

“We could perform much better if we had specific training for girls” – Impacts of the embodiment of tradition for elite-level *karateka* women

“Podríamos rendir mucho más si tuviéramos entrenamientos específicos para chicas” – Impactos de la encarnación de la tradición para mujeres *karatekas* de alto-nivel

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Abstract. Despite several struggles to achieve equality in society, a fight embraced first and foremost by feminist movements, women remain being seen, addressed, and treated as *other* in sport. Women who practice martial arts and combat sports to some extent disrupt the normative social and sportive order. But to be able to remain in environments where their presence is challenging, they are also challenged in their disruptive acting. They end up embodying the internal dynamics of *dojos*, adapting to and often reproducing the traditional teachings that discipline practitioners. It is not enough to become equal. Some athletes who can be reflexive and critical of their experiences may start a movement of raising their voices to advocate for equity instead of, or in combination with equality. We carried out a study with the Spanish women’s squad in preparation to attend the unique, to date, Olympic Games that karate was included into, Tokyo 2020 (2021), seeking to understand how they were subjectively dealing with overlapping issues that compose karate. In this paper, we focus on the gendered embodiment that women high-level athletes make of the so-called tradition in their practice of karate and how they reproduce or oppose to such tradition. Their possible resistance is configured as a claim for transformation of the environment through equity and respect for their own fighters’ and personal features, however, the process is challenging. They may reproduce and continue the stream of tradition; face personal confusion in trying to understand the contradictions of resisting domination and just remain in the team or as *karateka*; they still can be challenged by being named traitors and be conflicted with feminist positionalities; and yet some seem to start a movement of new internal disruption, making it loud that women are ignored, and posing a claim for more women in sport, showing that change has not been achieved enough.

Key words: gender, equity, challenges, change, social justice.

Resumen. A pesar de varias luchas para lograr la igualdad en la sociedad, una lucha abrazada ante todo por los movimientos feministas, las mujeres siguen siendo vistas, enfocadas y tratadas como *otro* en el deporte. Las mujeres que practican artes marciales y deportes de combate alteran en cierta medida el orden normativo social y deportivo. Pero para poder permanecer en entornos donde su presencia es desafiante, también se ven confrontadas en su actuación disruptiva. Terminan incorporando la dinámica interna de los *dojos*, adaptándose y a menudo reproduciendo las enseñanzas tradicionales que disciplinan a los y las practicantes. No basta con llegar a ser igual. Algunas atletas que pueden ser reflexivas y críticas con sus experiencias pueden iniciar un movimiento para alzar la voz y abogar por la equidad en lugar de, o en combinación con la igualdad. Realizamos un estudio con la selección femenina española en preparación para participar de los únicos, hasta la fecha, Juegos Olímpicos en los que estaba incluido el kárate, Tokio 2020 (2021), buscando comprender cómo lidiaron subjetivamente con las cuestiones superpuestas que componen el kárate. En este artículo, nos centramos en la encarnación *generificada* que las atletas de alto nivel hacen de la llamada tradición en su práctica de kárate y cómo reproducen o se oponen a dicha tradición. Su posible resistencia se configura como un reclamo para la transformación del entorno a través de la equidad y el respeto a las características personales y como luchadoras, sin embargo, el proceso es desafiante. Pueden reproducir y continuar la corriente de la tradición; enfrentar confusión personal al tratar de comprender las contradicciones de resistir la dominación y simplemente permanecer en el equipo o como *karatekas*; pueden aun ser cuestionadas al ser consideradas traidoras y entrar en conflicto con posicionamientos feministas; y, sin embargo, algunas parecen iniciar un movimiento de nueva disrupción interna, llamando la atención sobre el hecho de que se sigue ignorando a las mujeres, y a la vez reclamando para que haya más mujeres en el deporte, demostrando que el cambio no ha sido suficientemente logrado.

Palabras clave: género, equidad, desafíos, cambio, justicia social.

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Introduction

Historically, training has always been done for boys, and girls have adapted to that training. (...) Girls have other qualities, but they (men coaches) do not know how to take advantage of them because a workout for girls is not made. (...) I think that we are different, and we could perform much better if we had specific training for girls. (Minerva, athlete, Interview 12(2), 12/08/2020)

This text is a claim for equity in sport. Despite several struggles for equality in society, a fight embraced first and foremost by feminist movements, women remain being

seen, addressed, and treated as *other* in sport (e.g., Tjonndal, 2017; Turelli, 2022). Equality is therefore not achieved, and differences are often ill-intentionally used to justify exclusion and discrimination, even though they are disguised by politically correct speech (Foucault, 2016; McRobbie, 2015). There is no recipe for how to proceed, but it makes sense to work with equity, widely assuming and celebrating differences. In *karateka*¹ world, it is common-sense (Gramsci, 1992) that women should feel satisfied for being *allowed* to participate, for being *accepted*, and *included*. Indeed, in a number of occasions women may feel

