

## "We are not products": Stereotyping women athletes in karate through demands on femininity and sensual bodies

*"No somos productos": estereotipando a las atletas de kárate a través de exigencias de feminidad y cuerpos sensuales*

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**RESUMEN:** In this paper, we are focusing on the conceptions of femininity, female bodies, and beauty in sport that women high-level karate fighters and their coaches developed in order to perform in a traditionally male-oriented sport. With so much higher public profile for women in sports (e.g., soccer, rugby, cricket, traditionally male sports), has anything changed in the traditional order of the male preserve? Thus, our aim here is to reflect on the set of shown conceptions and assumptions in order to add to the produced literature on women's sports studies and hopefully contribute to sought advancements, claiming change. We interviewed the 14 women athletes and their four men coaches composing the women's Spanish Olympic karate squad in preparation for the 2020 (2021) Tokyo Olympic Games. Two open-ended semi-structured interviews were carried out with each of the participants. We conclude that the sportive-martial environment is still strongly male-oriented, even though female participation has been increasing; nevertheless, girls and women still face several challenges to achieve belonging. They enter the environment and reach the status of black belts, or elite athletes. Notwithstanding, we argue that the amount of power they truly exercise is limited and submitted to the male hierarchy.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** gender; martial arts; combat sports; stereotypes; embodiment.

**ABSTRACT:** En este artículo, nos centramos en las concepciones de feminidad, cuerpos femeninos y belleza en el deporte que mujeres luchadoras de kárate de alto nivel y sus entrenadores desarrollaron para desempeñarse en un deporte tradicionalmente masculino. Con un perfil público más alto para mujeres en el deporte (por ejemplo, fútbol, rugby, cricket, deportes tradicionalmente masculinos), ¿ha cambiado algo en el orden tradicional de la preservación masculina? Nuestro objetivo aquí es reflexionar sobre el conjunto de concepciones y suposiciones mostradas para agregar a la literatura producida sobre los estudios deportivos de mujeres y contribuir a los avances buscados haciendo un reclamo por el cambio. Entrevistamos a 14 atletas y cuatro entrenadores que componían el equipo olímpico español de kárate en preparación para los Juegos Olímpicos de Tokio 2020 (2021). Realizamos dos entrevistas semiestructuradas de final abierto con cada participante. Concluimos que el ambiente deportivo-marcial sigue siendo fuertemente masculino, aunque la participación femenina haya ido aumentando, sin embargo, las niñas y mujeres aún enfrentan varios desafíos para lograr pertenencia. Ingresan al ambiente y alcanzan el estatus de cinturones negros, o atletas de élite. No obstante, argumentamos, la cantidad de poder que realmente ejercen es limitada y está sometida a la jerarquía masculina.

**KEYWORDS:** género; artes marciales; deportes de combate; estereotipos; *embodiment*.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Que bonito é* How beautiful it is  
*Ver o "time X" entrando em campo* To see "team X" entering the field  
*De calcinha e de tamanco* In panties and clogs  
*Rebolando pro juiz* Wiggling butt to the (male) referee

Traditionally, sports culture has been developed in a way that celebrates women athletes, not for their performance but for their appearance (e.g., Bennet, 2017; Tajrobehkar, 2016). The results they can achieve are often not primarily considered but diminished in comparison to men's (Turelli et al., 2022), transferring the appreciation of female sport to aesthetic appeals (Ferretti & Knijnik, 2007; Souza, Capraro & Jansen, 2017). They are expected to display emphasized forms of femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) which are linked to sensual and perfect bodies according to the standardized canons of neoliberal societies (McRobbie, 2015). The refrain cited above in Portuguese and translated into English was a chant used by opponents in competitions in Brazil when the first author of this paper competed as an amateur athlete in karate. It contains contemporary supposedly valued attributes for women employed in a derogatory way. That was addressed to teams, both male and female, and aimed to humiliate and discredit the opponent who would shrink or get annoyed by the provocation, being led to some loss of control, then becoming easier prey for domination and, ultimately, defeat. Such humiliation was and often is made through feminization and playing with the sense of masculinity. This masculinity is not attached exclusively to men since women may also embrace the widely spread sense of worthiness and competence in sport, which is taken as a male preserve (Matthews, 2016; Theberge, 1985). Therefore, all genders can feel humiliated by being associated with socially and historically accepted feminine features (Marcuse, 2018) once they are equated with weakness and childish dishonorable characteristics.

