

# FABIANA TURELLI AND DAVID KIRK

# FIGHT!?! EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH MARTIAL ARTS AND COMBAT SPORTS

## ABSTRACT

A discourse of women's empowerment in martial arts and combat sports (MACS) through self-defence training is widely spread, although not indeed effective. Despite the promises of women's ability for self-defence, they have remained over the years at the margins of MACS, specifically karate, both at an elite and amateur levels, in the Global North and South. The structure, tradition, hierarchy, and pedagogy are kept usually by men in MACS positioning them at the centre of a circle of power from where they can tell women what to do for women's safety. Through life-long research, we have developed a project that aimed at changing this story by centring women and their voices and needs. Such project was piloted between 2024-2025 in Canada with a group of migrant vulnerable young women, who are active in their sustainable empowerment process, co-creating a different story way beyond self-defence. We report this innovative approach here.

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## KEYWORDS

embodiment; gender; karate; pedagogy; safety; social justice

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*A new world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.*

Arundhati Roy

## INTRODUCTION

Martial arts and combat sports' (MACS) spaces are not thought to be fit for women, since they are obdurate and long-standing male preserves (Matthews, 2016; Theberge, 1985) often reproducing violence against women in various ways. MACS' spaces tend to support patriarchal structures in society, increasing men's benefits from the patriarchal dividend (Connell, 1995). Tradition and hierarchy are powerful tools used in MACS to assist the privileged to maintain their privilege. Tradition, which is selected (Williams, 1977) or invented (Hobsbawm, 1983), provides a specific context for justification and maintenance of things as they were intended in their supposed origin. Hierarchy functions as the means to enact tradition, as it entitles people to exert power over others according to their positions. Hierarchies are often oriented by belts in many MACS, such as karate, although there are other forms of hierarchies that surpass belts like technical level and gender binary hierarchy, the latter of which tends to prevail above all (Lima et al., in review; Turelli et al., 2025a).

Research at both an elite level and amateur level in karate, in the Global South and North, has shown how women face inferiorization and othering as fighters due to their gender (e.g., Lima et al., in review; Turelli et al., 2023a). Yet, research carried out two decades ago in the Global South in comparison with a recent study evidences how the context remains similar, specifically in Brazil (Lima et al., in review; Turelli & Vaz, 2011). An autoethnographic study by the first author across five countries in the Global North showed how the situation has not improved for women in karate, despite countries' development levels. Around the world, women in karate do not feel confident enough for their self-defence, even when they are in European top positions as Olympic fighters (Turelli et al., 2024a). These women remain afraid specifically of men's violence, while in the Global South and at amateur levels, women embrace a futile embodiment of martiality to be allowed in the margins of a martial environment (Lima et al., in review).

In order for women to remain in MACS and grow sustainable empowerment, belonging, and other values, another framework is needed as an alternative to those disempowering prevailing models to date. The first author's autoethnography gathered evidence for this need for action, in addition to the informative study with the women's Spanish 2020 Olympic squad. Such set of data corroborated the urgent need for change that advocates for social justice focusing on women in sport and specifically in karate have stated, as they are under many threats of patriarchy, with their bodies being much more harassed than equipped with skills for self-defence (Turelli et al., 2024b). Thus, we took action to spark transformation through exploring the process of fighting for human rights instead of self-defence.

Most women fight through life, as a metaphor, to navigate challenging unfair situations to accomplish their goals. We proposed a research project to empower young self-identifying women newcomers to Canada using karate as a metaphor for life with equivalents on the mats; for example, we would explore mats' area widely in fights while looking to fight for social space, or scream kiai (the shout accompanying martial movements) in training sessions while practicing raising voices outside the mats as well. Although fighting physically is there and women develop skills, they are not led to believe they are prepared for self-defence, which could even turn dangerous (Turelli et al., 2021) and would be a somewhat fake performance if participants are indeed aware of their potential and limits as well. Instead, the struggle for social justice is what motivates the physical fight indeed, and in that resides our innovation since the core issue for women is in our embodied trauma from patriarchy. Thus, men usually cannot tell us how to perform as they are located in the root of our problem.

In this paper, we will introduce our developing innovative program as a pedagogical model for karate and a framework that can be adapted for general MACS; further details will be explored in materials to come. Following Casey and Kirk (2021), a pedagogical model is the foundation of models-based practice which are critical actions to change usually traditional outdated contexts. A pedagogical model focus on curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment as an irreducible unit. Karate's curriculum is given by contents for belts, but the ways of teaching and assessing leading to learning can be modified considering specific populations' needs. In the next pages, we will explore the central problems for women in MACS, so to our point on the need for change to be clear. After that, we will briefly describe our methods and approach to have co-creators in a research community more than just participants. The pedagogical model as our theoretical innovation offered to the martial community will be presented as the findings section, and we will conclude the paper with a few recommendations on how to proceed to implement new initiatives like ours and change given contexts, so to get new outcomes.