¹ Karate practitioners or environment.

privileged and authentic (see Turelli et al., 2023a) for taking part in the so-called masculine world of martial arts and combat sports (MACS). When we analyse the context from a critical perspective, though, acceptance into the environment, for example, does not lead necessarily to belonging because women are not considered to be true fighters (Turelli et al., 2022; see also Salvini, 2017). Neoliberal Western society tends to blame individuals, with an emphasis on women, for their unsuccessful projects (McRobbie, 2015), making them believe that all sorts of wrong choices were made freely and autonomously by them, so they just deserve accusations of blame and feelings of guilt.

Women who practice MACS disrupt the normative social and sportive order (e.g., Maor, 2018; Tjonndal, 2017). But to be able to remain in environments where their presence is challenging, they are also challenged in their disruptive acting. Then, they end up embodying the internal dynamics of *dojos*², adapting to and often reproducing the traditional teachings that discipline practitioners (Turelli, 2022). As they get experienced, if reflexive and critical of such lived experiences, they need to go to a sort of second level of disruption, starting thus from inside, estranging the familiar in a manner of an *outsider within* (Collins, 2015). It is not enough to become equal, because such equality is not a given possibility for this environment as pointed out in the previous paragraph. Women fighters are not going to be considered as worthy as men fighters; this is why equality cannot be taken as a rule for the environment. Equity, instead, should be applied since specifics of fighters could be increasingly highlighted leading to the expression of differentiated potentials.

Some athletes, reflexive and critical of their experiences, may start a movement of raising their voices to advocate for equity. They can face extra challenges, leading some of them to give in and conform, others to feel tired and leave, but still others to keep fighting and disrupting. Due to the stream of tradition that characterizes martial arts, with a traditional (normative, heteronormative, heterosexual, and gender binary³) martial pedagogy (Cynarsky et al., 2012), practitioners are expected to embody such a tradition to be in the line of continuity of warriors' heritage. Even when a martial art becomes sportivized, like karate, and reaches the spotlighted place as an Olympic discipline, Tokyo 2020 (2021) for karate, it is not able to detach from its origins. Karate is no longer included for the Paris 2024 Games, therefore we accompanied the exclusive moment, to date, that it was an Olympic sport. There were plenty of contradictory elements, for example, with athletes celebrating the debut of karate in the Olympic Games and the opportunity of fighting at the highest level, and at the same time criticizing several outdated features that are maintained in karate due to its roots. Nevertheless, despite the critiques we surely have of the Olympic Games and Olympic matters, the visibility the Games offer to disciplines is

positive in revealing internal issues too often covered up in somewhat closed MACS' environments.

We worked with the Spanish women's squad in preparation to attend this unique event seeking to understand how they were subjectively dealing with overlapping issues that compose karate. Explaining the subjective embodiment that women high-level *karateka* experience and construct while practicing their sport is a complex task considering the multifaceted character of karate. To point out just a few facets, it is simultaneously a martial art, and a (amateur/elite/Olympic) combat sport (Turelli et al., in review-a); it carries some philosophical Eastern teachings, and moulds itself to the Western competitive logic (Turelli et al., 2023b); it includes women fighters, while both accuses them of being masculinized and sexualizes their bodies (Turelli et al., 2022; 2023c; 2023d). Considering these few examples, we have been approaching our researched topic from different and complementary perspectives. In this paper, we focus on what women high-level athletes make of the so-called tradition in their practice of karate and how they reproduce or oppose such tradition. Their possible resistance is configured as a claim for transformation of the environment through equity and respect for their own fighters' and personal features. To show this, we structured the article as follows. We start by contextualizing gendered embodiment and tradition in karate. Then, we briefly describe the methods used to conduct the study. Next, we present data collected with *karateka*, women athletes and men coaches, and its discussion, as the embodiment of the received tradition. Finally, we offer some concluding thoughts on the theme.

Gendered embodiment

The whole body is central to most things we do. Through the body we do gender; it is a performance (Butler, 1990) that is possible due to material concreteness. It is in and on the body that culture, social conceptions, experiences obtained in the most diverse environments, are inscribed. The concept of embodiment has the potential to transcend the mind-body dualist view (Aartun et al., 2020). Embodiment encompasses that imprinted on the body, either by absorption of what is general in an environment or by what may contain local specifics translated in the form of *habitus* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In any case, there is a social relationship of mutually affected embodiments, simple or complex, where "the field structures the habitus" and the "Habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.127). For Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p.852), "social embodiment may be very direct and simple, or they may be long and complex, passing through institutions, economic relations, cultural symbols, and so forth—without ceasing to involve material bodies." Bodies receive inscriptions

² Martial practice location.

