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'Fighting like a *girl*': qualitative analysis of the gendered movement learning in the Spanish Olympic karate team

Abstract

Background: Female learning of movement in elite combat sports has not been studied enough to date. Literature on movement learning and teaching of complex skills does not focus on karate yet, and the scarce literature on the learning of elite karate practitioners mostly does not focus on women. Nevertheless, women fighters participated in the achieved condition of karate as an Olympic sport, even if such status was temporary, limited to Tokyo 2020 (2021). **Purpose:** In an analogy with Iris Marion Young's (1980) publication 'throwing like a girl', our aim in this study was to investigate what it means to learn 'to fight like a *girl*' and if there is a feminine learned fighting style. **Methods:** We have carried out an ethnography project focusing, due to the unexpected impact of COVID-19, mainly on interviewing the Spanish karate team in preparation for the Olympic Games. We have interviewed 14 women athletes of the team and their four male coaches twice each and analysed 28 videos of women athletes displaying their best athletic performances according to themselves. For the analysis, we developed a series of criteria in order to carry out the task of observation and analysis of the gendered martial-sportive movement supported in the literature, coaches' perspectives and athletes' views. **Findings:** Sports karate is still configured as a (hetero)normative environment, supported in tradition, be that of martial art, be that of sport as a male preserve. This context leads to an accepted view of women's learning to perform as inferior to men's, perpetually comparing them, in the hierarchical structure established within the field. Concepts of equality and equity are undermined, and by performing differently, or not meeting male models, women have their performance of some complex movements qualified as a *natural inability*. Performances observed in the videos found resonance with aspects pointed out and converted into criteria by both coaches and athletes. It is explained by them presenting opposite perspectives and, finally, due to heteronormativity prevalence in the patriarchal society highly conveyed through this environment. **Conclusion:** We conclude that there is a feminine way of learning to fight, but only with generalized characteristics since there is a rich plurality of styles among the women. For the field, to fight like a *girl* means inferior performance in comparison with men's performance, however, for us, it means really 'to fight', not just on the mat.

Keywords: gender; martial arts; video analysis; women's embodiment; elite sport.

Introduction

There is an extensive literature on movement learning in physical education (for example, Nyberg, Barker, and Larsson 2021; Janemalm, Barker, and Quennerstedt 2020; Larsson 2021), as well as studies proposing better ways of teaching students complex movement skills (Chróinín, Fletcher, and O’Sullivan 2018; Light and Clarke 2021). To some extent, analogous research has been carried out in a select set of sports, such as rugby (Llobet-Martí, López-Ros, and Vila 2017), action sports (Ellmer and Rynne 2021), cricket (Lascu et al. 2020), football (Mason, Farrow, and Hattie 2020) and dance (Mattsson and Larsson 2021). However, there is still a gap in the literature related to martial arts and combat sports, specifically karate, where neither the teaching of complex skills has been studied, nor the learning of gendered movement. Even though various pedagogical models were developed aiming at some facilitation of learning (see Barker et al. 2017), applying such models requires coaches who have the experience and expertise to use them (see Chróinín, Fletcher, and O’Sullivan 2018). Besides, athletes should be able to achieve a condition of high embodied awareness (see Standal and Bratten 2021), which can be a challenge especially when women athletes live athletic and social experiences of objectification of their bodies (Mason 2018).

*Karateka*¹ women often find their performance judged as inferior to men, even though they do not compete together, and they are assumed, by male *karateka*, to not be able to learn to perform some complex karate movements due to the fact they were born female, since their practice of alternative movements to the norm for men is read as *inability*. Karate is a martial art in which generally a normative and binary gender order is in place. Thus, studies have most often focused on male performances of techniques (for example, Alinaghipour, Zareian, and Ardakani 2020; Chaabène et al. 2014). Tabben et al. (2018) included *karateka* women fighters in their research, however, they did not discriminate possible differences that can be found in the fighting styles of women and men. In this article, we plan to contribute to filling the knowledge gap we have identified around female martial performance in elite competitive sport.

By analysing videos of competitive high-performance women *karateka* members of the Spanish Olympic team we found some general differences between female and male styles of fighting, which does not mean inferiority from our point of view, hence the importance of reconsidering the issue of equity. Our focus was on female performance. Nevertheless, undeniably, comparisons are made between females and males. We developed a series of criteria in order to carry out the task of observation and analysis of the gendered martial-sportive movement. We did not construct an ‘objective’ measurement scale with these criteria. We instead used these criteria qualitatively to discuss the fighting styles of the women, looking for the obvious and not so obvious aspects of combat in karate from a gender perspective. Thus, in the next pages, we start by presenting some peculiarities of karate competitive modalities, *kumite* and *kata*, and their general characteristics to be taken into account when analysing women’s movement learning. Next, we describe our methods and the set of criteria adopted for the video analysis. Finally, we describe our findings in order to fulfil our purpose, which was, in an analogy with Young’s (1980) ‘throwing like a girl’, to investigate what it means to learn ‘to fight like a *girl*’ and if there is a feminine fighting style evident among these women.

Performing *kumite* and *kata* in practice and in the literature

¹ Term used to designate karate practitioners.

