

Women in the Martial Arts

by: Ben Haryo

In Western countries, gender discrimination is a touchy subject. The “Sexist” label has been a potent weapon to legitimize countless lawsuits against many so-called “crimes”, both real and imagined. I have heard that even martial arts, especially Eastern ones, have been looked down on as “Sexist”. As an instructor of Japanese Martial Arts, I am moved to shed a bit of light in this topic.

First of all, the Japanese grandmasters who created Jūjutsu and Karate long ago did not know much about “feminism” or “equal opportunities”. But they certainly were not against women. The truth is they had done something better for women: they created special techniques for women. That’s it, special techniques for women. While female students have access to all the techniques, the male students were usually barred from these techniques, except for the very few who were designated as the successor of the grandmaster.

The grandmasters of Japanese arts knew that most women do not have the strength of men and they created new techniques accordingly. The Japanese do not care much about who is superior, male or female. They recognize the differences between the two and devise techniques according to their strengths. They know that women could rely on “the element of surprise and deception”, that is, allow the attacker

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to believe they are helpless and submissive, and, in a most opportune moment, strike the attacker and get away.

The great Jigoro Kano of Jūdō created “Jū No Kata” and “Joshi Goshinjo” especially for



women, because he knew that women looked better compared to men when performing such techniques as contained within the Kata. This also worked in the Aikidō field. Mr. Shioda Gozo of Yoshinkan Aikidō once remarked that Aikidō is very good for women because it makes them look graceful. Professor Okazaki of Danzan Ryu created Fujin Goshin No Maki and Ladies’s Yawara for his women students, and he gave instructor’s licenses to both male and female students.

While Karate featured many Kata forms that looked very masculine (such as the Seishan and Naihanchi forms), the masters of Karate such as Funakoshi (Shotokan), Mabuni (Shito Ryu) and Konishi (Shindo Jinen Ryu) did not neglect the feminine qualities of their students. The Aoyagi Kata of Shindo Jinen Ryu and Chinte Kata of Shotokan gained fame as Katas tailored for women, because of the graceful techniques.

And the aforementioned example does not mean that admittance of women and creation of women-specific techniques are limited to the above styles only. There are hundreds of martial arts schools and styles in Japan that have techniques for women only. In fact, there is evidence that the Ninjas developed an entirely new martial art devoted to the *Kunoichi*, or women Ninja.

Speaking of instructorships, I know that very few women are given instructor's license in Japanese arts. But that is not because of discrimination. This does not mean that there are no female instructors. Imi Okazaki (daughter of Prof. Okazaki) and Keiko Fukuda (granddaughter of Hachinosuke Fukuda the Tenjin-Shinyoryu Jūjutsu master) are good examples of this. There also are many examples of other female instructors. So we can say that if there are more male instructors than females, it is not because of sexual discrimination, but it is because there are not many women who enroll in self-defense classes with the intention to become instructors.

Now let us not dwell in an exalted past but let us look at the present. If you look at many Jūjutsu schools in the East and the West, you will see that many male instructors happily sacrificed their health for the sake of their female students. That is it: they selflessly volunteered to become the Uke for their female students. Ask Rorion Gracie, who got beaten up everytime he



taught a female self-defense class. Many male instructors get kneed, kicked or punched in the groin everytime they teach rape-prevention techniques. Does this sounds like an anti-women campaign? Not at all. To me it sounds like chivalry. That is what teaching self-defense is all about.


I also believe that women should be encouraged to learn self-defense. My teacher Ishihara Dai Sensei once said “self defense is the rights of those who need it”. And who needs self defense more than women, who are physically weaker than men? Any strong man could defend himself with his own brute strength without having to learn any form of martial arts. The same cannot be said about women. They need to rely on their cunning and feminine allure to survive, and learning self-defense is a readily available tool for them, should they choose to utilize it.

And so I can conclude that our Japanese Martial Arts is not sexist at all, and I recommend any women to have a look. I sincerely hope you could appreciate its values.

Ben Haryo is a Wado Ryu and Goshin Būdō Jūjutsu instructor in Jakarta, Indonesia. He holds 2nd Dan in Wado Ryu and 2nd Dan in Ishihara-Ha Yonryu Goshin Būdō Jūjutsu.

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