Karate is maintained as a martial art at the same time that its governing bodies seek to warrant a place among sports competitions, preferably as an Olympic sport. Indeed, karate figured among the disciplines for Tokyo 2020 (2021), even though it is no longer included in Paris 2024. In taking part in these two scenarios, women athletes are led to face challenges due to the martial culture found in the environment, which positions them under the stereotype of masculinized female fighters (Turelli, Vaz & Kirk, in review); and also challenges due to the sports culture, which sexualizes their bodies. There is no replacement of martial arts' prejudices for sports' prejudices,

but the mutual reinforcement of them. To be accused of masculinization does not please the athletes (see Turelli, 2022), so they can exaggerate traditional features of femininity in an attempt of attesting to their (hetero)sexuality (Roth & Basow, 2004). *Karateka*<sup>4</sup> environment is, in general, a strong heteronormative and gender binary environment, which justifies our focus on only cis-gender women and men here. We note, though, that in hurrying up from the masculinization stereotype and perhaps pleasing demands of the male gaze (Foucault, 2009), women still do not achieve established and respected status, which may be observed through the chant we shared above. It illustrates how pejoratively women and their supposedly valued sensual characteristics are addressed and used to insinuate females' power to corrupt men (Vaczi, 2016).

In this paper, we focus on the conceptions of femininity that women high-level karate fighters and their coaches developed in order to perform in this traditionally male-oriented sport. As well as we explored the conceptions, they, the Spanish women's national squad, built into their long-term practice in karate regarding female bodies and the view on beauty in sport. Thus, our aim here is to reflect on the set of shown conceptions and assumptions in order to add to the produced literature on women's sports studies and hopefully contribute to sought advancements, claiming change. To perform as a woman fighter is not just about competing and reaching good results, but it is a complex, tough task that, among several elements, requires athletes to be conscious of their social situation of women (Young, 1980), and constantly respond to various demands from the male gaze (Foucault, 2009). In the next pages, then, we will approach issues surrounding *the body of karateka women*, followed by *stereotypes they face in regard to femininity and sensuality*. After that, we present our concluding thoughts that reflect on the given picture and pose a vindication for a paradigm change for women's sport. With so much higher public profile for women in sports (e.g., soccer, rugby, cricket, traditionally male sports), has anything changed in the traditional order of the male preserve? Before doing so, we briefly describe the methods we adopted in the conduction of the study.

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<sup>4</sup> The term used to designate karate practitioners or environment.

## METHODS

This paper is part of a study we conducted to achieve a Ph.D. degree. It was carried out in Spain and had the main source of information, interviews, carried out online in 2020. Online interviews were the outcome of a needed adaptation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, we intended to do a broad ethnography of the women's Spanish Olympic karate squad; however, given that even the Tokyo Olympic Games required adaptations and were postponed to 2021, our research followed similar requirements for restructuration. Nevertheless, the study was satisfactorily adapted to the new context, complied with all the requisites of the Ethics Committee of the Autonomous University of Madrid, and obtained approval under number CEI-102-1930.

We interviewed the 14 women athletes and their four men coaches composing the squad at that time. Using pseudonyms, the athletes were Artemis, Diana, Minerva, Atena, Juno, Hera, Ceres, Demeter, Venus, Vesta, Hestia, Proserpina, Perséfone and Afrodite, and the coaches, Ares, Hermes, Apolo, and Hefaiostos. Two open-ended semi-structured interviews (Hammer & Wildavsky, 1990) were carried out with each of the participants (Hickey & Roderick, 2017) in Spanish and translated into English for the purpose of an international thesis. The first interview focused on the interviewees' athletic profiles, and the second interview dealt with our research topic more directly. We were interested in verifying how women athletes were constructing their embodied subjectivity in an environment in expansion, taking into account that the Tokyo Olympic Games were the first and unique time, to date, that karate was an Olympic discipline.

The first author of this paper has been a karate practitioner and amateur athlete for several years, having faced issues in karate that led her to abandon it, resuming practice and research of karate with its announcement as an Olympic discipline. She had the hope that more visibility for the discipline could be helpful in promoting change within the martial-sportive space. Then she started a movement aiming for such change by joining forces with other women and conscious men, firstly, though, seeking to verify if what she experienced in her home country in the Global South was not an isolated event. Indeed, women from the Global North and at high levels of the sport offered testimonies evidencing that they face similar challenges, as can be verified in the following pages and other publications from us on the same topic, which leads us to pose a wide claim for change in women's sport. The paper's co-authors do not practice martial arts but are experienced critical scholars in the field of sports studies and physical education. Their role in the study was

fundamental to question and debate with the first author, working in a manner of triangulation of academic experts, in addition to their function as Ph.D. supervisors.