Karate is a modality within the group of MACS, Martial Arts and Combat Sports. It has roots in Eastern martial art, which helps to explain the attachment to tradition (Williams 1977) and (hetero)normativity. At the same time, it embarked on a journey westward (Krug 2001), taking part in the sporting process (Elias 1992). The apex of the karate sporting process was to achieve the status of an Olympic sport, a condition already achieved then lost, since it participated in Tokyo 2020 (2021), but no longer is included in Paris 2024. As an Olympic modality, karate presented athletes in *kumite*, which is the fight itself, structured by weight categories; and *kata*, understood as a fight against an imaginary opponent, performed as a choreography of martial blows. We have researched the Olympic Spanish female team in their preparation for such a unique event, even though the final inclusion of athletes in the Games was not guaranteed, given the extremely high level of international competition and difficulties in filling requirements of the classificatory system. In addition, the pandemic scenario generated by COVID-19 also may have caused shifts in athletes' positions.

Nevertheless, in our research we have analysed videos of the athletes from the Spanish Olympic team where they were having their best performances in competitions, according to their own view. This is relevant to be said since, as pointed out by Nyberg (2015, 111), 'In analysing movement capability, movements as they are objectively performed, and as they are subjectively experienced, must be brought together.' We also delimited general characteristics around categories of weights for fighting, taking into account for this specific task performances of high-level women athletes who compose the international competitive scenario together with Spanish athletes. In general, karate does not require a specific body for fighters, as other sports can do. *Karateka* people of different physique will be allocated to different weight categories. Notwithstanding, the different body types need to be able to learn to perform martial techniques, though they are sometimes stereotyped as *naturally* bad fighters because of the ways in which they carry out these techniques. Some movements are quite complex and require training and effort, besides the observation of other factors (social, psychological) in interaction with biology, and a specific didactic in teaching such movements. Perhaps decomposing martial techniques into steps, using video feedback, something that would demand a combination of practice with pedagogical theory, would improve the embodiment of complex martial skills (Chróinín, Fletcher, and O'Sullivan 2018; Light and Clarke 2021). Regarding elite *kateros*, term Spaniards use for *kata* practitioners, they tend to be physically shorter than average athletic population, around 1.5-1.6 meters for females, but outside the elite this is not a criterion either. It means that even though their body type is not a decisive thing, they certainly need to be able to excel in performing techniques so as to belong to high-performance sport.

Within each weight category, however, there may be general characteristics of the fighting style that relate to the shape of the bodies. In a nutshell, we describe as main characteristics of the fighting style for each female weight:

- -50kg: usually characterised by short and fast movement; they bounce quickly, staying more in the air than on the ground. They can rotate a lot through the *koto*², with no limitations on direction. They perform very fast entries (attacks) and exits. Fighting position with legs closer together, practically 'standing'.
- -55kg: athletes enter and exit explosively, in general. They usually occupy the mat moving constantly, since they tend to be, like the previous weight,

² Competition area measuring 8mx8m, with more 2m of security area. The last meter inside the competition area is red to advise athletes they are near to leave the mat, what represents a penalty.

relatively small. They fight more 'on their feet' to gain height, and move nimbly, with short bounces and remarkable use of feints.

- -61kg: This appears to be a transitional weight as the athletes are not 'standing' and neither are with their base/stance low. They are explosive to enter and can be explosive to exit, even though the emphasis is on attack. The movement/bounce is no longer short, but neither are the bounces as long as those of the next weight.³
- -68kg: what draws the most attention in this weight is the occupation of the mat, since generally the athletes are tall and the base/stance they use is wide, using more space. They do not fight 'standing', and they tend to move with relatively long, high bounces, which makes it feel like they move a little slower.
- +68kg: usually have a more solid form of fighting, with the feet on the ground, although the bounce/jumps can also be short. But they are more on the ground than in the air. The position of the legs is wide, open, lowering the centre of gravity and giving greater stability to the body. They usually place the front arm extended away from the body to keep distance from the opponent. They present an attack explosion, without exiting with the same speed.

Finally, some considerations about *kata*. Its execution undoubtedly requires explosive capacity, speed, balance, coordination, flexibility, strength and power. It is a modality that follows performance standards, so it is not possible to see much variation among high level athletes. They need to adapt to what each *kata* they intend to perform requires. The *kata* is already given; they must approximate the perfect execution of such a sequence of movements.

Regarding published studies using video analysis in karate, they are especially related to physical and sometimes psychological performance in *kumite* and indicate, in general, the prevalence of techniques used to score and, with few exceptions, focus on male performance. Alinaghipour, Zareian, and Ardakani (2020) analysed ten male final fights of the 2016 World Karate Championship (of World Karate Federation, WKF), seeking to determine the techniques that score the most and their frequency. *Kizami zuki*⁴ was most used, followed by *oi zuki*⁵. Petri et al. (2016) analysed the 'anticipation' criterion in four men's fights, concluding that attacking technique jabbing punch is the most used. These movements need to match perfectly speed, timing, vigour, though they are not among the movements considered to be the most complex in karate, which are, in general, sweeps, projections and melee work. These complex skills seem to occupy a superior position in the field, and to meet parameters of good execution by male fighters.