³ Due to such gender binary strongly present in the researched environment, we are addressing mainly men and women as gender categories, even though we are aware that gender studies go far beyond this binary.

while they contribute their writing, generating and participating in a “habitus as social made body” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.127). The combination of these concepts with forms of capital, power, and interests (Idahosa, 2019) influence the production of masculinities and femininities (Mason, 2018; Paechter, 2006) that are constantly embodied. The embodiment of gender that the research participants in this study do goes through all these elements.

Although Bourdieu has also referred to embodiment (Csordas, 2008), Merleau-Ponty (2005) is the main reference on the matter. He defined the term as the perceptual experience obtained from the significant interpretation of what is lived by the body inserted in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2005). The body absorbs and builds itself with what it lives, performs, and experiences in different contexts.⁴ Reflexive processes are part of embodiment and highlighted in studies on pedagogies of embodiment (Aartun et al., 2020; Oliver & Kirk, 2015), embodied learning (Standal & Bratten, 2021) and embodiment of gender (Velija & Kumar, 2009). Gendered embodiment makes sense taking into account that lived experiences occur through bodies and their materiality, receiving different configurations due to both the biology of bodies, and the sociocultural action on them (see Kirk, 1994).

Mason (2018), inspired by Iris Marion Young, who in the 1980s analysed how gender expectations shape the bodily experience, states that “*gendered embodiment* refers to the ways gender (...) shapes our experiences of living within particular bodies. Gender affects how we learn to use our bodies, how we experience pleasure and pain, and how our bodies exist in relation to others” (p.95). She explains that “‘doing femininity’ means engaging in action while remaining highly conscious of one’s body” (p.97), and “‘doing masculinity’ properly means acting with as little regard for the body as possible.”⁵ Although genderqueer conceptions have been expanding, the binary order of gender still prevails in patriarchal society. The binary view always tends to place male/female, subject/object in opposition. This leads Mason (2018) to question whether it would be valid for women to adopt (although many already do) a masculine embodiment with the intention of *becoming* subjects. She does not find the solution in this though, considering that women would become the objectifiers of others (see Freire, 2005), tending to conceive violence in a normalized way, and seeking a productive embodiment (controlled and effective body). Bringing this to the participation of women in so-called masculine environments, there are several conflicts to their embodiment and subjectivity in an interwoven complex net. It seems that tradition plays an important role in such complexity, thus we address it next.

⁴ We take embodiment from a monistic perspective. It is worth noting that Butler considers another direction to some scholars. In her words: “Note the extent to which phenomenological theories such as Sartre’s, Merleau-Ponty’s, and Beauvoir’s tend to use the term embodiment. Drawn as it is from theological contexts, the term tends to figure “the” body as a mode of incarnation and, hence, to preserve the external and dualistic relationship between a signifying immateriality and the materiality of the body itself” (Butler, 1990, p.95-96). We think though that for this interpretation to work, it would be needed a religious belief in the immaterial.

Tradition and hierarchy

Karate is a combat sport, a “codified, institutionally governed sporting discipline” (Channon & Jennings, 2014, p.774), being for a short period of time, as we noted, among the Olympic sports, taking part, therefore, in the male preserve’s (Matthews, 2016; Mujika et al., 2024; Theberge, 1985) world of sport. Notwithstanding, it originates as, and maintains roots in, a martial art. Martial arts often have links to Eastern traditions and are structured in hierarchical ways, as shown by graded belts, for example. These two contexts have elements in common. We devote this section to approach one of these elements of great relevance that is tradition. To do so, we base our argument on the work of Collins (2011). He endeavoured to analyse the origins of Australian rules football, which relate to national myths and an imperial past in a process of invention of sporting tradition. He exposes examples about the roots of rugby and baseball as well, showing characteristics of sport that suffered changes in history towards a new story. He explains:

The history of sport has become a palimpsest. Meanings, interpretations and purposes are written and rewritten over that history as people seek to give a broader significance to the act of play. Details and fragments are reassembled and rearranged to create a story that meets the desires and demands of different generations, social groups and ideologies (Collins, 2011, p.8).

Collins’ study draws inspiration from the theory of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983), “The Invention of Tradition”.⁶ Collins applies such theory to sport and adds features capable of helping to identify invented traditions. It is similar to the given scenario in karate, in which we find a “founding father” (Collins, 2011, p.11), evidences are “based largely on hearsay or personal affirmation, usually of one person” (p.12), in addition to supporters of invented tradition basing their position on acts of faith (p.12).