In the following pages, we present the findings and discussion for the proposed topic, analysing elements of the hegemonic sporting culture that the Spanish *karateka* team provided us with. We considered sensations and feelings that were/are triggered in athletes from the experiences they lived regarding stereotypes used to fit them in. They may embrace and embody that since they are in constant construction, immersed, of course, in society. But they also can be critical of such stereotypes claiming to be seen in a not-objectified view, not being commercialized as products. Therefore, we start by briefly sociologically addressing the *karateka* female athlete's body and the different conceptions around it. Next, we bring the squads' considerations on the complex topic of femininity, including ideas about beauty and sensuality, relevant elements for thinking about the situation of women's performativity (Butler, 1990).

### **Stereotypes around the body of *karateka* women**

The division between body and mind, the Cartesian dichotomy, is recurrent in society, sometimes used in a didactic way, and at other times as an expression of the Greek cultural heritage, particularly in the West (Le Breton, 2011). The Greeks are known for proposing a combination of music and gymnastics to educate the mind or soul, and body, respectively (Platão, 2007). As their heirs, the Romans began to use the phrase "*mens sana in corpore sano*", usually translated into English as "a healthy mind in a healthy body", which was later adapted by the Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the restorer of Olympic Games for the Modern Era, as "*mens fervida in corpore lacertoso*". It means that the body should be trained to carry an enthusiastic mind (Cousineau, 2004), justifying the relevance of sport even though in a disembodied approach that often ends up objectifying the whole. We advocate, though, that lived experiences occur through embodiment (Aartun et al., 2020; Oliver & Kirk, 2015), where intellectual elaboration, feelings, and sensations all count.

The sports environment, in addition to existing through physical performance, has its culture closely linked to the aesthetics of bodies. Aesthetics, as a branch of philosophy, refers to the sensory perception of beauty and is guided by some subjective aesthetic values such as beauty, harmony, balance, delicacy, and elegance (Vigarello, 2005). Although some authors, such as

Corbalán (2010), argue that aesthetic criteria would follow exact proportions called auric and these would guide classic beauty contests, they are described as subjective values; therefore, they are also related to taste (Bourdieu, 1984). Taste involves social construction, class experience, access to culture, or a particular type of culture. Thus, each person can report their preferences according to their individual experience combined with what they incorporate from the *habitus* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) in which they are immersed. Karate's traditional pedagogy (Cynarsky, Obodynsk & Zeng, 2012) expresses and strengthens traditional elements linked to *the feminine*. It is in place both in the martial version of karate through allowing women's associations with masculinization, and in the *karateka* sports version. Then, there is found a strongly gendered embodiment, with expectations for body expressions, which usually turns into diktats, especially for females' bodies. Coaches commented on how they see women's body expressions:

In *karategi* it is not noticeable. Once the championship is over and they dress as a woman, their body shows itself. (Coach Hefaistos, man, Interview 37 (2), 30/09/2020)

There are those who are very feminine but not in training, in their life. (...) I am very surprised when I see them off the *tatami*<sup>5</sup>. (Coach Hermes, man, Interview 32 (3), 21/09/2020)

Coaches dichotomize female athletes as someone who has a sort of fighter identity and become a woman again when off the karate mat. In addition to being a reifying practice, it seems to authorize the masculinization stereotype within the mat and in martial action but pursue standardized feminine features *in life* through "dressing as a woman". It evidences how bodies are targeted as the source par excellence of femininity and even gender itself. Athletes end up embodying this approach, which is the *karateka* but also yet the socially prevalent perspective, and pointed out the following:

This very muscular body seems a bit that... I don't define it as masculine, but rather that I don't like such a fibrous body for a woman. (Afrodite, Interview 19 (2), 24/08/2020)

I have many (examples of) comments about the bodies of sportswomen and how ugly that body is (for being strong). (...) I wanted to wear a dress and it's "of course, dresses like this

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<sup>5</sup> Usually the way to call the area of practice.

don't favour you, because it's possible to see your arm." There are girls who don't want to do certain training because of that. (Atena, Interview 14 (2), 15/08/2020)

We are sharing opposite views of athletes, which synthesizes in two groups how athletes conceive issues around bodies and embodiment. Usually, athletes in *kata*<sup>6</sup>, understood as the feminine branch of karate, will be seen and see themselves as more feminine women, being often linked to the sexualization stereotype of small and cute, even though strong, bodies. *Kumite*<sup>7</sup> fighters, in turn, may be seen as more disruptive of the gender order, being linked to the masculinization stereotype (see Turelli, Vaz & Kirk, in review). These internal branches of karate, at times, end up competing with each other in a gender hierarchy seeking to prove that they are brave, even when pretty; and lovely, even when courageous (see Turelli, Vaz & Kirk, in review-b). Nevertheless, both groups are facing stereotypes and often concentrating on overcoming that through showing so-called feminine bodies and attesting femininity within karate (mainly for *kata*) and/or outside it (especially *kumite*), not focusing, from our point of view, on central issues that demobilize women.