Before moving forward, we want to make a note on the use of them and us. We are not referring to ideas of them against us, as for Diversi and Moreira (2018), even when we address men critically, but to positions that mix with each other. For instance, our critique is addressed to patriarchal structures and those managing them, with openness to work in partnership with men who recognise the unfairness of the system. While Diversi and Moreira's (2018) in-betweeners identities refers to places that many of us in this project have been repeated times as perpetual outsiders, in this occasion, we are intentionally using us to represent the authors of the paper, and sometimes us stands for women, as the first author positions herself with the women in the project. In other moments though women are also addressed as them. Although it may feel confusing to the reader at occasions as if we are all messed up, we are using them and us with

intention and following others who have spoken about queer approaches (e.g., Ahmed, 2004; Joseph & Bain, 2024). By reflecting on the use of them and us intermittently and making the choice to keep it like that, the first author is reporting and respecting her embodied need of detachment as trauma processing by taking distance from situations, through them, and then re-approximating to ideas, with us. We, the authors, decided to keep this feature, as this by itself speaks in favour of our argument on women's embodied patriarchal trauma as our (women's) core problem, in which the second author has been a permanent ally and accomplice.

## A CENTRAL PROBLEM IN MACS FOR WOMEN

In times of increasing violence against women, we hear the neoliberal argument more and more that women need to be able to defend themselves, that they should, literally, learn self-defence. In the context of this argument, MACS are proposed as empowering practices for women, able to disrupt social norms. We challenge this affirmation and promise of women's fast physical power achievement, supporting our stance in long-term research. We invite a reflection on the controversies of this argument, starting with the title of the article, with "Fight!" The exclamation mark speaks to the discourse widely spread that women can join MACS, perform and master them. While women can acquire skills and become more movement-literate by practicing MACS, as well as their presence in male preserves to some extent unsettling of normative traditions, there is another story that, yet prevalent, is not being told.

Martial spaces, specifically karate environments, are guided by gender binary rules and pedagogy, in which women and men have specific roles (Cynarski et al., 2012). Women's participation in karate is allowed to the extent that they can learn the behaviours expected from them, somewhere between a tough fighter (but not masculinized) and a "real" woman (not a lesbian, spreading emphasized femininity instead, but yet not too much), that contributes to comply with EDI (equity, diversity, and inclusion) institutional requirements (Turelli et al., 2023b). It means that they are absorbed by the norms to be allowed to remain, or, if they can't achieve this, in many cases, they just leave. They leave also due to harassment, abuse, and other various forms of violence, which cannot stand, obviously, alongside the aspiration for empowerment (Turelli et al., in press). When they remain, despite the adversities, practicing and pursuing their goals, such as becoming elite-level athletes, they all report some personal or witnessed experience of violence (Turelli et al., 2023c). They also say that although their bodies can be agile and strong, they do not feel prepared enough and confident enough to self-defend on the streets (Turelli et al., 2024a). This is not a victimization narrative, but a failed attempt to empower women through traditional MACS training and pedagogy.

We want to tell another version of this "Fight!"-story and, mainly, offer insight into a new story, written from scratch, about how to create a safe community for the building of self-sustainable-

empowerment. It passes through acknowledging trauma among people who we can trust and will not hit us (both literally and metaphorically), and move forward with confidence. As stated, this offering of another story is grounded in a 30+ years relationship with MACS and in a doctoral project with the women's Spanish 2020 Olympic karate squad. The strong affirmations presented in the previous paragraph, which can be found literally quoted in the cited publications, come from those elite athletes who, despite their extreme high level of physical abilities, do not feel ready for "self-defence", the main reason so often given for women to join MACS. This evidence leads us to inquire in the title of this paper, adding a question mark to "Fight?" This is a provocation, wondering about approaches that say that women are fully empowered by just wearing a gi (martial uniform) and learning a few self-defence techniques. Although that may generate good feelings, real violence goes beyond a sense of empowerment. If such empowerment is not applicable to women elite athletes, it is even less so to women amateur practitioners who are far more submissive to gender hierarchy and misleading feedback on their skills, as found in our recent study in Brazil (Lima et al., in review). We highlight that we do not intend to universalize any experience of a single research project, or even of a researcher that carried many projects. The Olympic athletes experience, on the other hand, is relevant as it is, to date, exceptionally unique, as karate integrated the Olympic scenario only once.