Visiting Hobsbawm’s (1983) work, we find that invented forms of tradition are not completely arbitrary, instead they “normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past” (p.1), following rules, rituals, or symbolic nature to keep links. The characteristic of traditions is invariability, with a quest to perpetuate a fixed *way of being* and changelessness. Remembrance of the past plays a role in the traditions of an unshakable fixed structure to which one can/must always return. Fixed practices are passed on and reproduced over time through repetition. Hence the importance of ritualized activities, following protocols and martial routines, always the same way. Martial arts usually have ritualized etiquettes of respect of hierarchy, and this is

⁵ Note that Mason study is from 2018 and she highlights that “These ideal types oversimplify the realities of embodiment” (p.97). We acknowledge that new forms of masculinities and femininities are constantly being produced and performed by any genders.

⁶ Raymond Williams wrote about tradition in 1977 in “Marxism and Literature”. For him, *all* tradition is invented and a selection and shaping of the past in particular ways by the dominant class. John Hargreaves wrote about this in 1986 in “Sport, Power and Culture”, and David Kirk, in relation to “traditional physical education”, in 1992.

maintained to some extent even when the sports side prevails. We argue that it becomes convenient. Different forms of hierarchy may be in place (see Turelli et al., in review-a), but the power dynamics it feeds is there and must be considered. Thus, tradition supports those who are powerful, positioning them higher in the stream that supposedly links them to the founding masters and myths, facilitating a process of domination.

Going deeper on the topic, Williams (1977) argues that tradition operates conjointly with hegemony (Gramsci, 1992). He writes that:

What we have to see is not just 'a tradition' but a selective tradition: an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification. (...) Yet, within a particular hegemony, and as one of its decisive processes, this selection is presented and usually successfully passed off as 'the tradition', 'the significant past'. (...) It is a version of the past which is intended to connect with and ratify the present (Williams, 1977, p.115-116).

The selection of relevant parts of the tradition according to vested interests manipulates history building "truths" with authority supposedly recognized by time, by the ancient founders of something, and by a past presented as pure origin. History itself is written in versions of some, usually winners or those with the means to do so, not allowing subaltern versions to be accepted or widely known, in addition to the way that historians may perceive facts varying according to multiple factors affecting their subjectivities. This view of tradition links to Foucault's (2016) production of subjectivity related to truth. Versions of history and selections of tradition lead to many discourses posed with power of truth when, perhaps, they just come closer to what might have taken place. The character of truth with the power of tradition, added to hierarchical forms justified by tradition itself, govern and shape many practices that we participate in today. Generally, the discourse of tradition is imbued with an honourable and differentiating sense, placing the activity in question out of the ordinary, implying that it is not a single "orphan" activity, but belongs to an important and conserved genealogy. Therefore, the recuperation of gymnastics, as a predecessor of sport, from the Greeks (Cousineau, 2004), as well as the martial tradition (Aguilar, 2009), confers distinction and symbolic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) to Olympic karate and its practitioners.

Methods

⁷ Fight structured by weight categories.

⁸ Fight against an imaginary opponent, performed as a choreography of martial blows.

⁹ We decided to offer limited information on the participants' demographics considering that they have some national and international prominence, and it is our ethical duty to try hard to protect their confidentiality.

¹⁰ As we have indicated in the introduction, this article is part of a larger study. From it, we have produced a specific publication on the analysis of the videos (Turelli et al., 2022), and another publication specifically focused on the auto-ethnographic experience of the first author (Turelli et al., 2023e). As well, observations

We carried out an ethnographic study with the women's Spanish karate squad in preparation to attend the Tokyo 2020 (2021) Olympic Games including their coaches. The team participating was composed of 14 women elite-level athletes, ten from *kumite*⁷ and four from *kata*⁸, age range 19-33, and four men coaches, ages between 33 and 62 years old.⁹ We conducted two semi-structured interviews (Hammer & Wildavsky, 1990) with each of them aiming, with the first interview, to know more about their athletic profile and experiences in addition to creating some proximity to interviewees; and with the second, to enter more properly our topic of research on the construction of gendered embodied subjectivities in the unique Olympic moment of karate, lived by these people. Both interviews ended up revealing several overlapping issues present in karate, emphasized, though, for women since gender matters are central for the domination in place in *karateka* environment. Data were generated from interviews, video-analysis of the fighting styles of the women in the squad (Turelli et al., 2022), notes from observations of some training sessions of the squad, which were interrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For the same reason, the Olympic Games were postponed to 2021, impacting our original research plan and representing a limitation of the study, therefore requiring adaptation. Such disruption led us to add an auto ethnographical complementary approach to the study, considering notes of karate training experiences of the first author in different countries during her research journey, and other memories from her long-term practice in karate, for about 30 years to date (Turelli & Vaz, 2011; Turelli et al., 2021; 2023e).