Regarding the specifics of the testimonies, dissociating the view of a feminine body from a strong woman, there are several studies on muscular women. Gorely, Holroyd, and Kirk (2003), for example, indicate in their study how young students consider the physical capital (Shilling, 2004) of muscular women as something derogatory. Tajrobehkar (2016), in turn, highlights how women weightlifters seek ways to compensate for their muscles, seen as masculine, exaggerating femininity through makeup, heels, and, in general, the use of sensuality. We think that strong women are taken as a threat to male hegemony since men's sense of power and domination, even if disguised as offering protection for small weak women, is diminished. With these brief points, we just wanted to introduce the problem around female body views in the sportive-martial environment. In the next section, we go deeper into the theme of stereotypes by sharing conceptions of femininity properly, wondering if it works in a reduction mode for women's freedom since stereotypes dictate and fit in behaviors, performances, and lives.

### **Stereotyped athlete woman: femininity and sensuality**

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<sup>6</sup> Fight against an imaginary opponent, performed as a choreography of martial blows.

<sup>7</sup> Fight itself, structured by weight categories.

In the sporting environment, body, femininity, beauty, sensuality, eroticism, and desire are some topics that may constitute problems to be faced by women. Here we present testimonials on how participants in our study understand femininity, beauty, and sensuality. Starting with femininity, an athlete said:

I think it is like the way of being politically accepted by society in general, of the girls in their way of speaking, the way of dressing, of acting. You are not supposed to be feminine by wearing clothes a little looser, or a little more masculine. Or, being female, you have to do a series of social protocols. (Minerva, Interview 12 (2), 12/08/2020)

In line with Butler (1990), Minerva refers to an expected *performance* of women, which is related to the moment in which we live and its demands or meanings about the social place of each one, a way of behaving and performing, situated in time and space. Reflecting indignation due to being felt as a social imposition, other athletes expressed their understanding:

Femininity: a person who takes care of herself. And that's it. And the person is satisfied with herself. (...) For wearing heels, I am not more feminine. I love heels, but when I wear sneakers I am also feminine. (...) You are totally putting women as a product, (...) a product to please others. No. I am feminine in sports clothes. (Diana, Interview 13 (2), 13/08/2020)

What is feminine? Always I wear a dress, or a skirt, one of the first comments that follow me is that of my mother, who says (ironically) "what feminine legs" because many times I have bumps and bruises on my legs. The legs, if they have a bruise, are they not feminine? Why do we label so much what is feminine and what is not? It seems terrible to me. (...) Well, being feminine will depend on the woman. (...) I believe that a female coach is feminine, if she is a woman, she is feminine because she is a girl and that's it. (Atena, Interview 14 (2), 15/08/2020)

What Atena says about a woman expressing femininity simply because she is a woman makes sense "in 'common-sense' sociology-speak, (where) femininity or femininities are seen the ways of 'doing girl or woman'" (Paechter, 2006, p.6). However, there are authors who work with concepts of female masculinities (Ambjörnsson, 2020; Channon & Jennings, 2014; Paechter,

2006) and male femininities (Paechter, 2006). Atena is expressing her outrage at stereotypes and prejudices. What they, Atena and Diana, put up is relevant because it exposes how they feel feminine. In other words, embodied femininity, particular and subjective, is an experience that is defined through perceptions, feelings, and emotions, making it something non-transferable and completely multifaceted. It is not about being produced to please the eyes of others, to meet market expectations, and so on. Notwithstanding, it is also necessary to be aware that not meeting these expectations generates uncomfortable confrontations.

