girls are not taught how to explore their bodies, how to conquer the world using their bodies (Young, 1980), thus they become docile, fragile, afraid, and less able and confident about their possibilities, which in fact they may not even know exists.

Yet, a coach reveals how to denigrate women when they approach the male model given to them, which is clearly a controversy and a mechanism to keep women in an inferior position, deflecting their threat to male domination. There is the association of women who have some success with the male testosterone model, in this case. If a woman somehow stands out, this is justified by her approximation to some characteristic considered masculine in the field. Even so, this is not positive for women, leading to questioning of their sexuality as a tool for undermining of female physical power. Roth and Basow (2004, p. 253) explain how it occurs in a process of “threaten[ing] women's power by admitting it [power] exists and claiming that its very existence implies that the woman is not a real woman. When is a woman not a real woman? When she is a lesbian”. While among men those who stand out become alpha, women who stand out are discriminatorily classified as all sorts of freak.

Athletes and coaches speak about how is it to work with the two genders –binary is the limit. Although there are differences, there does not seem to be a different form of karate addressing

specific needs but, at the same time, comparisons and hierarchizations are made. A testimony from an athlete speaks for her impression, and then coaches are reported as well:

The guys kind of have used more resources. The sweeps, it is very noticeable that the boys use more than the girls. (Vesta, athlete, Interview 16 (2), 18/08/2020).

Working with boys is a more intense job, much more body to body. (...) Boys can try to throw their opponents to the ground many times. The girl practically does not use this resource. To do this, she is going to need many hours of training. (Hefaistos, man coach, Interview 36 (1), 09/30/2020).

Why don't girls know how to sweep? Well, I don't know, but when you explain, it is difficult for them to understand the concept and I really explain it well, eh. (Hermes, man coach, Interview 30 (2), 17/09/2020).

Tactically she evolves less, or a little later. Less strength, yes. I think the notion of tactics is a bit simpler for women, more basic, as if they have less tactical development. Note that women are more cerebral, but they have less development, they have "something that suits me and I keep that all the time." The man changes more in tactical aspects "well, now I'm changing and I'm going to do something else." (Ares, man coach, Interview 35 (2), 29/09/2020).

Coaches need to aim for the best results. Athletes know this too, they submit to it, and it is all basically agreed. What seems to cause discomfort, however, is that women do not make some movements according to idealized expectations, do not matching up to men's performances. Notwithstanding, they do not receive specific training on that, what seems to be a burden. Also, they assume they are not good for that, as Vesta commented, and keep receiving models to imitate that reinforce a lack of confidence and self-sufficiency. Vesta adds:

Many times they try to make us fight like a boy, because in the end they always put them as a reference to us, almost all the boys. (Vesta, athlete, Interview 16 (2), 18/08/2020).

There is no appreciation of differences, but instead an attempt at standardization. As we saw, according to the trainers, women have less sophisticated tactical capacity, and great difficulty in understanding and performing melee work and sweeping, all of this in relation to men. Women can build their capacity for strength, tactics, and sweeping through training. There are no body determinants preventing women from throwing opponents to the ground, especially since it takes technique to do so more than brute force, and because fighters are in a similar weight range by categories, and women do not fight men in competitions. The fact that women do not do so much melee or sweeping work is not associated with genetics either. The physical structure of the hips and shoulders may affect the aesthetic form of movement and even the levels of difficulty, which unfortunately has not been scientifically studied to date. However, these are perfectly trainable elements. If melee work and sweeps were an irreversible disability for women, they would not be able to fight *judo*. Similarly, tactical work can be optimized. *Karateka* women acknowledged they are strong, denying assumptions, as in the following statement from Hera:

Within karate, I can take any kind of punches, no problem. (...) We do not shrink about being a woman... because we are brave. (Hera, athlete, Interview 9 (1), 27/07/2020).