We focus on data from the interviews in this paper¹⁰, which were coded manually, answering to and re-elaborating an inductive system of categories previously thought of, which is explained on detail and can be consulted in Turelli (2022). We conducted a pilot interview before proceeding with the formal interview process, testing our proposed semi-structured protocol with a Spanish *karateka* woman colleague of training of the first author. Questions prompting the conversations with participants were around 25 for each interview, inspiring a range of 1 hour and 10 minutes of recorded conversation. Specific questions can be found in Turelli (2022) as well. The generated data is primarily interpreted from the perspective of the first author, and then crossed over, in a manner of triangulation, with the other authors in the paper.¹¹ They are experts in the sociology of sport and exerted the function of constantly questioning the first author's perceptions as an insider. The first author is a cis-gender woman karate practitioner since

were used as a source, but the generated material is not included for the purpose of this specific article in order to avoid becoming repetitive. We focused on publishing about participant observation in a pilot study that we carried out (Turelli et al., 2021).

¹¹ Even though for this paper we are three authors, we acknowledge that for data collection, analysis, and triangulation, we were four authors. We remain grateful to this fourth author, not named here, who was fundamental for the completion of this work, as well as we pay our respects and admiration to him.

childhood with experience in other MACS as well. She comes originally from the Global South, having lived for six years in the Global North. The second author is a cis-gender man as the third author, is originally from Europe, having lived for years in Oceania. He has experience as an athlete, not in MACS though, and is highly and internationally recognized for his scholarship. The third author is from the Global South, holding strong scholar experience at an international level as well. He also lived for years in Europe, and had experience performing as a professional athlete, though never in MACS. There are many other features of our positionalities that affect our reading of data. We just point out general characteristics though acknowledging that our interpretation is not neutral (Criado-Perez, 2019). Our entire study lasted four and a half years, with data collection happening in 2020. We obtained ethical approval to carry out the research in 2019 by the Autonomous University of Madrid, under approval code CEI-102-1930. The interviewees are identified through pseudonyms. Now we proceed to present and discuss the findings related to the embodiment constructed by women high-level *karateka* of the MACS tradition and its impacts over them.

Findings and discussion

We present data here that address the transmission of tradition in karate, a complex issue in MACS. Such tradition is not neutral but preserves male hegemony (Turelli et al., 2023d). In general, women embody martial tradition to be accepted and included, even though they end up othered (Lugueti et al., 2022). There may be in place discourses of gender-blindness spread out and absorbed by men and women, notwithstanding, it is far from being fair in the patriarchal dividend (Connell, 1995), with extremely unequal outcomes for women (see Garay Ibañez de Elejalde et al., 2018; and Hall-López & Ochoa-Martínez, 2023). The discrimination finds justification in the tradition that positions men higher in the stream connecting to masters founders and the supposed oriental mythological martial (hetero)normative heritage where warrior divine heroes are men (see Aguiar, 2009). For a next demanding step of disrupting tradition from inside, practitioners need several years of practice, reflexivity added to awareness of problems, and criticality. The process is challenging. Considering this overview, next we share different perceptions of women in their way of dealing with these issues. They may reproduce and continue the stream of tradition; face personal confusion in trying to understand the contradictions of resisting domination and just remain in the team or as *karateka*; they still can be challenged by being named traitors and be conflicted with feminist positionalities; and yet some seem to start a movement of new internal disruption, making it loud that women are ignored, and posing a claim for more women in sport, showing that change has not been achieved enough.

Embodiment of the received tradition

Some athletes' interviews show that they decided to reproduce what they received by means of direct transmission, something that is valued because it keeps tradition fresh. Women embodied karate *habitus* and, through traditional martial pedagogy, many of them are led to pursue a style of fighting (Turelli et al., 2022) and teaching that tend to mimic the way men do karate. They commented:

He (her *sensei*¹²) has a way of teaching that I really like. When I came to teaching karate, he has taught me how to teach some things. (Hera, athlete, Interview 21(2), 27/08/2020)

I believe that when I come to teaching, I will teach like my father (and *sensei*), because since I was a child, I was with him, and he teaches very well, for my taste he teaches very well! (Juno, athlete, Interview 25(2), 07/09/2020)