Other athletes reflected on femininity, not expressing indignation towards stereotypes but being aware of them, as the following contributions attested to:

You can wear baggy pants, a wide T-shirt, not paint yourself, but be feminine. So I relate it to a woman who feels like a woman, and that's it; I don't want to relate to the stereotype that says that she is the groomed one that likes fashion... (Ceres, Interview 17 (2), 23/08/2020)

A feminine woman is one who likes to take care of herself based on her concepts. (Demeter, Interview 20 (2), 27/08/2020)

A person who likes herself, that for me is femininity. Not that she wears a crown and is going to dress up as a princess all the time! (Venus, Interview 22 (2), 02/09/2020)

Feminine refers to a stereotype. In the end, feminine is something that has been created like that, so a fine woman, exposing the opposite traits between femininity and masculinity that have been created. (Artemis, Interview 26 (2), 07/09/2020)

Artemis refers to the feminine performativity of women in the present moment, although it has a historical path to its establishment. She mentions the opposite traits between femininity and masculinity that could help define them by contrast too. The understanding, by contrast, makes sense (see Paechter, 2006); however, it should not necessarily be so. The combination of elements understood as specific to masculine and feminine can help to give rise to new possibilities, new forms of femininity (Bordo, 1997), and masculinity, not so stigmatized.

Among the testimonies, though, were also those who conceive the performativity of femininity in accordance with its traditional standardized view, as can be read next:

We can also be feminine if we put on our skirts and our dresses and our heels. (Hera, Interview 21 (2), 27/08/2020)

Because of their clothes, their way of walking, their way of speaking, expressing themselves, making gestures. (...) It is not necessary to show your feminine part. I think it is intuited. (Hestia, Interview 15 (2), 17/08/2020)

Hestia mentions intuited femininity which refers to Young (1980), who says that her studies, like those of De Beauvoir, go in the opposite direction from those who conceive the existence of feminine essence. Young talks about the situation of women in a given context:

I take "femininity" to designate not a mysterious quality or essence which all women have by virtue of their being biologically female. It is, rather, a set of structures and conditions which delimit the typical situation of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves. (p.140)

Hestia also brings up another point related to Young's writings. Like other athletes and coaches, she mentions the relationship between femininity and the way to move, with gestures, the way to express oneself. There are techniques of the body (Mauss, 1973) taught to girls that undeniably take into account as the first criterion their gender, their situation as girls in patriarchal society (Young, 1980). Thus, they learn to perform basically politely, in a contained manner, according to elements that compose traditional femininities, as "regulated repetitious processes, norms that are internalized in the form of body style, public representation, and dramatization"<sup>8</sup> (Preciado, 2008, p.181, referring to Butler's *performance* definition). A coach added his view on the matter:

Gentle, elegant gestures, smooth skin. She is feminine because she has smooth skin, she is feminine, she moves with elegance, smoothly. (...) Elegance, softness, harmony, softness on the skin... She is careful, take care of everything, the fingers, the hands, well, that... the

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<sup>8</sup> Our translation from Spanish to English.

hands, the care, aesthetic care of the body. (...) They fix their nails, cuticles... (Coach Hermes, man, Interview 32 (3), 21/09/2020)

Coach Hermes' comment finds similarities with what Vigarello (2005) says when describing the historical process traced by art, which contributes to consolidating the place of each one in society. Vigarello explains that "the woman must take care of her skin in order to recreate better and rejoice the tired, exhausted man (from working)"<sup>9</sup> (p.30). Vigarello shows in his process of analyzing art over time how the woman has always been inferiorized, transiting between a demonized figure and a weak and beautiful lady requiring a strong man to protect and guide her. Regarding the "demoniac" aspect of women, there is a link to sensuality, which we approach from now on. In line with Hestia's comment, Afrodite ponders sensuality as an innate attribute:

Many times a woman who is beautiful, who likes to dress up, has that sensuality a bit innate. (Afrodite, Interview 19 (2), 24/08/2020)

Other athletes still added that:

Sensuality is more of a way of being than how you really are objectively. (...) And you can see people who may be less beautiful, but nevertheless, their way of being makes them be or have more sensuality. (Minerva, Interview 12 (2), 12/08/2020)

I relate sensuality a little to sexual attraction, you see a person and say "well, this person attracts me physically, they awaken that attraction in me", so that it is something sensual. But there are many people who seem to you to be very beautiful and that attraction feeling is not awakened in you. (Atena, Interview 14 (2), 15/08/2020)

I don't think that she is sensual simply because she is beautiful, nor do I think that it has to go hand in hand. Many women are beautiful and want to go in their own... they are more for themselves (they do not expose themselves). Other women are pretty and they also like to be seen, showing off. (Artemis, Interview 26 (2), 07/09/2020)