Ross (2009) also analysed female fights and concluded that the most used technique by them was *gyaku zuki*⁶. This technique requires a solid basis/stance for effective realization. He analysed eight female and 19 male final fights from the 2004 and 2006 WKF World Championships. Among his conclusions, he explains that 'the male karatekas (*sic*) also revealed

³ Competitive World Karate Federation, body responsible for Olympic karate, presents these five categories for women fighters, besides *kumite* per team and *kata* individual and per team. Nevertheless, for the Olympic Games they were reduced into three categories: -55, -61 and +61, and individual *kata* only. Perhaps the specificities we describe are somewhat founding criteria for the combination of weights for the Olympic Games.

⁴ Punch delivered with the front fist/arm of the guard, or jab punch.

⁵ Equivalent to lunge punch.

⁶ Reverse punch.

a statistically significant result with regard to the number of initiated attacks' (4). This observation is interesting as it predates the introduction of *senshu*⁷, the golden point, officially established in 2010. Often the fear of losing the golden point and being at a disadvantage is something that inhibits competitors, who contain their attack initiatives. However, the observation predates the *senshu*, and Ross reports that women had less initiative, which cannot, therefore, be attributed entirely to the fear of losing the golden point advantage.

Chaabène et al. (2014) analysed physiological responses and movement time among 14 elite male fighters, looking for differences between winners and losers. They found no significant differences. However, other minor conclusions from the study catch our attention and may be relevant here. They state that 'karatekas predominantly use upper-limb karate techniques. Karate's nature is intermittent, with fighting activities representing ~6% of total combat duration and ~84% of actions lasting less than 2s, with ~21-s mean time interval in between' (307). Considering that they analysed only men, it is relevant to observe the predominance of upper limbs, something also verified by Tabben et al (2018), and not legs or sweeps and, especially, the time of the fight that is used in attacks. In other words, men are in attack/defence only approximately 6% of the time of the fight, even though it is said in the *karateka* field that they act much more than women. In addition, the attacks themselves are temporally short, in less than two seconds, and with a very long interval between them, which is not so visible when watching the fights, which seem much busier than the female fights. A simple reason for this could be the spatial occupation made by men on the mat due to their body size, in general bigger than female bodies, which can produce something like an optical illusion of more movement. If the mat for women's fights was smaller, perhaps this would alter to some level the brain's perception of female combat. Also, as Young (1980) points out in her still relevant work, to some extent updated by Mason (2018), men tend to develop a sense of confidence given the education they received since boyhood, which inclines them to feel entitled to occupy spaces more freely than girls and women, and to use their bodies unrestrictedly. Social burdens certainly count for female and male resourcefulness, the former receiving a place of *object* in a wide range of environments, and the latter of *subject*. Taking into account the normative context of karate, women could keep a position of self-consciousness about their bodies and ways to move to a point of inhibiting or at least diminishing their possibilities of performance, while men could build their embodied awareness relatively more easily (Mason 2018; Standal and Bratten 2021).

Tabben et al. (2018) analysed 120 elite *kumite* athletes, 60 men and 60 women, during the 2012 and 2014 WKF World Championships, seeking to evaluate the 'decisive-moment' (DM). 'DM represents the moment from which one of the two opponents dominates uninterrupted the other until the end of the fight' (3). They do not report significant differences between men and women in the factor they assessed, giving greater importance to the difference between winners and losers. These were the main studies found, so we proceed to describing our methods.

Methods

We have conducted an empirical study about women's embodied subjectivity in karate as an Olympic sport. In so doing, we have combined ethnographic techniques of data

⁷ *Advantage* obtained by scoring the first point in *kumite*. If the fight ends in a draw, the athlete holding the *senshu* wins.

collection with autoethnographic elements, considering that the first author is a sportive karate practitioner for several years, not taking part, though, in the elite context. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the Tokyo Olympic Games, as is known, and also our initial research design, especially regarding the observation of training sessions of the team, and following them to the Games, which was not possible due to the various restrictions on movement during the pandemic. Nevertheless, we have adapted research procedures in order to keep reliability of data contrasting with literature (Colás and Buendía 1992), applying observation technique in video analysis of the athletes' performances in competitions, since in the course of our fieldwork, especially in conducting interviews, women had their performances characterized as inferior to the men's in the Spanish Olympic team. Furthermore, there is the question at hand as to whether there is a feminine way of learning to fight.

We conducted two interviews with each of 14 women athletes of the Spanish Olympic team and their four male coaches between June to September 2020, and in January 2021 we asked all of them to indicate us two videos where they showed the best performance of their sporting careers. They responded promptly and positively. This request to them was made taking into account their own subjectivity in the choice of videos. This was very positive as some ended up sharing videos that are not available online. Some shared more than two videos, which were watched, but only two from each woman were included in the analysis to comply with the stipulated criteria. In order to make the analysis somewhat transparent and perhaps allow for the dependability criterion (Colás and Buendía 1992) of the research, we present a table of the videos analysed below.