Fasting and Pfister (2000, p.106) emphasize that "Women who enter this world (of so-called masculine sports) must learn to play the game, which they often do." In searching for acceptance and highlighted positions, women may try hard to achieve external given standards of how to perform as good fighters, which for karate specifically corresponds to men's styles of fighting. In doing so, they may take a stance, supported by their absorption of the environment, in the name of egalitarian approaches, with equal treatment, although not always in ways that correspond to equal rights (see Herrera-Valenzuela et al., 2021). An athlete exemplified this point:

I have always trained with the person in front of me, be they a woman or a man. There have been quite a few girls, but my teacher has never distinguished between men and women, it doesn't matter. (...) As a teacher, I do it too. (...) If you make girls only get on with girls, they will not improve and they will remain in a group of inferiority. You have to be able to get them to hang out with boys and make them grow more. (Ceres, athlete, Interview 7(1), 24/07/2020)

We understand Ceres' point in improving girls and women's abilities and possibilities by practicing with boys and men, nevertheless, we argue that it depends on each situation; it is something that needs to be taken from an equity perspective, as we pointed out in the introduction. There are occasions where single-sex classes may be a more suitable option (Rodrigues et al., in review). However, the focus here is on the supposed equality that does not respect possible differences that, if considered, could lead to improvements of performances of girls and women, as Minerva pointed out and we highlighted her comment cited at the beginning of the introduction. The non-discriminatory approach may also be read as lack of interest in preparing proper training sessions, or in studying female specific needs and interests (see Lise et al., 2022). It means, considering all people equals, not always correspond to inclusion, but may disguise a lack of effort in addressing specific needs due to different experiences and backgrounds. Demeter also commented on this:

¹² The graduated teacher.

We are forgotten by technicians or *by education* in general. (...) We are different, neither better nor worse, we are just different. So, with a team, you have to give men one thing and women another. (...) Many times, by trying... perhaps not to make inequalities... we are not treated (trained) as we should. (Demeter, athlete, Interview 20(2), 27/08/2020)

Demeter is not referring to single-sex classes but, to some extent, the ability of coaches in managing specifics of women. An example of this could be the lack of knowledge on menstruation and female hormones, a topic that we brought up in the interviews and complaints were almost unanimous among athletes (for more information on this, please see Turelli et al., 2023b) while coaches presented a colloquial view¹³. It means that equality should be reached through girls and women making the effort to equal or resemble boys and men in order to be inserted into martial environments. This ends up keeping the patriarchal engine running since, as Fasting and Pfister (2000) argue, "it is not enough to get more women into the (sports) organization, if women are merely imitations of men" (p.105). Following this line, there is in place, therefore, a requirement to *be the same as men*, as the coach said:

I personally consider that they (women as *sensei*) can be the same as men, or they are the same as men. But it is true that we live in a sexist society, unfortunately. So, when you want your son to learn karate, if there is a male coach and a female coach, people usually decide on the man. It is a prejudice of the society. If you have a daughter, you prefer that she go with that female coach. Why? Because you consider that she will understand her better, do you understand what I want to tell you? But it is my opinion. (...) If you are looking for competition or self-defence, parents usually go for a man, that's the way it is. (Hefaiostos, coach, Interview 37(2), 30/09/2020)

The coach speaks about the view of society, locating himself somewhat off the mainstream. Notwithstanding, he reframes himself after saying that women *can* be the same as men, revealing the traditional martial pedagogy in which men are positioned hierarchically higher and the stigmatized view of women as nurturing, which in itself is a culturally devaluated characteristic (see Donoso Pérez et al., 2023). Men, on the other hand, are taken as proper fighters, able to compete and self-defend, teaching that to others with efficacy. For this conception, women, with effort, may pursue (not necessarily achieving) such levels, however, they *naturally* (Young, 1980) hold the role of caring teachers. Undoubtedly, male hegemony is socially spread and affects sports spaces, but these in turn also affect society (Turelli et al., in review-b).

Additionally and simultaneously to this first group in which a reproduction of the social and martial view of women is carried out, there are athletes dealing with some

sort of confusion in trying to settle both *the way things are* and *it does not feel right*. One athlete perceived such complexity when scrutinizing the transmission of tradition:

Karate itself has been invented by a man, it has the traits of this person. So, I think that what is transmitted is from this person, who was a man, but I don't think that it is because the person is male or female. Maybe a woman would have done it differently. (...) A man invented it and what this man has invented is transmitted, but I don't think that... I don't know, I wouldn't enter into masculine or feminine. I do not think that now because I am a woman, I transmit something more feminine. I do what they have taught me. I don't know. I do not know how to say it. (Ceres, athlete, Interview 17(2), 23/08/2020)