Athletes relate sensuality to attraction, and a display of the body itself as a form of beauty. The observation of Artemis reminds back to Young (1980) when she describes the process of

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<sup>9</sup> Our translation from Spanish into English.

construction of modesty in a girl. Young especially refers to girls' mobility and use of space, as well as familiarity with their own bodies. She says that girls develop "bodily timidity which increases with age" (p.153) from the many restrictions girls experience in their attempts to appropriate the world. Thus, the action and, also, exposure of the female body was/is repressed. This has been changing over time, taking paths of both the subversion of norms and the interested directions of consumption of bodies. Diana spoke in this direction:

We have women as a product. (...) We are not products; you cannot associate with an image that is more sensual or is not. (...) Society is based on aesthetic canons and so we always have a figure that we want to pursue. (...) It is simply by times and by styles, we always tend to make some canons and look for perfection or a role model, which is not the case. There are no role models for this, that's the problem. (Diana, Interview 13 (2), 13/08/2020)

Diana's indignation is directed at women's consumption as if they were a product or object. She also reports on the woman's situatedness in time and the variability in tastes and criticizes the establishment of standards with the imposition of models that destroy equity among women. Other athletes criticized the problem they feel or see up close:

"She's very good (fighting), but she's horrible." That is what boys comment, more than to see the fight between two girls... Boys are fighting, they watch the fight perfectly; but if two girls are fighting, it is about criticizing or praising their physique. (Vesta, Interview 16 (2), 18/08/2020)

There are clear examples that because of your form, because of your physical appearance, you win a little more in sports. (Minerva, Interview 12 (2), 12/08/2020)

Karate, I believe, it is quite a man's society. The referees are men, so the cuter I am going to perform a *kata*, maybe it might have an influence –and I have talked about this with men, yes, and they have said it is so–. (Ceres, Interview 7 (1), 24/07/2020)

I have spoken with male referees that yes, if you have two *kateras* who equals their level (technically), but one is more beautiful, or has a more open neckline, the beautiful one wins. This I swear to you, and if you talk to Hera and Demeter, because they were there

too, they can confirm that a male referee told that to us. (Ceres, Interview 17 (2), 23/08/2020)

If you are watching a *kata* and the form of the *kata* and the movements are harmonious, fast, on top of that the figure you see is pretty, damn, much more harmonious than if you see a monster. But hell, you are judging the performance of the *kata*... (Coach Hermes, man, Interview 30 (2), 17/09/2020)

The performance of an athlete, as Vesta shows, is secondary to her aesthetics for men as spectators, and may even be completely unimportant if the woman is "horrible" or "a monster". It seems that they also prioritize the appearance aspect when there is an equal technical level between competitors in the situations they have the authorization of the evaluation, as referees, as Ceres reports. The stereotype of the beautiful and/or sensual woman precedes her sporting ability from a male perspective, a fact observed in both karate sub-modalities, *kata*, and *kumite*, as well as in sports in general.

Thus, beauty and sensuality, according to athletes' contributions, are only weakly related. Following Vigarello (2005), beauty carries an air of purity since it was used in art history as a sacred attribute *given* to deserving women. In contrast, sensuality would be demonic, characteristic of Lilith, mythologically presented as the first woman (Nogueira, 2020) in the Jewish religious tradition. She would have been Adam's partner before Eve, created like him, and who did not want to submit to him. Thus, she would have been expelled from Heaven or abandoned it by her own will; both versions are narrated. Eve, in turn, would have been engendered as subordinate to Adam, and also a sinner, since she ate the apple, as reported by Christian tradition. Note how Adam was supposedly the victim of the two women. Moving forward, a bit in a "rebel" line, Hera brought an observation that is out of the ordinary:

A woman who is not pretty can be sensual. In fact, this is usually the case, the ugliest ones are more sensual because in the end they work with another type of... because the one that is very pretty doesn't need it. (...) So I think that goes the other way around, the more beautiful she is, the less... (Hera, Interview 21 (2), 27/08/2020)

Hera is referring to something like a market of attraction, conquest, and relationships, where a search for success dictates the need to develop and employ one or another attribute. Finally, we present testimonies that inform the view of the athletes about female performance disconnected from the attributes of emphasized femininity, even though they continue to perform as "feminine" women, on and off the mat:

I don't think that by training, sweating, and hitting a bag you have to lose anything (of the scope of a woman). (Ceres, Interview 17 (2), 23/08/2020)

When I am not that careful, well, I feel feminine just the same. (Afrodite, Interview 19 (2), 24/08/2020)