Table 1

Videos provided by athletes for analysis

Video Analysis			
N.	Athlete	Video 1	Video 2
1	A1	WKF Junior, Cadet & U21 World Championships	National League
2	A2	Premier league	Open of Paris
3	A3	Premier League	Series A
4	A4	Open of Paris	European Championships
5	A5	Spanish Senior Championships	National League
6	A6	WKF World Championships (fight in Spanish <i>kumite</i> team)	Premier league
7	A7	WKF Junior, Cadet & U21 World Championships	Premier league
8	A8	Young league	Spanish Championships
9	A9	WKF World Championships	Premier league
10	A10	Spanish Senior Championships	Premier league

11	A11	European Karate Championships (Spanish <i>kata</i> team)	Premier league (Spanish <i>kata</i> team)
12	A12	European Karate Championships (Spanish <i>kata</i> team)	Premier league (Spanish <i>kata</i> team)
13	A13	European Karate Championships (Spanish <i>kata</i> team)	Spanish Senior Championships (regional <i>kata</i> team)
14	A14	WKF Junior, Cadet & U21 World Championships	Spanish U21 Championships

Originally, this table included more information, such as place and date. Notwithstanding, once we are doing more publications of the wider research, in order to protect participants' identification in case of links among studies could be made, here we have adopted different procedures. Given that these people have a certain prominence, we try hard to preserve their anonymity. We know, though, that they could be found based on their weight and country, but the reader would need to set out to look for and 'find' the person. It is not our intention that the identification takes place by simply reading this article. By this we mean that all possible measures of keeping participants' identities securely anonymised were taken by us. Our procedures here were to summarize the table of videos, and not link them to pseudonyms used in other works when quoting interviews, naming them in this study just as A (Athlete) 1-14, and C (Coach, in quotes) 1-4. We also took off the interviews information after quotes (date, interview number) and have decided to use here exclusive interview's data, in the sense that they were not reported previously.

To carry out the analysis, we used a series of criteria established by the first author with the help and supervision of the last author. Other authors in the paper worked as well as experts guaranteeing the reliability of the analysis and findings, in the triangulation process of checking information (Colás and Buendía 1992). We checked in the literature for possible observation and analyses of gendered movement videos and they are, in this specificity, absent. Our way of using the observation technique follows what Geertz (2008) recommends, being governed by *guidelines of meanings*, more open than systematic and structured. However, for the analysis of videos, direct observation, with defined criteria of what is taken into account, is presented as pertinent.

Considering these aspects of observation, and thinking about what it means to learn 'to fight like a *girl*' and if there is a feminine fighting style, the sociological literature provides information that can be converted into verification criteria for the methodological work of video analysis. We selected some of them:

- **Use of space** made in different ways between men and women (Maclean 2019), possession by men of symbolic space (Scott 2020), with purpose of domination, whether territorial or enforcing submission of the other (Wood and Stanton 2012).
- **Expansive male movements** (Young 1980) with long sequences of strokes, leading to forceful occupation of space and presupposing skill (Connell 1995).
- **Restricted female movements** (Young 1980), with defences very close to the body in a contained and modest way (Bordo 1997).

- **Kiai**⁸ as a revealing element of restraint and embarrassment of many women (Maclean 2019).

Among coaches, the criteria used to emphasize differences between the way men and women fight reported through interviews, are:

- Difficulty for women to perform **sweeps, projections and melee work**.
- They tend **to risk less**, holding on to known and mastered techniques.
- They are **less aggressive** than men, making mistakes more often than men do when completing attacks.
- Women have difficulty doing **tactical work**.
- Women find it difficult to get **complex time-gesture coordination** (peculiar agility in *deai*/anticipation time⁹).
- Women's way of expressing **kiai** does not match the expected patterns (it is usually a shriek, long and sometimes yelled before the blow, configuring a warning to opponents).

The predominant criteria listed by athletes, although some may disagree on certain points, are:

- They see themselves as **careful and assertive**, attacking less impulsively or hot-headed as men.
- They do not waste techniques or seek volume of points, but do what is **necessary to score**.
- They do not create or test new things at the time of the competition; they do not seek to 'make a show' or attractive fight, but **to do the basics that work**.
- They feel they do **less projection work** than men because other things are more effective for them.
- They are **aesthetically more zealous** than men.

Taking into account these 15 observational criteria for the analysis of gendered movement, we, as observer-researchers, but also without completely detaching from the experience of the first author as a *karateka*, watched the 28 videos that athletes sent us, 20 videos from *kumite* and eight from *kata*. From these analyses we categorized and classified ways of fighting, presenting the results, which are not simple, in the next section.

Regarding ethics considerations, our research obtained approbation of the Ethics Committee of the XXX in 2019.

Findings and Discussion

Women's embodied 'knowing' in movement

Our analysis of the two videos of fights and *kata* presentations of each of the athletes indicated that there are differences in the styles of women and men. However, we can point out general considerations, and in relation to this specific group of women. In other words, to

⁸ Scream accompanying the blows. It is understood as a *cry of power*, not just a cry from vocal cords.

⁹ Rules have changed over time, so the athlete who scores first does not invalidate opponent's attack, if there existed an attack; both can score together. Nevertheless, anticipation is still trained/used broadly, since it can destabilize adversary's attack in progress.

say that a feminine universal form of fighting exists would certainly be mistaken. Some women will come closer to the male model, others less, and there cannot be a completely fixed pattern. However, after learning socially to perform as a woman, in addition to the undeniable biological burden, it is difficult to stop performing as one, even for a moment. Thus, as Young (1980, 144) observes, 'one can nevertheless sensibly speak of a general feminine style of body behaviour and movement'. But outside the general, the way someone fights, to be precise, must take into account the individual, in their biological, emotional, cultural, social composition.

