

Exploring Women’s Transformative Learning and Community Building through Practicing Martial Arts to Disrupt Gendered and Hetero-Patriarchal Norms

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Abstract

This article explores the potential for martial arts to support transformation and community building for women. Findings indicate women can derive many individual benefits from learning martial arts. Yet, the benefits must extend beyond the individual level to create social change. Based on an evaluation of literature on women’s experiences learning martial arts, I use my perspective as an adult education researcher and a feminist lens to propose creative approaches to supporting women in learning martial arts. Supporting women in learning martial arts requires promoting creativity and invention in practice. Feminist new materialism, transformative learning theory, and communities of practice are the theories that guide the direction of this article. The major contribution of this article is to offer creative approaches for imagining a feminist praxis through martial arts that could foster learning environments that encourage self-determination and build social support and resistance to hetero-patriarchal power and gender inequity, which has relevance to broader educational settings and communities.

Keywords:

Martial arts are defined as “a myriad of systems of embodied movements and underlying philosophy and pedagogies” (Pedrini & Jennings, 2021, p. 2) which have a foundation in self-defense training and an attention to health-promoting and self-cultivation practices (Moore et al., 2020). The term covers a wide range of combat-style activities and practices under the broader concept of *body pedagogics* (Shilling, 2017). Another term, commonly used to broaden the definition of martial arts, is the term Martial Arts and Combat Sports (MACS), which encompasses, both traditional movement systems and practices along with modern inventions like Mixed Martial Arts, referred known by the acronym MMA (Bowman, 2019; Channon & Jennings, 2014; Pedrini & Jennings, 2021). Cultural and societal assumptions between martial arts and combat have led to the dominance of masculine ideals within martial arts spaces, which is also an issue in the larger context of sport and particularly significant for the **topic of women in sports** (Magnusson, 2018; Maor, 2019; Mizwierski & Phipps, 2015; **Rasmussen** et al., 2021). Women’s participation in martial arts, therefore, has required some ingenuity and resulted in substantial debates by challenging traditional gendered expectations of femininity (Davies & Deckert, 2019). There is a growing body of scholarship investigating the potential impacts of women’s participation in martial arts to support challenging gender norms and expectations (Lindsay et al., 2023).

Research into women’s participation in martial arts has grown substantially in the last two decades, producing some compelling findings concerning self-transformation and the ability to alter mainstream perspectives and normative assumptions about gender and femininity (Channon & Matthews, 2015; Channon & Phipps, 2017; Nichols et al., 2023). For instance, practicing martial arts has been seen to contribute to embodied identity development, shifting self-narratives and creating spaces where women can physically, mentally, and emotionally challenge and break free of traditional gender narratives (Guthrie, 1995; De Welde, 2003; Nichols et al., 2023). Research into martial arts seeking to challenge hetero-normative ideals and expectations may identify ways to transmute gender

narratives, disrupt gender hierarchies, and combat systemic gender inequities (Noel, 2009). More research is needed into the pedagogical implications of learning martial arts for supporting women in disrupting gendered and hetero-patriarchal norms, violence, and oppression, because pedagogy is pivotal in shaping women's martial arts learning outcomes (Channon, 2018).

This article focuses on strategies to improve women's learning and participation in martial arts to address gender and social justice issues in martial arts. This is of significant because as Griffith (2023) identifies in the martial art of capoeira, discussions on the ways capoeira have the potential to promote social justice remain incomplete without attention to the ways gender injustice and potentially sexual harassment remain unaddressed within capoeira learning contexts. Gender justice concerns addressing the multitude of injustices and inequalities persisting in society that are based on gender, such as violence against women, unequal distribution of power and labour and lack of recognition of women's abilities and achievements (Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Cin, 2017; Gheus, 2011; Young, 1990).

Gender norms are learned through social interactions and embedded within institutions and determine what are socially acceptable activities for women and men to engage in (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). Gender norms must be challenged owing to a need for more diverse ways of representing gender, and because the long-standing association between masculinity and martial arts, and sports in general has produced a plethora of societal problem of gender segregation and the ways gendered systems are responsible for unequal distribution of resources, roles and power (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Magnusson, 2018; McDonagh & Pappano, 2008; Pape, 2020; Rasmussen et al., 2021).

The gender-segregated nature of sports participation based on traditional forms of masculinity and femininity, may discourage those who do not align with the gendered behavior from participating in certain sports, which is how women are inhibited from participating in certain sports (Pape, 2020; Rasmussen et al., 2021). Gender is important to understand because it influences certain attitudes and behaviours and can determine whether women will begin, remain, and succeed in a sport (Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Lindqvist et al., 2021). Women have been unjustly excluded from participating in sports that do not align with heteronormative femininity, and there is a systemic perception of female athletes being inferior to male athletes in terms of power, strength, and ability which needs to be challenged (McDonough; Pape, 2020). This is more than an individual issue, change is needed at the institutional level, and sustained action and attention to institutional transformation relating to gender-power relations are required to improve women's participation in sport overall and martial arts in particular (Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Pape, 2020).

I employ adult education and feminist theories to explore the transformative potential and unique community-building aspects available through practicing martial arts. From this exploration, I discuss implications of viewing martial arts as a creative practice and teaching methods to promote gender justice in martial arts learning settings. The questions driving this research are: How are women able to re-imagine and re-create their self-concept through martial arts? What pedagogical approaches can promote the establishment of inclusive communities in martial arts, aiming to subvert gender norms, expectations, and hierarchies?