Yet, the fast empowerment that supposedly would be acquired by joining MACS' practices can be criticized as a neoliberal proposal, forcing women to perform as empowered while they are, alongside this, also afraid and scared (McRobbie, 2015). They are made responsible for their self-defence in a way that, if they are subjected to violence, they are blamed for, first, "attracting" the violence to them, and second, for not being able to stand up for themselves. Following the reviewers' recommendations in the peer review process of this paper, we acknowledge the work of some collectives which also adopt feminist perspectives against neoliberal dynamics and have developed critical approaches to MACS for women, e.g., WENDO (Canada), Comando Colibrí (Mexico), Yvone Duarte's project at the University of Brasília (UnB – Brazil), the suffragettes (UK), and Pink Panthers (EUA). While we do acknowledge non-neoliberal feminist approaches carried out before us in MACS, we emphasize that our critique targets the traditional approach MACS is still dominated by. Specifically in karate around the world, women at different performance levels feel the neoliberal burden of not fighting accordingly to the male models given to them (Turelli et al., 2025b), leading them to self-blaming processes and reinforcing social beliefs and embodiments of inferiority, and ultimately some allowance of (self-) violence complicity. Neoliberal practices instilled in MACS environments have strong effects on people's mental health by reinforcing a kind of gaslighting strategy since people, mainly women in this case, find themselves doubting their own senses, potential and capabilities.

With this, we wonder, “Fight?” and continue building on our version of the story with “Empowering women through martial arts and combat sports” in the title of this paper. Our intention is to spark reflection: after blowing up the idea of cheap-fast-empowerment for women through self-defence (!) by providing evidence from highly potent elite-level athletes who do not feel confident enough for self-defence (?), we turn back into a proposal of sustainable empowerment for women through MACS. What a contradiction! Well, no. Our deeply reflected and critical proposition of a pedagogical model for women in MACS stands both to the literal physical practice that needs to happen, and to a metaphor, because women are fighters throughout life. Martial arts often rely on a poetic proposition of “winning without fighting”, something that unfortunately does not apply to those oppressed by patriarchy. Women are constantly required to fight. Women need to take an active stance towards their own rights, to create their safety through self-protection, which goes way beyond self-defence, but relates to raising voices, occupying spaces, expanding body movements, becoming able to respond through aggressive attitude, which is far from violence, being instead, a struggle to stop becoming victims. All of this is done not in a neoliberal individualistic approach, but in a communal one, that does not blame women but viscerally understands their struggles. There is a lot of metaphorical learning that needs to happen through fighting as a physical practice, though. Our title, therefore, is an invitation to reflection and encompasses a combination of training sessions to sweat in, and a deeper understanding of women’s social positioning through studying feminist theory applied to life.

In appreciation of reviewers’ recommendations, we acknowledge the work on empowerment discourse in MACS reported in previous scholarship. Such literature has shown that empowerment is rarely straightforward, with Paradis (2012), for example, providing informative research, as much as Maor (2018), who published on physical feminism, and McCaughey (1998); yet, Davies and Deckert’s (2019) should be recognized, as well as Nash (2017), van Ingen (2016), McNaughton (2012), and Carlsson (2017), although there is no space in a single paper to acknowledge many other valuable work conducted. This said, for a vast literature review, please visit Turelli (2022), and for a systematic review of women in MACS’ studies specifically, see Turelli et al. (in press). Taken together, this literature demonstrates that empowerment in MACS is always contested, situated, and negotiated through uneven dynamics of power, gender, and embodiment. The specificity of our project though, resides on a group starting from scratch, with only women involved to date, allowing therefore, for something to be tailored for them instead of adaptations being made in and to a running dojo, the martial gym, with current practitioners at different levels of practices.

We argue that sustainable empowerment is about an active posture to take ownership of one’s life and decisions. It concerns embodiment as a comprehension and performance of autonomy. Putting all together, “Fight!? Empowering women through martial arts and combat sports” speaks to a concept that surpasses

the conventional understanding of empowerment but refers to the process of embodying confidence and safety by profoundly knowing stories that do not represent women. Despite, in some cases, good intentions, men usually cannot teach us properly, because of our embodied trauma from patriarchy. Yet, there are many occasions in which men cannot help and, moreover, are inclined towards performances of control and domination, although they tend to not recognize this. So, we need to write a new story. Our story, our way, our “do”. Karate-do, the “way” (do) of empty hands, fighting without weapons, in its traditional version does not apply to women, whose hands are socialized to be caring and giving to others. We need to reshape our embodiment to use our hands and fight in a way that does not make violence to ourselves, by trying to perform according to others’ expectations and assumptions about women but prioritize ourselves.