This said, Nyberg (2015) explains that an individual's epistemological perspective of ability to carry out a movement is not necessary for the movement to be well-performed. Nyberg says that tacit knowledge of movement is personal and often unarticulated knowledge and developed with practice. In other words, just knowing theoretically the laws that govern the displacement of body mass and centre of gravity according to different and fast positions during combat does not guarantee technical effectiveness. Embodied knowledge is required and, in karate, a wide range of bodies can meet requirements to perform the sport, even though it will be converted in an expertise, or not, due to extreme dedication to training. We believe that tacit knowledge that also contains something of 'theory' is ideal to avoid reproductions based only on tradition, a risk of the extremely hierarchical environment of martial arts. However, it is with the body that one learns to perform, in a process of embodied learning, of 'knowledge in use'. 'The tacit component is embodied, a knowing, integrated through experience' (Nyberg 2015, 112).

Women elite karate athletes in this study started training very early in childhood, specifically between 3-9 years old. They have certainly embodied the movements and developed some degree of 'practical knowledge', 'physical literacy' and 'kinaesthetic intelligence' (Nyberg and Carlgren 2015). So the fact that they are said to be not able to perform some techniques, especially *ashibara*¹⁰, is intriguing. What disables them? What kind of knowledge or learning through the body do they lack? The movements they perform are repeated countless times, to the point that they become automated. Automation undeniably refers to a certain reification, but it also reflects a state of mastering, of knowing of the body as pointed out by an athlete:

It is true that what you train and what you automate, later (...) when you least expect it, it comes out. (A6)

What is incorporated is not universal, but varies according to the teachings received. The embodiment of movements undeniably involves the culture of the place and the way in which knowledge is transmitted. Nyberg and Carlgren (2015) report the experience of teaching and learning complex movements in physical education classes. It is a challenge for teachers and students. They explain that 'the technical description of how the movement should be performed is not sufficient' (Nyberg and Carlgren 2015, 614), since an 'embodied understanding' (618) is necessary. Somatic involvement needs to be integral and active, as 'the required awareness involves all the senses' (626). It is important to note this because the practice of sports, with its tendency to think of the body as a machine, can distance athletes from subjective body perception, which can also contribute to the difficulty of mastering complex techniques. In the case of *karateka* women, we wonder if what *sensei* report regarding their difficulty is related to a type of individual unconsciousness of potentiality or

¹⁰ Sweep made to overthrow or unbalance opponents.

social belief of incapacity (Roth and Basow 2004); or whether it would be some kind of transmission failure in teaching complex movements (Janemalm, Barker, and Quennerstedt 2020), perhaps in a too theoretical way, or the opposite, the absence of concepts and knowledge of female training methods, taking into account physiology, biomechanics, anatomy of women. In this regard, an athlete and a coach make contributions:

(I miss) That they understand and be able to have the confidence to talk about menstruation, because I believe that many times you yourself notice that physiologically (...) there are different requirements. On top of not following an adequate diet (due to the need of losing weight), you still feel worse. And those things (female specificities) are not taken that much into account, yet. (A7)

The program is practically the same, in the end the training with girls, at a physiological level it is studied that they have small differences, at a hormonal level we are not the same, at an anatomical level either, so we have to compensate for certain things, but let's say that the training proposal to general level is the same. (C2)

These comments point to differences; nevertheless, in order to treat people equally, the training does not follow specific and necessary equity guidelines. We point out these issues considering the relationship of surrender that exists in sports environments in general and specifically in the martial environment. Athletes surrender their bodies to be trained and rely, often blindly, on their coaches. They grow up being guided by coaches, often becoming devoted to them. Athletes will do what coaches say, they will shape themselves, pursue the goal given in order to achieve a place of prominence.¹¹ Thus, their ability or disability could be seen as a shared achievement. Another athlete and coach illustrate this with their testimonies:

What I need in the chair primarily is someone to give me confidence. Then obviously if you know karate, if you know how to read fighting very well and you know how I fight, come with me, I'll buy you, I need you in my life! But I don't care if he (coach) knows combat if he doesn't give me confidence, because if he doesn't give me confidence it's like my brain doesn't listen to him. (A5)

More is achieved with a bad coach but in whom the guy trusts, than with a good coach in whom the guy does not trust. (C3)

This leads to thinking that limitations and expressions are allowed and built in athlete's partnership with coaches. By limitation allowed we mean objectively the inability to do complex movements, such sweeps and melee work. In a way, it seems to be allowed, perhaps unconsciously fostered, for women not to be able to use these techniques, positioning them as inferior within the field's hierarchy. And with a built expression we mean behaviour seen as masculine, obtained from the pursuit of a masculine ideal of a fighter, considered the *correct* way of fighting.