However, this may lead to discomfort due to the destabilization of the male preserve, therefore, power expressed by women tends to be denied by men. Women need to continue occupying these and other spaces generating beneficial nuisances. Furthermore, this will force more studies to be carried out in relation to female performance, possibly promoting advances in training technologies, and filling knowledge gaps.

3.2. Masculinization of women?

Athletes highlighted that the incorporation of characteristics considered masculine (Marcuse, 2018) is not negative for women. Indeed, people's subjectivities are complex and plural, made of intersecting factors. Young (1980, p.140) points out that "it is not necessary that any women be 'feminine' – that is, it is not necessary that there be distinctive structures and behaviour typical of the situation of women". It could even be positive and subversive to take positions that somehow confront normativity, destabilizing it (Berg & Kokkonen, 2021; Carlsson, 2017; Landi, 2018; Maor, 2018). In the researched karate context though, women might deliberately want to resemble men as a way to reach acceptance and some level of personal worth. In doing so, they face stereotypes on and off the mats. The fact that some women enter terrains understood as masculine, can generate some level of instability in the sense of security and power for men. So, the inconveniences generated may lead to aggression and violence, attacking and accusing women as a defence mechanism, as Atena pointed out:

In the course about machismo [that she provides karate coaches with], I noticed that men get super aggressive when I talk about these things, and I am not accusing them specifically. (Atena, athlete, Interview 14 (2), 15/08/2020).

There are different ways for reactions to show up. Vaczi (2016) researched women's presence in male sport, having the characterization of "fatal woman". As a fan, athlete or girlfriend, women could be destabilizing men, since they would be "a 'dangerous destabilizer', a woman whose sensuality may threaten the male order of sport performance" (p. 301). From then on, women are given some characteristics and responsibilities such as "demonization, fetishization, the pathologization of sex and the proliferation of erotic fantasies" (p. 299). Another way of reacting to fear of loss of power to women turning into attacking them is through accusing them of *Mari-machos*, a woman who likewise heterosexual men, "likes women". This would justify them coming to share space with men and having less feminine traits. This is taken as an accusation because by no means it is a respectful understanding of a sexual option, but a way to denigrate people. Athletes elaborate on the prejudiced view thrown at them:

They talk a lot about "well this girl does karate, she *likes* girls; look at her, what a *machunga* (lesbian)". (Venus, athlete, Interview 22 (2), 02/09/2020).

Even girls used to say the typical to me, "you're a *machorra* (lesbian), *machorra*", I didn't care because I knew that... I didn't care, I would play soccer with the children, basketball, karate. (...) And now I'm older, I don't care, people know I'm not a *machorra*. (Juno, athlete, Interview 24 (1), 05/09/2020).

I think the last time I heard it was doing the national trainer course, about being a man. Many times they tell me that I am a boy, “you are a boy, you are half a boy”, the typical phrase. (Atena, athlete, Interview 14 (2), 15/08/2020).

Roth and Basow (2004, p. 253) observe that “The fear of being labelled or outted as lesbian can lead to an even greater emphasis on femininity by female athletes either to prove that they are not lesbians or to hide the fact that they are”. Tajrobehkar (2016) provided evidence that women who do bodybuilding need to show that even though their bodies are strong and muscular, they are feminine. Muscles, strength and aggression seem to reduce the aesthetic capital (Anderson et al., 2010) of women in the normative society. Although there are various discomforts for women facing stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination, appearance and physical power (Roth & Basow, 2004) and even sexual orientation (Rich, 2010) can become somewhat subversive attitudes adopted by women to further transgress spaces of male preserve. Through these attitudes they emphasize they are strong enough, for example, to protect themselves freeing men from this supposed need, another destabilization in the sense of security and power for men, causing then offensive reactions, as when someone is cornered, so they attack.