Our fighting style and our social fight is serious, as “Fight.”, with only a period. There is some grief for us in this always required word as a metaphor of life (we cannot stop fighting). In the seriousness of this word, for women, is also some celebration of capabilities, which do not come for free. In the seriousness of fighting through life, women celebrate the acquisition of capabilities holistically, from physicality to the understanding of many stories told to manipulate them and keep them oppressed. Yet, the seriousness of fighting for women stands to a celebration of the commitment to a revolutionary joy found in the power of a community, and the acquisition of power throughout the body, a body that was too used to being oppressed and abused and becomes body-self-aware of how to unlock its power, as if accessed by a communal code. The revolutionary joy does not come from denying or ignoring the world’s odds, but by a decision of not surrendering to continuous domination, which literally kills our joy and taste for life. This leads to fighting for embodied self-sufficiency in a sense that casts off patriarchal chains for those involved.

Considering these complexities behind a couple of punctuation signs, we want to provide context on the dismantling of prevailing stories, and narrate another story written in community, to show that another approach, and world, is possible, as stated by Arundhati Roy. In previous publications we have been revealing normative MACS’ stories taking traditional approaches that enforce patriarchy, maintain hierarchies, with men at the top of them. We decided to advance from the critique, which is of course needed, to taking action, by developing and implementing an alternative approach centring on women, their voices, and their needs. Being open to collective contribution, collaboration, and co-creation was a fundamental portion of the piloted program. Thus, we want to share the pedagogical model built specifically for karate, and a framework adapted from the pedagogical model for general MACS, which is made by and for women. The proposal is bi-directional, complying simultaneously with the sustainable empowerment goal, and the innovative critical pedagogy of embodiment (see Aartun et al., 2020) to be employed centring self-identifying women and girls in MACS.

## METHODOLOGY

We submitted a research project proposal to be piloted at the University of Manitoba (UM), Canada, to an internal grants' competition, UM-SSHRC, which was funded in 2024. We developed themes, in practical (physical) and subjective (metaphorical) ways, as we aimed to develop a pedagogical model (Casey & Kirk, 2021) for teaching women and girls in MACS while working with participants towards self-protection, as an umbrella concept related to autonomy and freedom. This approach is to show both, how to change martial environments that are outdatedly relying on selected traditions (Williams, 1977), and how to equip self-identifying women from oppressed backgrounds with skills and knowledge to navigate their younger years managing emotions well, such as fear that can be paralyzing due to a lack of confidence and safety. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Board 1 from the University of Manitoba under protocol number HE2023-0369 in June 2024.

From September 2024 to April 2025 the pedagogical model was developed and implemented with a group of ten participants newcomer students to the UM stating they lacked confidence and a sense of safety. They are young women mostly from South Asia, facing various forms of oppression throughout their lives, which did not stop happening when they got to the Global North. By actively pursuing their sustainable empowerment though, they greatly supported the development of a pedagogical model for karate. They engaged whole-heartedly, becoming co-creators in the research. The approach to have co-creators consisted of working in a community environment, with women having their voices and needs valued, and through the sharing of many experiences in a safe space of mutual support. They did not need to compete for attention, prove their abilities, or please anybody to escalate hierarchies. They were encouraged, instead, to support each other, as all should advance to the first coloured belt together. No one was left behind, as long as they wanted to remain in the group. They were challenged in balance with their will being respected (see Lima et al., in review, for the neglect of women's will). The first author was their training-mate, as a kind of role model as they were all inexperienced in karate, given our goal of building something from scratch. The participants/co-creators ended up withdrawing their anonymity to, e.g., build a social media page for the project they are part of (more information can be found in Turelli & Kirk, in press).

The project was conducted with critical feminist theory as framework (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1994), and participatory action research as methodology (Lenette, 2022). We met once per week, on Saturdays, to train in sports karate for 1,5 hours. Our focus was on sports karate, and not traditional karate, hence the critique to self-defence. Once per month, on varying days according to women's school schedules considering they are in different degrees programs across the UM, we met for a theoretical class on feminist subjects for 2 hours. We also had two focus groups, one in December 2024 and another in April 2025, and a belts ceremony on March 8th, 2025. All these events were documented with the support of a research assistant, a karate

instructor, and a film maker, in addition to the participants' reflections on the theoretical classes conducted by the first author. Such set of data is being worked out to be disseminated in due course. Here, however, we focus only on the first description of the pedagogical model developed in response to the journal's call, on Theoretical and Conceptual Development in and through Martial Arts Studies.