Fighting like a girl

Regarding the question of what it means to learn to fight like a *girl*, as indicated by the criteria used for analysis, there are general considerations that say how a woman fights and

¹¹ A hard way of saying the same: "Athletes do what you force them to do, because they want points. Since they get points, they are going to do it." (C3)

that, basically, this form implies inferior performance according to the interpretation inside the male-dominated field. This brings us to the analysis that presents itself more complex than just a meaning of fighting like a *girl* as “good” or “bad” performance. We describe the points analysed in relation to the gendered movement in elite karate individually or in sets of criteria:

➤ *Use of space, expansive male movements, and restricted female movements*

Female elite athletes use the space quite extensively in comparison to *karateka* women in their training in non-elite *dojos*, who usually just move back and forth (Maclean 2019). Videos of A1 and A2, for example, show this, regardless of the athletes’ body size and weight category. In relation to high-level male athletes with whom female elite athletes are compared, men fill the space with their bodies more easily, given that the *koto* remains the same size for men and women, and male bodies are usually bigger. It is not difficult to notice the trend towards territorial domination that men seek to exert, taking over spaces, or even performing swaggering movements, which is linked to stereotypically masculine ways of moving. We present a comment in order to illustrate this point, which also could be related to tactical work, reported later:

Maybe the placement, that is, it depends on how you place yourself on the *tatami*¹². Maybe that really costs me a lot to see, it depends on how you position yourself. Also fighting oriented towards one judge or another, that is true that C1 told me in a championship. The best thing would be to be oriented towards the two who are giving me points, because if I change the orientation for whatever and I am doing the same, they do not give me points. (A4)

➤ *Less risk taking, less aggressive, and difficulty in complex time-gesture coordination*

Some of the athletes notably prefer to wait for the opponent's attack to anticipate their blows or counterattack, which can be seen in the videos of A6 and A9, for example. This could be related to the fear of losing the golden point, since according to what was raised by Tabben et al. (2018, p.9) ‘72% of the winners scored the first point’. But they can also simply be related to hesitation or lack of initiative, as pointed out by the study of Ross (2009). In fact, regardless of comparisons with men, women are considerably hesitant in the videos we analysed. In some cases, such as in A3 and A7, they do not complete attacks, which happens, we venture to say, for attacking already thinking about exiting and avoiding suffering a score against them, and avoiding a harsh experience of shame (Ryall 2019). Thus, some attacks seem average, that is, they are not carried out at 100% power, even though they are still powerful. A point to be scored needs good form, sporting attitude, vigorous application, awareness, good timing, and correct distance¹³. Possibly this is also related to the long-pointed out observation by Young (1980), of the female tendency to perform short movements close to the body, which complements the previous criterion, with a defence that does not defend (not effective), an attack that fails in reality. This helps to explain why some coaches see the experiences of violence on the street in suburban neighbourhoods as valid.

At the same time, in addition to this, the preference of some athletes for anticipation reveals that complex time-gesture coordination can be a successful experience for them,

¹² Way to call the area of practice or fight, but also the material that covers the floor in the *dojo*, made of a synthetic material, 1mx1m, fitting like a puzzle, commonly in blue and red faces.

¹³ https://www.wkf.net/pdf/rules/wkfcompetition-rules-2019_en-pdf-en-764.pdf

denying general assumptions made by coaches. This is observed in many of athletes' performances. In the videos provided, successful anticipation is performed by A1, A4, A5, and A10. In some situations, athletes present a view that can be more in agreement with coaches, or be again denying coaches' perspective. What we mean is that, for example, A8 consider herself to be an active fighter:

When I do a fight I am not passive at all, so to speak, I do, the truth is that sometimes I exaggerate a punch or something, I do admit it, sometimes they give me 'contact' (penalty). It is true. But I do want to be a person in a 'live' combat, who does not only *jump* (move without blows) the full fight, no, I like that there are things (*action*, blows). For me it is what interests me the most, that things happen in the fight. (A8)

On the other hand, even if she sees herself as an active fighter but her coaches think she could be more aggressive, this is in the end a matter of perspective, recalling Nyberg (2015) on the subjective experience of movement.

It is possible to notice sometimes the tension, nervousness and fear on the faces of some athletes. In one video of A2 but not exclusively there, her opponent seems to be very scared, and that gets worse when she finds herself losing the fight. She appears so anxious that her mouth protection keep falling out, even though there could be other explanations for such event. These elements are contrasted with and diluted by aggressiveness. It seems that while the fight does not 'start' it is not possible to release the tension, and it appears, observing the fighting, that the fight only begins after scoring or giving away the first point, as in the case of A4 and A6 videos. Nevertheless, the 'start' of the fight is given by blows or activity understood as 'things happening in the fight' as said by A8; but the study of the adversary happening in the initial seconds of the fight is undeniably the fight too. For an observer, that seems to be 'nothing', nothing happening; but athletes are immersed in tension, adrenaline, concentration, and obviously fighting. When the action given by blows starts the fight, however, athletes become more aggressive, out of confidence or out of necessity. Although they may sometimes want to protect the point, if they have scored it first, they fight harder. Tabben et al. (2018, 9) state that 'after DM, winners demonstrated a higher offensive/defensive ratio. (...) After DM, losers increased the rate of combination techniques compared to before DM'. This leads us to think that it would be better to 'start' the blows in the fight soon. Even though we recognize that it is easy to observe, criticize and opine from off the mat. Being there, with the feeling that you are about to go to slaughter, is quite another world.