It is common that women do not know how to deal with offenses, so usually MACS have high rates of abandonment by women and girls (there is also an absence of pedagogical models of how to teach them). With this high rate of attrition compared to boys, spaces are kept under male domination. So, if they become capable of saying, as Juno put it, “I don’t care” about accusations addressed at them, they are making space for manoeuvre. Such posture, embracing accusations of masculinization and not denying or fighting it but queerly performing, somehow confront men’s power, because it interrupts the habitus (Gorely, Holroyd, & Kirk, 2003). However, it is a specific posture, not the submission to diktats.

The interaction between men and women in combat sports in mixed-sex training (Channon, 2013; Maclean, 2016; 2017) strengthens participants and adds value to the spaces as a whole. This does not invalidate equitable work in parallel though, considering specifics of groups. If women just conform to the power dynamics and accept that they do not have space if they do not achieve what men say to them, they will continue not having space and this could result on increasing disadvantage. As Criado-Perez (2019) writes, everything that is previously established and said to be not gendered, presented as “neutral”, is not neutral but masculine. Yet, in the offensive actions taken to control women, men can blame women of being those generating the problems. An example of this, can be seen in the next claim of a male coach:

I don’t think it’s the sport’s fault. (...) The women themselves are the ones who label and then inequality is created. (Apolo, man coach, Interview 33 (2), 25/09/2020).

It seems that theoretically men would not see differences between women and men if women did not point them out to men. An argument for manipulation and domination and, an attack using symbolic violence, making women responsible and guilty for the flaws in the gender order. Considering all this, the next section stands to athletes’ testimonies on uncomfortable offensive experiences in the martial world.

3.3. Uncomfortable situations: power and machismo

In sports environments there is some permissiveness for things that outside them are not allowed, like levels of violence and ways of manipulating/touching bodies. Inside sports' fields, a variety of things happen, but they must remain there, being suspended when people leave. Athletes know how this works. Horkheimer and Adorno (1985) speak about reification, which in the sports world can be read as a kind of method that disciplines the body to the point of mechanization, teaching how to submit to tough training regimes by developing a certain insensitivity towards oneself. This leads to things such as prejudicial jokes being tolerated, becoming "part of the game". This can get mixed with situations that go way beyond what can be managed, but they are then messed through confusion disguising episodes of harassment, for example. All starts in a ladder of discrimination though, with gender stereotypes and prejudices being at the root of these issues. They are found abundantly in karate, as a couple of examples illustrate it:

A colleague commented that if she was going to train and there were just two girls for a training session, the coach wouldn't train them. But if they were two boys, or even a boy and a girl, he would. (Ceres, athlete, Interview 17 (2), 23/08/2020).

I know many coaches who believe that coaching girls is not cool, that "the level" is with boys, and male *kumite* [fighting]. (Athena, athlete, Interview 14 (2), 15/08/2020).

The Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games Organizing Committee president, Yoshiro Mori, in February 2021 made macho statements about women. He said that "Boards of directors with many women take a long time. If you increase the number of female executive members, and if their speaking time is not limited to a certain extent, they will find it difficult to finish, which is annoying". And he added: "We have eight women on the organizing committee, but they know how to stay in their place."¹ According to the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper, male assistants present at the meeting laughed at Mori's macho statements. He, after the polemic, resigned his post. In addition to the obvious misogyny, this brings up another important problem surrounding women's leadership and representation in positions of power in sports. Women's presence in the Olympic Committee does not meet the requirements of the entity's governance project (Gonçalves & Vaz, forthcoming). In relation to karate specifically, athletes also have things to say:

I think several generations will pass until we start to see female referees, coaches, and women in assemblies. (...) There was a photo of the WKF [World Karate Federation] assembly in which eight, nine people were members of the assembly – all men, over 50 years old, all in the same role. There was not a single woman. (Minerva, athlete, Interview 12 (2), 12/08/2020).

They [men] have created like their circle, that they can do very well in sport... but it does bother me, because I see around me how there are many prepared women who do not have opportunities. (Minerva, athlete, Interview 12 (2), 12/08/2020).