## FINDINGS

Women's oppression, in society and in sport, serves the patriarchal order broadly. By keeping sport as it was traditionally conceived, this cycle feeds it back and is legitimized, often with people involved in it not being aware of the mechanisms. We saw that this context requires action to change, so to contribute to social justice and women's continuous struggle towards liberation from patriarchy. Empowerment enables people to act for their emancipation, achieving greater awareness of freedom from oppression, challenging gender stereotypes, improving self-esteem, self-determination, acquisition and mastery of skills, and social benefits (Liechty et al., 2016). We conceived the idea of sustainable empowerment in contrast to a cheap-fast-empowerment proposal, which we criticize, then thinking of a sustainable condition to be cultivated in a life-long journey. MACS are long-term practices, a way (Japanese "do") of life. However, traditional martial environments are often toxic environments, failing to prepare women, repeatedly damaging them instead, and therefore requiring transformation. Starting a group from scratch with people who did not embody the martial habitus (Brown & Jennings, 2013) previously is needed for the creation of a different environment and healthy martial culture.

Thus, in our project, karate practices were used to build such an innovative approach and atmosphere, using metaphors of fighting in life against patriarchal oppression while fighting on the mats. Specifically, theoretical classes on critical feminist theory and embodiment theory were delivered for women to get familiar with concepts that were not fully grasped or were previously viewed with prejudice by them, given their culture that condemn women linked to feminism and women too active physically. Classes were mostly dialogued, with concepts delivered through many examples from daily life, as a way to see the oppression sitting besides us on buses when our space is taken, and ingrained in our bodies when we think we cannot kick because we are wearing skirts and are ashamed of anyone seeing our underwear. Women were invited, in a completely safe space, to share experiences as long as they were comfortable with that. Their participation in and inputs to the process, as they felt their voices matter and they were being heard, worked as encouragement to keep speaking and strengthened a community with overlapping oppression in common. It ended up being that classes went always over time, as all had many situations to bring up, which the first author would always connect to feminist theory, showing how it is practical and can make us aware, seeing beyond attempts to keep us oppressed and dominated.

We started with theoretical classes and then went to the mat. Women's required reflections on the theoretical classes helped them identify connections to karate practice when pointed out by the first author as their karate-mate in training sessions. The first author would use the end of each training session to debrief what was done physically and connect that again to the theory. During the training delivered by a woman karate instructor, there were no stops, as movement was prioritized for karate to be learnt bodily. Thus, the combination of understanding oppression mechanisms with body movements, together, made women start to unlock power, working on embraced beliefs of limited bodies and becoming, slowly, self-aware of their own bodies and capabilities (Young, 1980; Mason, 2018). Yet, they do not become "wonder women" as the journey is perpetual and danger is real and close, as those being oppressed over time know well. Instead, they work through small steps, starting by healing from multiple traumas, in a space that is harassment-free and provides participants with the required safety for a healing process to start.

This was the summary of the first theme as an overview for the entire program. There are seven themes in total though, which are linked to a belt system. In the first belt, around six months of experience in the program, a participant gains insight on the full program, which means that a fully engaged woman practitioner could become a confident black belt in three to four years-time. An overview of the pedagogical model is presented as follows in Figure 1 and in the summary descriptions for each theme.

#### Seven themes

- Body-self-awareness (overview, 'pilot')
- Having a voice
- Body modesty
- Spatiality
- Aggressive attitude
- Aesthetic experience



Figure 1: Pedagogical model themes linked to belt system in karate

#### Theme 1, body-self-awareness, white belt

Progressing in belt colours means progressing in the understanding of social structures that oppress women, therefore equipping women to transform their reality towards a fair, enjoyable, safe life. Briefly, body-self-awareness relates to women becoming aware of their bodies and its possibilities. Many of the participants in the project reported they were not aware they could kick, for example, and often they would put their arms in different places than they were asked for, revealing the lack of knowledge on motility, spatiality and transcendence of their bodies (Young, 1980). They were invited to reflect on the possibilities and limits of their bodies, learning from how to close a fist for punching, to how to find joy when venting anger towards a punching bag.