➤ *Less projection work, sweeps, melee work*

In the videos we analysed, there are few attempts at sweeping and some of them, when the opponent 'forgets' the leg after the kick, are performed ineffectively. We observed this in particular in the videos of A7. In this specific case, we consider that the athlete does not believe she is capable of carrying out the projection, regardless of her size. However, there are other athletes who project their opponent with confidence and vigour, such as A9 and A10. It seems that the more experienced the athlete, the more conviction she has to perform this type of technique effectively. And, especially, the more the athlete exceeded in technical training and, in this case, the more she understands and applies as tacit knowledge the laws of physics and biomechanics, the more qualified she is to sweep. This is evident in the video of A10, who performs sweeps very often in her fights, more than once per fight inclusive. This events make coaches add a relative recognition of female progress:

There was no female (competing) until four days ago, it is normal that there are many girls who have a worse job than boys. Now you are improving. (C3)

Even though they mention the improvement, what seems to prevail is the view of inability in *karateka* women learning complex movements. In this regard, Nyberg, Barker and Larsson (2021) have explored at the same time they have proposed knowing, learning, and developing movement capability differently. Perhaps it would be useful to try different approaches, as an alternative to the very traditional practices typical in the martial field, with women, or at least with some women. We are not, with this, proposing a new goal for female performance, since in high-level sports karate they undeniably need to be effective in projecting if the aim is the higher score using this resource (*ashibarai*, for example). But we are saying that by applying different strategies in practicing such complex skills, not following the normative ones, therefore proved to be inefficient, new paths can be effectively built.

➤ *Kiai*

Regarding *kiai*, it is a somewhat inconsistent matter from our point of view. The athletes shout *kiai*, sometimes with nervousness and something of shyness, but it is *kiai*. Perhaps the athletes could make themselves more imposing through it, but together with the aggressiveness, after the fight 'starting' with blows, the *kiai* also tends to be freer, as can be seen slightly in the videos of A4. We say slightly because, in fact, problems around *kiai* are not so evident for athletes in this level of performance.

➤ *Tactical work*

Some athletes sent videos of fights from earlier in their careers, including when the women fought two minutes¹⁴, and it is possible to see how they fought more modestly, as in the case of A4, even though she won the title on the occasion. Now some of them tactically show the point to the referee, attesting that they are capable of learning the game (see Ellmer and Rynne 2021); it is a matter of training. One of the athletes, A9, sent a video where she repeatedly moved to position herself to punch always in the same position, because those referees, from that angle, were giving her the point.

My husband studies all the rivals and I know what I have to do in each case, I also know how I am and I know how I compete in one corner, in the other corner, if I win, if I lose, everything is studied. (A9)

Nevertheless, contradictorily perhaps, coaches consider women to have too much 'in the head', which could make understanding of things more difficult:

Let's see, women are more complicated, you are more complicated, because there are more things. We (men), as someone said about the drawer, we have a drawer (compartment in the head), there we tighten things. You have a lot (specific compartments) there. (C1)

Some of the older fights seem less technical than some current fights from the same athletes, such as in the case of A4 mentioned above, where she won the championship performing techniques understood to be not complex, mainly *gyaku zuki*. However, athletes pointed out these earlier fights as their best performance. They can skilfully make a projection/sweep in some other combat, but they, A4 and A9 specifically, indicated those

¹⁴ Time given to them only equalled men's time in 2019, three minutes.

earlier videos to us. We must analyse those, of course, but we cannot help noticing some of the points that we are critically reporting here. And this leads to confirm Nyberg's (2015) point quoted earlier. Those fights, performatively perhaps not so complex, generated sensations of perception of the movement in flow (Csikszentmihalyi 2000); the context, the moment, the difficult opponent, the victory with a special flavour, all these subjective factors need to be taken into account in analysing objective movements.

➤ *More careful and assertive, do the basics necessary to score*

Especially the girls, yes they look more professional and more cared for. (A9)

Women fighters consider themselves to take their tasks more seriously than their male counterparts, as observed by A9. Nevertheless, there is another point seen through a different prism by athletes and coaches. Women athletes defend their position as a good thing, while coaches view these qualities in a negative. The coaches consider women take less risks than male fighters, and see this as an indication that women are inferior fighters, repeatedly valuing that which is historically understood as proper of men. But, again, this is seen differently by the women athletes, getting to be something they are at odds with, as pointed out by A6,

I'm quite cold, fighting. I am aggressive, but I am... C... (past *sensei*) often tells me 'you have done nothing; you always control yourself.' No. It is that I am always thinking about the failure of the rival, I do not throw 28000 million techniques to fail and they score off me. I try to see the failure of the opponent, and if I have to shoot only one technique, I shoot one technique. In that sense I am cold, but I do consider myself aggressive, I am not afraid that if I have to go ahead and see it, I will go forward. (A6)

It seems to be of fundamental importance to achieve embodied self-knowledge (Standal and Bratten 2021) in order to develop movement capability and be sure of the person's own potentialities perhaps in a mixture of resisting and giving in. Women need to know themselves and self-produce themselves as subjects in order to resist some opinions. However, they need to give in on some issues, since they cannot always oppose and confront, otherwise they just do not have a place in the team. And in fact there are certainly also assertive and confident attacks that leave the opponent helpless, such as in A1, A2, A5 and A10 videos, among others. They move very well, keep a good distance, playing with this element frequently, using it as a device to approach and depart at the right time and cancel opponent's work. It is clear there the athletes who are studying their adversaries and train in very close quarters, with a personal coach, for example.