I think we are authentic because we are feminine, but we have also adopted some boyish things. (Venus, Interview 22 (2), 02/09/2020)

The athletes end up proposing, to some extent, the adoption of a type of contemporary femininity that mixes styles, performances, and representations. It is true that, at times, they take on elements that relate to traditional meanings. Given the strength that traditional conceptions have in the environment in which they embody *habitus*, and considering the pressure exerted by sports culture and patriarchal society, it may justify the standardized embodiment. Nevertheless, at other times they read things with a feeling of indignation, and under the feminist heritage. This process often includes discomfort, as pointed out by Ahmed (2004), and it may be okay to be like that. Because although athletes can be led, in a way, to exhibit femininity and do so, at other times, they are precisely questioning and confronting these established elements. Is this contradictory? A little bit, perhaps. But this can also be queer (Ahmed, 2004; Landi, 2018) and contribute to building another type of femininity or female masculinity that moves away from hegemonic styles.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

"The manner of this renunciation (of power, by men) transforms it into a symbolically powerful repudiation of power" (Paechter, 2006, p.9).

Our aim for this paper was to reflect on the set of conceptions and assumptions the squad we researched presented, at that time, on femininity and female bodies in order to add to the literature on women's sports studies, wondering if the situation of women in sport is improving or not. We expect to contribute to sought advancements in this area, claiming a change in it. Karate is organized following a gender binary approach, a traditional martial pedagogy, and a *habitus* heteronormatively guided. These features undeniably exert influence on the views that women high-level karate fighters and their coaches develop along with years of practice and its embodiment. The sportive-martial environment is still strongly male-oriented, even though female participation has been increasing; nevertheless, girls and women still face several challenges to achieve belonging. In fact, they enter the environment and reach the status of black belts or elite athletes, for example. Notwithstanding, we argue that the amount of power they truly exercise is limited and submitted to the male hierarchy. The quote from Paechter at the beginning of this conclusion is our invitation to reflect on disguised forms of allowing women to be supposedly powerful. We ponder that if the change in gender-related issues was already achieved, the uncomfortable feelings that people are yet experiencing would be otherwise than they actually are. Thus, games with and around power maintain the *karateka* environment as we are describing it since it is just made by (powerful, powerless, or empowered) people.

Resuming our focus points here, processes of objectification and consumption of women athletes were evidenced as being in place not only in the Global South and at amateur levels of the sport, as the first author wondered before taking her international research journey. This is not a novelty in itself, as literature has shown; however, in verifying this recently in karate as well, we add another picture confirming that women's sport remains universally devalued in terms of women's athletic performance, and contradictorily valued in the sense of the sensualization and sexualization of their bodies, favoring a desirous male gaze. *Karateka* women need to deal with this stereotype, which does not replace but adds to the masculinization stereotype they face from participating in a discipline defined as combative too. Despite these characteristics though, we still

consider that the visibility the Olympic Games gives to karate has its importance, as it can contribute to removing possible injustices from anonymity. It is worth mentioning parallel developments, such as the women's world soccer cup. It is far from what we envision as fair and equitable, but it is better than remaining in anonymity.<sup>10</sup> In due proportion, taking part in the Olympic scene has put karate in a place where sports culture has penetrated it like never before. On the one hand, the sporting spectacle commercializes the disciplines and the athletes; on the other hand, though, it has the potential to avoid invisibility, making public some problems that could unfold without anyone's knowledge, as just mentioned.

We acknowledge that in the sporting world, ultimately, men are also marketed. However, men sell performance and feel as if they are in their world, whereas women are, arguably, intruders in this world, and would be for sale themselves as objects of consumption depending on the level of sex appeal they may have. This supports a reification that athletes are often subject to and links to the dichotomization that we briefly approached. From a sociological perspective, we touched on the gendered embodiment theme, considering embodied views of the women themselves depreciating muscular bodies in an attempt, maybe, of pleasing others' expectations. Also, we shared the views of the male coaches who generally occupy the position of authorities, expressing their conceptions of feminine performances as traditionally standardized performances, e.g., when women "dress as a woman" they would be more of a woman, somewhat losing that condition when they are on the mat, as if fighters or warriors were not social positions recognized as suitable for females.