#### Theme 2, having a voice, yellow belt

Metaphorical practices for women to raise their voices in life were conducted on the mats especially through kiai shouting, which can be demanding for women to perform considering their embodied experiences of and socialization involving timidity as moral value through life (Mason, 2018; Young, 1980). Kiai practice is encouraged towards pleasant self-expression, although never a source of shaming reinforcement. Screaming in community helps in this process. Kiai practice goes hand in hand with social practice of posing their voices, e.g., through expressing preferences and disagreements in a gradually growing way. Participants reported how they overcame situations in school, at their university degrees, where they would usually be quiet, but started sharing opinions with less hesitancy and more confidence.

#### Theme 3, body modesty, orange belt

Connected to Young's (1980) theory on body intentionality, this theme relates to the restraint women's and girls' bodies are usually under in socialization processes and gendered embodiment. The way girls traditionally are dressed, for example, teaches them how to be restricted in movements, and this does not help in MACS, as fighters need to keep opponents away. By performing defence movements just close the body in MACS, girls allow unwanted blows to enter their body area, getting hit, and often absorbing the message that they are not physically capable (Lima et al., in review) or that they should accept violence. This relies on a message of reification and bad relationship with their bodies and physical skills. In this theme, then, women and girls learn how to occupy a wider space with their moves, expanding their body area. As Connell (1995) notes of hegemonic masculinity, men's bodies occupy space forcefully, many times to the detriment of others' space. This and the control of objects (including other bodies) in space are defining features of hegemonic masculinity, which is challenged by the program.

#### Theme 4, spatiality, green belt

This theme is linked to the previous one in theory (Connell, 1995; Young, 1980), and in practice relates to the use of space that women make. In Turelli et al. (2022), we studied how elite fighters could explore better the mats in fights, by optimizing the occupation of space. It was shown through video analysis that even elite women karate fighters use only a "corridor" of an entire court (koto), a reduced area when they could play with space. As they are adapted to having corridors instead of broader areas for training in dojos, the martial gyms, in a daily basis, they cannot perform differently when more space is allowed, and so they are accused of not fighting boldly. In the project, with an introduction of this theme, participants reported their beginning of using more space in buses, for example, when sharing a seat with a man. They shared that men usually take ownership of space due to not facing body modesty as women do, and can use one and a half seat, while a woman is left with the remaining half to shrink. Participants said they started confronting this small but unfair situation.

### Theme 5, ability to respond, blue belt

Traumatized women often experience feelings of anger and rage (van Ingen, 2011), but do not externalize that. As a dog that was hit and wants to bite and attack, but is afraid of more violence so turns docile, traumatized women tend to freeze instead of standing up to violence. This is, again, related to the social gendered embodiment they were raised under. Participants were aware of their freezing response and reported they hate that, while they could not help in acting differently. Thus, this theme stands to training women by re-shaping their social embodiment in a way that they can become able to respond, especially to unjust situations. Ability to respond connects with response-ability, so women are not re-educated to become violent, reacting by impulse, but to respond in a way that stands up to injustice and stops the patriarchal cycle of victim-predator. They do not react by being triggered but learn to identify situations and decide with awareness, seriousness and social responsibility how best to respond, putting themselves in the first place though. They respond because they start to value themselves, no longer accepting violence to them.

### Theme 6, aggressive attitude, brown belt

By developing the ability to respond, to act, women become active and not paralyzed in the face of threats of different dimensions. They need to be aggressive, which hugely differs from performing violence due to the responsibility component that they learn through embodiment. Yet, this learning also enables them to vent emotions and frustration instead of holding all that and getting sick due to trauma repetition. The training space is essential to them to express strong emotions, which need to be expressed, but are prevented from turning against people. Emotions are approached openly and with acceptance, where none is taken as shaming, but instead, as sources for action. This is the process to understand and act to heal traumas that women carry (Turelli & Joseph, 2025). Most women, if not all, carry intimately or have experiences of harassment and abuse to report. Thus, healing spaces for women should be a matter of healthcare. Due to the complexity and profundity, this theme is proposed in an advanced stage of the program, not at its beginning. By embarking in the healing journey actively and with intentionality, the aggressive attitude theme stands for the achievement of confidence and the generation of safety by self-protecting from others' harms, which are not only physical.

### Theme 7, aesthetic experience, black belt

This is the utmost goal of the program; to find flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), joy, and fulfilment throughout one's own body and movement, with commitment. There is the concept of the aesthetic and beauty to be explored, which are not guided by traditional standards, but relate to fluidity and self-satisfaction, and explores aesthetic experience (Kirk, 1996) through aesthetic theory philosophically and sociologically. Grounded on critical black feminism, it offers women knowledge on aesthetic capital. As self-satisfaction and self-sufficiency are aimed at, this theme focuses on oneself, expecting all participants to do the same and,

by doing so, the flourishing of a community happens, with the shared achievement of goals instead of in isolation and in competitiveness. It does not mean to eliminate competition events though. The creation of the community of mutual support has to do with a common-unity, which allows healing to keep going and confidence to keep growing in a shared way. The group stands up for each other and co-creates a safe space. As they physically move, they are removed from a known place of despair towards flow and beauty, or aesthetic experience.