Performing in a way not dominated by opponents can give positive results, destabilizing opponents. However, what would it be like for a heavy man to fight like a light man? It is certainly not impossible, but it would require a lot of work, to the point of impacting by overtraining the epigenetic expression (Bedregal et al. 2010). Likewise, it does not seem to be impossible for a woman to perform close to the male model, but it will be difficult, challenging and possibly frustrating for her. We do not refer to the performance of complex movements and skills, which is surely possible to be and is performed by women fighters. What is asked of the woman regarding approaching the best male model of performance, therefore, can be configured as a type of violence, expecting her to transform herself in an extreme level, since what she is or how she performs does not seem to be well accepted in this kind of environment, so to say valued.

➤ *Kata specificities*

Regarding *kata*, its evaluation takes into account a part of technique (70%) and another of athletic preparation (30%). The athletes sent videos of performing *kata* by team and also individual. When the team reaches the final, they also have *bunkai*¹⁵ presentation. Although *bunkai* exposes possibilities of application of techniques presented in the *kata* performed immediately before in sync by the three athletes, it has a strong spectacle aspect. Because of this, many people regret its non-inclusion in the Olympic Games.

When performing *kata* by team, Spanish *kateras* perform as if they were one, they have perfect physical balance, a criterion where other teams usually slip up. They also perform movements that require explosion and are very accurate. When performing *bunkai*, reported in videos of A11, A12 and A13, there is a lot of creativity in the techniques chosen to represent the applicability of the movements, thus attending to the spectacle, which includes complex movements in order to meet exactly these criteria, but without forgetting a certain degree of reality, which is obviously important. Athletes perform the strokes with a sense of excellent distance, which helps to give reality to the execution. They even hit hard each other by going beyond the limits of the presentation.

Many times it has happened to us in the finals, in the *bunkais*, you hit! You stick and then bruises come out and cuts come out. I, for example, remember right now in Moscow last year, in November, A11 kicked me and destroyed my whole mouth inside. And I was on the mat like this (makes suction noise), absorbing the blood because if you bleed, they disqualify you. (A13)

In both team and individual *kata* performance, athletes seem to be facing the opponent in front of them, which can be seen in the performances presented in A11, A12, A13 and A14 videos. The opponent, however, is not present.

Conclusion

This analysis of videos aimed to verify what it means to learn to fight like a *girl* and if there is a feminine way of fighting. As a direct answer to these questions, even though the analysis has proved to be quite complex, we conclude that there is a feminine way of fighting, but only with generalized characteristics, since there is a rich plurality of styles, as many as there are women. The gendered embodiment, cultivated throughout life, cannot be easily annulled. And even though women can be magnificent in the execution of karate techniques, and they are, they also perform as women in the training sessions they do, where the binary conception of gender is, still, hegemonic. So, even though 'pink gloves', as Channon and Phipps (2017) say, also grant 'black eyes', the way women distribute black eyes differs in relation to other possible glove colours. Of course, the fact that it is different, as we believe has been made clear here, does not in any way mean that it is inferior. They are still black eyes!

We consider Young's (1980) 'throwing like a girl' current in *karateka* context and departing from such text we approach the second question of this analysis. In the *karateka* environment, dominated by men, to fight like a *girl* means, for men practitioners, not only to fight differently due to social feminine construction of girls as Young explains; but it means to keep the childish condition of a girl through life and not be able to throw the opponent at all. For them, to fight like a *girl* means inferior performance in comparison with men's, claims

¹⁵ Demonstration of the meaning of the *kata* and application of the techniques used in it. This presentation only is made in medal disputes.

which, moreover, are made very frequently. However, for us, considering the factors analysed, first it is necessary to highlight that it is a very complex topic, requiring a deep analysis, and second, that it means really 'to fight', not just on the mat. Perhaps it is the rudeness with which women are evaluated in all aspects of life that leads to this inferior conception to be so easily proposed and accepted, even if mistaken. Given the numerous adversities, it is correct to say that female martial performance surpasses expectations. Finally, the analysis leads us to assert that it is not impossible for a woman to perform like a man; however, to stablish the male model and require women to perform in accordance with that is an action steeped in symbolic violence.

As secondary points in this observation of the gendered movement of *karateka*, we also drew attention to the importance of the link between what is performed objectively and what is perceived subjectively by those who perform. Sensations experienced and the experience of moments that may not be relevant to those who judge or watch, may be for the performer what makes all difference, becoming imprinted in the person's subjectivity. Also, *karateka* women challenge the environment by simply being there, to some extent they disrupt the hegemonic order, but face several difficulties to perform in the traditional and normative karate environment. Besides that, by entering the elite competitive world, women are in turn challenged, since men in sports male preserve (Matthews 2016), self-considered 'fated' fighters, do not seem to want to share space with, in their view, 'fake' fighters. With this, women have various invitations to leave martial-sportive field; and exactly due to such adversity, just remaining there can be configured as an act of resistance in favour of female sport.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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