Ceres displays a disturbing confusion towards her own beliefs. Karate cannot be manifested without a transmitting vehicle, which means, people's bodies channelize and give life to the sport. Thus, karate is moulded both on and by the body that materializes it and by the culture of the place where it is practiced. In this sense, karate is a tool, created by men and aimed at them, with masculine performance standards to be achieved by those who practice it (see Hardin & Whiteside, 2009). As we have been showing, women often try hard to achieve male models given to them following traditional approaches that *have always been like that*, even though they end up finding through their own practice that *there could be more for women*, that things feel weird the way they are disposed. It is hard to raise their voice about such a weirdness though since established people in the structures may disagree and on occasions adopt gaslight approaches, in which women are presented as crazy and are strongly taken and addressed as other (see Flores Fernandez et al., 2022).

In addition, women starting in the process of awareness of oppression need to deal with the discomfort that sometimes reflexivity can bring, because they are insiders, but they also queer the familiar, self-questioning about assumptions that may have been mistaken. They were given a worldview, notwithstanding, when they see the world by themselves, they may find out that the previous view was not accurate or beneficial to them, but on the contrary. To exert criticality can be too demanding at times, therefore the discomfort of becoming aware often involves retreats, repositioning, and inner battles, as another athlete showed when speaking about feminism from her situation of an insider:

Karate is quite egalitarian. (...) In fact, I believe I am a feminist and I think every woman should be a feminist, but I also think that right now the term feminism is badly related. Acts that are taking place in different places... I don't want to be related to that because I don't feel related to that (e.g., supposed victimization). (Proserpina, athlete, Interview 18(2), 24/08/2020)

¹³ For example: "They all (women athletes) tell me that, just like that, in the middle of the mat! I tell them 'I don't care, leave me alone, I don't care about it. I'm here, what are you telling me?' (like 'I am watching you, I don't need a story'). They say, 'because I have my period, so I'm bloated'. I reply, 'yes, yes, yes, of course'. It's a chore... And with the weighing, 'I have liquid retention and I feel

bad.' And suddenly one of them breaks out and starts crying like a crazy person and they all hug her and do their protocols, their stories... (...) Someone says, 'I'm on my period, I'm going to... I'm getting all dirty, I have to go.' 'Yes, yes, go.' Hahaha." (Ares, coach, Interview 34 (1), 29/09/2020)

Some regions of Spain seem to explore feminist literature, then, young women usually had contact with feminism during their education. Although they can identify with it, they at the same time feel conflicted due to the environment that they are part of and demands of them a sort of loyalty. They may feel *betweeners* (Diversi & Moreira, 2018). It is complex once they hold a position in the national squad that may easily be lost, quickly replaced by another athletes. So, Proserpina is both a woman athlete in a masculine environment, disrupting social norms, and someone seeking to belong, at the heart of the *karateka* group, which includes the embodiment of its ideology. This explains why, on occasion, accusations of betrayal, on one side or another, may arise.

Finally, and again simultaneously, there are athletes engaged in negotiations that combine resisting and giving in to a necessary process for maintaining their team positions, but fighting domination (Bourdieu, 2012). They are aware of the hegemonic male presence in the sport and consider that more women might lead to reversion of this fact in their favour. They presented complaints as well as making claims for change:

The masculine continues to be transmitted... If technical positions were given to women... "Hey, it is necessary to deliver a course in Latin America." Well, call a woman, take a female coach there. That could help. (Demeter, athlete, Interview 20(2), 27/08/2020)

I miss a female coach. (Diana, athlete, Interview 13(2), 13/08/2020)¹⁴

My confidence with women (coaches) maybe was greater than with men. (Artemis, athlete, Interview 26(2), 07/09/2020)

Athletes reported the need for change, although we must note that it is slow. It is true that feminist waves provided progress, but as we said at the beginning, it is not enough because structural oppressions are disguised and keep being reframed (McRobbie, 20015). Fasting and Pfister (2000) carried out a study that found compatibility with what *karateka* say, even though there is a 20-year gap between that scenario and what athletes said recently. The first thing to note is exactly the interval of time and the rhythm required to move forward on issues. Despite a tendency towards consensus, opposite forces act concomitantly through *machista* and sexist attitudes, hidden beneath apparently politically correct behaviours that disguise manipulation, and by producing contradictions and confusions that end up benefiting and putting patriarchy in a perpetual self-nourished cycle. Second, there is still present the social place attributed to women and men; women as caring and nurturing, as the coach pointed out earlier, and men with the serious and worth tasks, as much as requiring strength, allowing violence, and the ability to supposedly protect others. The stereotyped gender view (Rodríguez Fernández & Ospina-Betancurt, 2022). counts on the embodiment often made by women of forms of oppression, leading them to

struggle in pleasing so to be accepted and maybe achieve belonging, adapting to models that are usually unsuitable for them. All this relates to the tradition found in the environment which attributes special meanings to things and facilitates its incorporation, then helping in the maintenance of privileges and the strong gender binary hierarchical logic.