We next approached the topic of femininity, including a few testimonies that drew upon beauty and sensuality as well. Even though this point can have its relevance criticized, we were seeking information to think about the situation of women and female performativity currently, in addition to our motivation of trying to cover the karate topic in its entirety. In the disguising of domination, there is spread the speech that women have nothing more to claim of. The feminist movement undoubtedly generated great advances, but we still are far from equality, equity, diversity, and inclusion as being indeed daily lived experiences. In the sports environment, inequalities are felt intensely in the form of symbolic violence that constantly judges and classifies women and their

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<sup>10</sup> Please visit <https://www.uol.com.br/esporte/colunas/milly-lacombe/2023/07/20/primeiro-dia-da-copa-feminina-da-uma-ideia-do-odio-dirigido-as-mulheres.htm>, accessed on 21/07/2023. The news reports cursing and insults addressed to women while the first game of the world cup was being transmitted in television in Brazil.

attributes, insisting on giving them paths to follow. It is true that many athletes take such paths for different reasons and embody even hegemonic or toxic forms of masculinities. On the other hand, there are also athletes proposing, to some extent, adopting a type of contemporary femininity that mixes styles, performances, and representations. Although at times they exhibit traditionally emphasized femininity, at other times they are precisely questioning and confronting these established elements.

We do not think that this last group of athletes is a sort of preferred group with which to work. Possibly, it is easy to work with this group; notwithstanding, we consider that, in order to achieve change, all "groups" need to be worked with in the direction of awareness (Freire, 2005). Added to reflection, this is the first step that will allow taking action and advancing in the direction of change of structures. Engaging in the path to be an agent, not a comfortable position, will also demand empowerment. We do envision that women can truly be empowered using martial arts as a tool. However, for doing so it is required that more and more people of all genders become agents in promoting structural disruption for renewal. This disruption used to be dreamed of as a huge revolution; however, over the years we have seen that it is quite difficult to effectively happen. Then, the proposal to keep fighting and achieve small wins (Kirk, 2020), celebrate them, and never stop or give up sounds like a great deal. With this in mind, in agreement with Dubet (2020), we consider that "Domination never fully eliminates the capabilities of indignation and denunciation of individuals, because they measure precisely the tensions of their trials criticizing injustices, big or small, of which they are victims or witnesses". Thus, the permanent struggle taken is possible and even a sort of engine to remain active.

To achieve small wins and keep moving forward, we would propose subversive actions to the environment that break stigmas, create a nuisance or healthily disruptive chaos, and disrupt consolidated *habitus*. These may be queer actions, expressed through the body, conceptions, and/or behaviors in a holistic sense, that can destabilize the hegemonic order. There is plenty of literature offering examples that can be adapted to the sportive-martial environment (Ahmed, 2004; Berg & Kokkonen, 2021; Devís-Devís et al., 2017; Kirk, 2020; Landi, 2018; Lisahunter, 2017; Maor, 2018). Despite many of these experiences being uncomfortable for those who live them, they are rewarding since they are leading to some freedom and giving people purpose. Ahmed's contribution is especially relevant here since she speaks about the maladjustment feeling, shared

by many women in sport. The fact that this is so spread among women leads us to advocate for queer strategies holistically employed; we mean, martial arts must empower not only physically-focused but in the pursuit of a sort of moral empowerment as well. This is about feelings, sensations, and perceptions, as we stated at the beginning of the article, in addition to potency, so women may have their sense of freedom not compromised. We acknowledge the good power of literature in general, feminist literature particularly, enlightened mentors, friendship, (self)reflection, and conscious people, as sources for increasing embodied empowerment.

The martial environment is based on tradition, and this implies that the strange or queer do not find an opening to enter and be welcome; instead, they face a hostile environment. However, if queer actions are taken by those who are already inside and have some prominent place, this can be a path to change. Hence this study focused on basically established athletes. From there, from within, it would be possible to open up for the strange to enter. Today, women's performance is seen as inferior to men's and linked to sensualisation and eroticisation. However, women's athletic potential is what should be appreciated in addition to the somewhat influential position they can adopt, helping to promote different uses (Ahmed, 2019) of the martial space. Such uses could relate to a space for the promotion of authenticity, educating authentic warriors, and fostering a new type of empowering *habitus* for women and other stigmatized collectives. With that, the pejorative chant we presented at the beginning of our paper would become soundproof. Actually, this has no value or applicability if we take women seriously. This paper is evidence of such seriousness in its analysis of women's conceptions.

**Declaration of conflicts of interest**

The authors declares that they have no conflict of interest.

**Declaration of authorship**

Author	Conception	Data Curation	Analysis/ Software	Research/ Methodology	Project/ resources	Supervision/ Validation	Initial writing	Review and final editing
1	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
2	X		X	X	X	X		X
3	X		X	X	X	X		X

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