A summary of contents for each theme can be listened to by accessing two interviews delivered by the first author and three participants/co-creators, to CBC Canada, in February 2025, while the project was running: Part 2: A new approach to karate for women | The Weekend Morning Show (Manitoba) | On Demand | CBC Listen (Episode 2) and <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/audio/9.6651096> (Episode 1). As a pedagogical model proposal, we align curriculum (contents), teaching and assessment with our learning aspirations. The themes presented represent this alignment, with learning foregrounded.

### Framework adapted for general MACS and specific pedagogical model in karate

The general framework for MACS is based on the pedagogical model presented here as for the main thematic ideas. If there are more belts, they should be grouped in a way that respect the seven themes; if there are less, they should take longer to be advanced to the next, e.g., with 1.5 or two themes being worked on in a belt for around one year. Possibly the time of six months for a theme could be a fair tool for measurement. As overall characteristics, four stand out. One, the framework emphasizes the importance of training sessions combined with feminist classes as a must; one cannot be there without the other. Two, the alignment of the people involved (ideally all people in a gym, but at least and especially the MACS' instructor and the person teaching the theoretical classes) is fundamental for success. Three, criticality and reflexivity need to be pursued, and sometimes even taught to participants/practitioners and instructors. They cannot accept everything that is told to them, but they need to be encouraged to ask and become comfortable in confronting and being disagreed with at occasions as well. Four, the role of continuous committed reflection, community creation, belonging, healing, and finally, safety, need to be the targets for all, instead of belt progressing per se.

A diagram functioning as a framework for general MACS should aim at centring women's voices, needs and experiences as represented in figure 2.

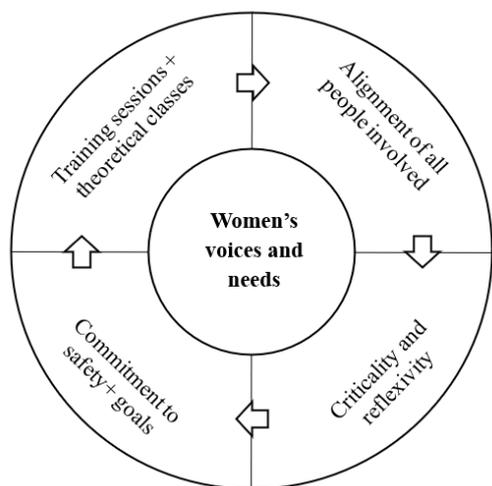


Figure 2: Diagram for a framework for teaching women and girls in MACS

In the experience of piloting the introduced project, co-creators gave testimonies in their belt ceremony towards yellow rank providing a very successful short story, that goes against the oddness of the world and the adversity just across the board. By turning the previous prevalent story in MACS into a call for radical hope, our story stands as an invitation for continuity and engagement at multiple levels, including MACS, education, social justice advocates, women's and gender studies, human rights and more. For this to happen, our pedagogical model aims at a revolutionary form of hierarchy in opposition to the traditional one, as shown in Figure 3 (version 1), which we invite other MACS practitioners to adapt to their specifics.

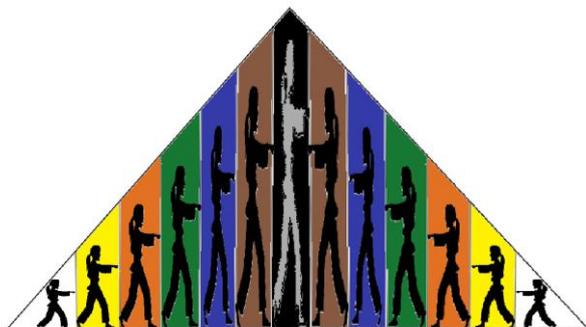


Figure 3: Vertical pyramid of equitable responsible power for sustainable empowerment in karate

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In order to get new outcomes, new initiatives aiming at changing given contexts are needed so we came up with a proposal, already piloted, and presented here. Following the synthetic presentation of the themes and framework with its main features, we want to discuss Figure 3 as a synthesis of the pedagogical model. MACS usually prize hierarchies in a complete legitimate way, as they benefit those in centred or top power positions. The framework centres women's needs and voices, and Figure 3 stands as a revolutionary form of vertical hierarchy in opposition to the traditional one, where some step over others in a horizontal pyramid. Such proposal, inspired by readings of Confucianist philosophy, dismantles traditional imposed hierarchies, especially by having power shared in a responsible, and empowering process, characterized by committed authority. Participants may start small, as they do not master martial skills and body-self-awareness, lacking the ability to connect daily life challenges with broader social justice matters, which can be aided by critical feminist theory.