In addition to this, despite many times women are conscious of the issue around gender hierarchy, there is the fact that several of them avoid prominent leadership and administrative positions. There is a number of reasons for such an avoidance, among which we could emphasize the very embodiment of beliefs around the gender order. Prominent positions must extend to all hierarchical levels, however, demands are such that often lead women to question whether they are capable of performing in other positions than those they adapted to. It also justifies their reproduction of what they have always seen men do, the imitation they may aim, even in order to hurry from or minimize criticisms. Besides that, Fasting and Pfister (2000, p.93) highlight also "less status, lower salaries and less power than their male counterparts" as reasons for women not always want higher positions. However, the claim the athletes make for more women populating MACS spaces, strongly agreed by us, asks for women taking agency and paying the price for defying structures. Undoubtedly, these are courageous goals. There is a lot of work to do, there are movements happening, although slowly, but we also want to value small wins (Weick, 1984) that have been obtained through criticality, women's voices raised, and women's strength to remain in environments that do not welcome them but that make room and crave change. It is not enough but mobilizes us to keep fighting instead of giving up.

Conclusion

In this paper we focused on the gendered embodiment that women high-level athletes make of the so-called tradition in their practice of karate and how they deal with such tradition, reproducing or opposing to it through negotiations. Our research followed an equity-seeking approach, thus contrasting with conceptions of equality that may be biased. Equity refers to singular attention being paid to individuals or, in this case, to a group of people. Trying to force them to be equal to men fighters is not an empowering action, but a way that do not respect their specifics attributing to them the place of *other*. *Other* because they are not men but something *trying to be*. We argue that their performativity is not of *other*, and should not be of attempts of imitating men, but a performativity of women. With our study, we found out that women *karateka* at times may end up reproducing patriarchy, through the embodiment of so-called martial tradition from the gender binary heteronormative environment, despite their desire not to do so. There were athletes reproducing the tradition they have al-

¹⁴ Note that, as far as we know, after the research the coaching team seems to have become more diverse.

ways been receptors of; these athletes did not show confusion in their thinking, just acting in favour of patriarchy. The embodiment of tradition, therefore, is perceived through the pursuit of specific styles of fighting, shouting, wearing uniforms, performing within the mat trying to imitate men, and outside the mat trying to attest emphasized femininity to comply with coaches' expectations, for example; and the impacts of such embodiment of this selected tradition are felt and work against women, once it reinforces patriarchy and keeps domination in place.

Similarly to the embodiment of tradition made by the first group and the impacts observed, a second group of athletes went through the embodiment of distorted conceptions on equality spread in the environment as part of the selected-useful tradition. As well, it functions feeding the patriarchal engine back in a manner that women work for their own detriment, with the difference that the second group of women showed some confusion as, we believe, a sign of becoming aware of incoherencies of the environment. Some women among the athletes thus perceived things as *not right*, but seemed to struggle to find a sort of harmonious path in which, ideally, all oppositions could turn compatible. It might be quite difficult to take a defined stance since their place as *karateka* could be at stake. Yet, other athletes found ways to negotiate and exert agency while doing their work well and respecting rules that, they know, cannot be broken. For now.

Thus, there is in place a complex situation of overlapping positionings. By being active fighters in a sport understood as masculine, women *karateka* do not conform to the hegemonic order; but *inside* their disruptive action, they are asked to conform to the order *within* the martial world, in, on and through their bodies. So, women athletes struggle to be within, and when there, they still do not belong, experiencing concomitant feelings of insiders and intruders (see Ahmed, 2004). It is a challenge for women, although attesting to their strength in remaining there, which clearly correspond to small wins being achieved. Change of unfair situations, though, is still pursued, with these challenged women being active as challengers of the structures. Their presence in daily *dojos* as more women and girls, in elite-level sport as competent fighters, and in positions of prominence as coaches or responsible for sports bodies, contain a subversive potential when they are aware of issues and willing to break the stream of tradition as explained here. In short, it is a fact that tradition goes through all *karateka* generating different impacts on their embodied subjectivities and performances, and consequently different attitudes towards the future. It would be relevant to carry out research evaluating how the received impact pointed out here is being spread by and through them, if feelings of confusion keep being in place with time passing and the chain of tradition remains reproduced, or is interrupted, or reframed, generating or not change towards more equitable environments that empower girls, women, and other vulnerable genders.

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