Pfister (2003), in an analysis of quantitative data from Germany, Denmark, the United States and Australia, already pointed out that female leadership in sports organizations was far from being

¹ The report can be accessed at <https://globoesporte.globo.com/olimpiadas/noticia/presidente-do-comite-toquio-2020-faz-declaracoes-machistas-sobre-presenca-feminina-em-reunioes.ghtml> (accessed on 27/05/2021).

the same in relation to men's. Fasting and Pfister (2000), and more recently Melo and Rubio (2017), reported how the positions of power in the sports market are yet not occupied by women. This leads to the establishment of quotas through laws to ensure that basic rights and respect are guaranteed to people, in addition to preventing some contexts from being configured as "male clubs" (Pfister, 2003, p. 12) or "women-free zones" (p. 16). Diana highlights this in karate:

If there were not this inequality, we would not have the need for that women's programs to exist. (Diana, athlete, Interview 13 (2), 13/08/2020).

If it had been possible to achieve equality by other ways, it would not be necessary to resort to mandatory legal means, which undeniably signals social injustice, summarizing the point Diana makes. Minerva also expresses her opinion in this regard:

It is curious to see how it is strictly enforced. If there must be two girls out of 12 people in the assembly, there are two girls. Why can't there be four, five or six? That bothers me as you fix nothing there, because they are complying with the law, but they are not complying with it in a way that they understand, they comply because it has to be that way and that's it. (...) For me that is also a reality of machismo, that the law is strictly enforced, period. The boys say, "why does it have to exist?" Well, because it is something historical that has happened, and we must fight against it. (...) You have to say "yes, there has to be a gender violence law; yes, there has to be a woman and sports law", because we have historically been fighting against a lot of barriers that if they don't support us a little, we won't be able to break down. (Minerva, athlete, Interview 12 (2), 12/08/2020).

In the patriarchal society where all of us were socialized, some women may end up not sharing Minerva's view, and sometimes agreeing with the norm as an attempt of avoiding exclusion. Thus, some women themselves at occasions reinforce bias and stereotypes, and men in this environment, highly benefiting from the patriarchal dividend, emphasize a sort of *modus operandi* of things. Earlier in this paper, we provided a quote from a coach posing women as guilty for issues they face, something that Pfister (2003, p. 30) explained saying that "traditional supply-based approaches place the 'blame' of female segregation in the market on women themselves and their 'decisions'". We can find evidence of this issue in the following statements:

I think that the woman has started to work and has realized that she cannot alone, or that she cannot handle both. Before, culturally the woman did not work, then the housework was done by herself, while the man worked. Now women have gone to work. (...) And we want to change things that cannot be changed from education. (Apolo, man coach, Interview 33 (2), 25/09/2020).

I'm not *machista*, huh? But I insist that it is a bit of history. (Hermes, man coach, Interview 30 (2), 17/09/2020).

I have not seen any machismo. I feel lucky to be where I am. I have not seen anything strange, that is, I cannot comment on a subject of those. (Hefastos, man coach, Interview 37 (2), 30/09/2020).

In the opposite sense to what was explained in Apolo's comment, Pfister (2003, p.27) contributes by saying that "In relation to the sexual hierarchy, sports organizations are a faithful reflection of

societies as a whole, characterized by an imbalance of power and status”. She also provides considerations about the history:

When reflecting on the reasons why women are a minority in the highest positions in the sport, one should keep in mind the history of this practice. As already mentioned, the sport was “invented” and developed by man and for man and, for a long time, “it was obvious” that men were the athletes and also the “born” sports leaders. And it takes a long time to change traditions... (p. 28).

In line with Pfister are comments from other athletes, who are more firmly positioned in relation to the problem:

The world of karate is a bit *machista*, on a historical level. In the end, the great masters were all men, right? I imagine that there would also be women who practiced karate, but the karate world has been a bit *machista* in that sense. (...) It is about being national coaches, a coach of your community, little by little, to get into that world. (Hera, athlete, Interview 21 (2), 27/08/2020).