As they progress in the program, they are encouraged to grow, although they will never remove their feet from the ground as a reminder to never step over others and never forget their struggles so to not repeat similar mistakes to others (Adorno, 1995). As they grow and heal, they take the responsibility of inspiring others and passing through the ideas of a community, a place where people are not left behind or competed against; this is why a connection among people is added to Figure 4 (version 2) as bonds supporting mutual empowerment and social responsibility. Thus, those more elevated or more knowledgeable by having healed and re-shaped embodiments have more responsibility in the encouragements of others for taking the pathway (do). Figure 4 (version 2) stands for our final vision, as we envision people growing together and sustaining the responsibility of inspiring others to grow together.

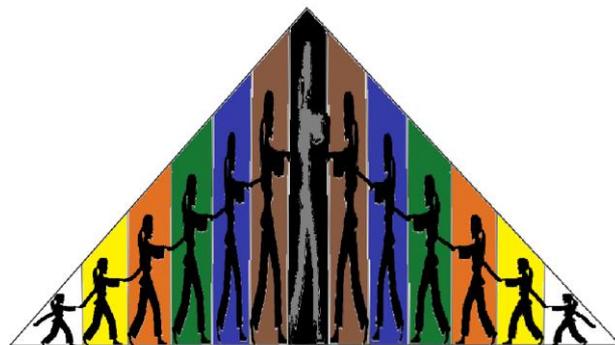


Figure 4: Vertical pyramid of equitable responsible power for sustainable empowerment in MACS focusing on community flourishing

In this paper, we aimed to introduce our innovative developed program to teach women and girls in MACS while equipping them towards sustainable empowerment felt as increased confidence and safety. The scholarly community concerned with martial arts is spread around the world, widely lacking an approach to work with women in an empowering, respecting, community-building way. We hope our initiative can shed some light and inspire others to follow us in changing unfair situations. For doing so, in addition to implementing an approach like this, we would have a few recommendations to close this paper with for those benefiting from patriarchal dividend and enjoying MACS' spaces as male preserves, as they end up being in the core of our problem, even if less intentionally, but due to patriarchy. While we are working on parallel initiatives to provide education through workshops on women specifics in MACS for men interested as next stages of the research, a few suggestions can be left here for reflection. Those benefiting from the patriarchal dividend are positioned at the centre of a circle of power or at the top of traditional horizontal pyramids of oppression, maintaining their hegemony from where they can tell women what to do to become fighters. However, as we argued here, women must be centred for them to flourish, with their voices and needs prioritized as well. Women need to value themselves enough to respond, as stated in the themes. As we socially learned not valuing us, there is a tendency of allowing for mistreatment. So, we need time to re-learn and re-shape embodiments. The first recommendation, then, is to be patient and allow space.

Next, there should be a reflection on why some men want to teach women so many things. Why to teach them self-defence? What makes you believe you know more? Isn't this a continuous colonial approach, as if women need to be civilized? Why some men think they will teach women how to defend themselves from... bad men? Because they are good men, so we must trust them. How come? If you want to help, you may need just to step back. Stop violence. Allow time for women to heal from patriarchal trauma. Perhaps cross the street instead of walking behind a woman that has no idea what you want from her and is scared. Help us rebuild trust in you. You cannot impose that. By insisting on showing how good and different you may be, you are just making our problem worse. You can assist when we ask for help though; in the meanwhile, listen and reflect. Do not adapt a male model for us, or ignore our specifics, saying that we are all the same. Learn more, research more, ask us more. Really good men should stop exerting domination disguised of help and care. Be honestly humbler so you will be helping.

#### Declaration of competing interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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#### Declaration of artificial intelligence use

The authors affirm that no artificial intelligence applications were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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Belts order image (figure 1): <https://thekaratewins.com/the-ranks-of-shotokan-karate-belt-colors/> Copyright: (c) maramade | Dreamstime.com

Silhouette karate girl used in the vertical pyramid of equitable responsible power (figure 3 and 4): <https://www.istockphoto.com/illustrations/karate-woman-drawing> Copyright: tronand | Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

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