I think it goes a bit for historical reasons and because the industry revolves around men, which sells more. So, changing something that pays a lot, to bet on something that you do not know if it will give money, it is complicated. (Ceres, athlete, Interview 17 (2), 23/08/2020).

It is worthy to note the role attributed to history, which is intriguing, as both coaches and athletes use it as justification for the points they make, although both groups speak from different standpoints. The general idea of a powerful inherited historical tradition would supposedly be behind what men keep reproducing in the present time in a way that honours and renovates such tradition. Notwithstanding, there are many flaws to such history and tradition reported. Yet, the present time is no longer paying debts to the past, where women should remain loyal to unfairness, mistreatment and silence. Instead, they may want to take ownership of their lives and build a new history, with forms of sports that do not erase, deny or ignore permissiveness of, e.g., violence and harassment inside sports environments, as mentioned at the beginning of this section. They may want to fight objectification as reification and insensitiveness that leads to mental illness, becoming more coherent to their own truths. All of this is certainly demanding and challenging, as reactions to instability and loss of power could be exacerbated by those feeling defied. However, this seems to be a path to disrupt the hegemonic masculine domination experienced, which requires women to keep marching and fighting, giving continuity to a chain in a movement started a while ago.

4. Conclusion

Despite all the paths already traced by feminist waves, women still face several adversities to perform as themselves/authentically in different environments, the MACS’ being one of them. With this paper we aimed to present struggles that *karateka* women face to remain and gain space in the environment, analysing and providing an interpretation of why this happens and how this could, not easily though, be overcome or start to change by being challenged. In searching for

acceptance and some degree of prominence, women may start to pursue the male model of someone who knows how to fight, which is given to them from outside. The masculine ideal of fighting, or the acceptance of inferiority for fighting like a woman, who would not know how to fight was, as we saw, supported by comments on genetics, testosterone and prehistory. The lack of practice or intense training of some movements, as well as specific training considering the general female specifics are issues to be considered, as well as the gendered social embodiment. Persecution for personal worth and recognition in the world can lead many women to submit to the role models imposed on them. Thus, they often adapt and mould to the contexts in which they are seeking acceptance and belonging, in addition to, sometimes, intentionally avoiding being noted to avoid harassment.

Bodies' expressions and beliefs lead to the subject of women's masculinization, which brings to women the need to face questions about their sexual orientations, and the suffering of accusations of tempting/seducers of men or accusations of being their equals regarding *taste* in sexuality (as lesbians). We offered invitations to subversion of normativity by taking actions that could destabilize the traditional martial male preserve, through embracing accusations of masculinization. We also approached uncomfortable situations experienced by women throughout their *karateka* lives. They reported prejudices and machismos that they suffered personally or witnessed in the environment. The field is highly dominated by men globally, with rare female figures in positions of power. Notwithstanding, many athletes are aware of and somewhat militant towards the issues, to then hopefully take action.

This study shows how it can be uncomfortable for those experiencing some level of questioning and perhaps uncertainty about their future and long-lasting positions that women threaten men by just entering a terrain that is not "naturally" theirs. This inconvenience, generated by women in male spaces, was reported when female journalists proposed to cover male sporting events in the 1960s and 1970s, for example. In those situations, they were viewed as invaders of men's spaces.² They were forbidden to access changing rooms, as other men reporters did, and so they simply could not do their jobs. For advocating for the right of doing their job, those women were accused of being prostitutes, faced harassment, and mental rape, as the journalist Lisa Olson described it. This is just an example of how reactions get irrationally violent due to fear among the privileged. Although the argument shows this discouraging reaction, such effect can also be taken as something that works for the goal of destabilizing unfair patriarchal structures, to change the hegemonic logic of traditional male preserves, at least as a start.

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² ESPN Films – Nine for IX – *Let Them Wear Towels* <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6h48pk>

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