I begin by sharing my conceptualization of martial arts as a creative practice included within the broader category of artistic ways of knowing (Blackburn Miller, 2020). I then explain the theoretical frameworks that inform my approach. These theories include feminist new materialism (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 2016), transformative learning theory (Dirkx, 2008; 2012; English & Irving, 2012; Mezirow, 1991); and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2016). I use these theories, to evaluate my findings and offer new directions and creative approaches to support women in learning martial arts. The significance of these pedagogical innovations in martial arts concerns fostering learning environments that encourage self-determination and build social support and resistance to hetero-patriarchal power and gender inequity. Although the recommendations provided are based on martial arts learning contexts, they could theoretically be applied to other sports and educational settings.

Martial arts as a creative practice and artistic way of knowing

Martial arts, briefly introduced in the beginning of this article, have been conceptualized in many ways (Bowman, 2017; Judkins, 2016). To elaborate upon what was presented in the introduction, martial arts are holistic movement-based pedagogies that “unite aesthetic and philosophical aspects” and in doing result in improved “breath control and relaxation, discipline, respect, self-esteem, and mind-body coordination” (Ciaccioni et al., 2024, p. 2). Due to the stylized and creative movement sequences, discipline, and body awareness inherent to martial arts practices, it is little wonder that have earned respect from general society (Farrer & Whalen-Bridge, 2011). Beyond the physical dimensions, the mental health benefits from practicing are gaining interest in research studies, although these benefits must be tempered with other research noting the potential for injury and adverse health affects (Messauod, 2016; Pedrini & Jennings, 2021). Essentially, teaching martial arts offers ample opportunities for interpretation, innovation, and creative influence on the learner's body and mind (Wetzler, 2015).

There are many martial arts styles that have been diversely described as hard, soft, traditional, and modern movement (Ciaccioni et al., 2024). Some examples are provided to give context to martial arts mentioned later in this article. Originating in Japan, Karate is widely recognized around the world for its focus on self-defense without the use of weapons, using empty-handed combat movement techniques, that dynamically engage the entire body (Messauod, 2016). Taekwondo, which also originated in Japan, is a modern martial art that emphasizes fluid hand movements (Cholet, 2020). Muay Thai, translated to “the art of eight limbs”, is referred to as both the martial art and national sport of Thailand (Davies & Deckert, 2019; 2020; Muller-Junior & Capraro, 2022). Muay Thai presents a particularly intriguing example for creative development and innovation given that the exact origins of lineage of the martial art are unknown, and the martial art has been adopted into Thai sporting culture and nation-building (Muller-Junior & Capraro, 2022).

Despite popular misperception, not all martial arts come from Asian origins (Bowman, 2021). Capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art, combines fluid fight-like movements with music in a circle, known as a *roda*, and includes elements of dance and play (Griffith, 2023). Boxing, although it may not seem like a “traditional” martial art, is one of the oldest forms of combat and is included in the category of MACS (Jennings, 2014). There is no singular way to conceptualize or define a martial art and it will depend on practitioner’s style and experiences and even culture (Bowman, 2017; Judkins, 2016).

Although primarily conceptualized as physical practices, martial arts present a multi-modal learning context that involves complex interactions between practitioners, for instance through the practice of sparring drills, and even between an individual and themselves, through self-cultivation and self-transcendence (Maor, 2019; Messaoud, 2016). Learning martial arts takes place in a communal setting which involves social and cultural dimensions and embodied knowledge transmission – knowledge transference from one body to another (Brown & Jennings, 2011).

From the perspective of transformative learning, Blackburn Miller (2020) includes martial arts in a category of artistic ways of knowing. Drama and theatre are also in this category and have been sites for transformative learning theory research. Artistic ways of knowing collectively correspond to the category of expressive, embodied, and performing arts, which can spark potent learning through a “deeper awareness and widened possibility” (Dawson, 2017, p. 383), particularly on emotional levels. Artistic ways of knowing, emerge from theories on multiple ways of knowing, and Blackburn Miller (2020) concludes that “due to the aesthetic, emotive, and extrarational nature of the arts” (p. 349) personal transformation results through greater self-expression, perspective transformation, and better understanding of the “other”, in addition to dealing with difficult or complicated emotions. Martial arts, when approached as a creative practice, offer potential insights into navigating complex issues like gender justice and transformative learning, which I discuss through the theoretical perspectives I introduce next.

Theoretical frameworks

I use the following three theoretical perspectives to evaluate my findings in the literature and in my discussion of opportunities for advancing gender justice using feminist praxis in martial arts learning contexts.

Feminist new materialism and situated and embodied knowledge

Feminist new materialism is a theoretical direction in feminist scholarship following the affective turn, which was an early 20th-century shift for many disciplines that connected social, cultural, and political with emotional, embodied and unconscious power and politics (Clough, 2008; Zembylas, 2021). The affective turn acknowledges “feeling, emotion, and affect are forms of knowledge” (Williams, 2019, p. 37). Feminist new materialisms take this direction of thought further by paying attention to how the material processes of the world impact sensory dimensions of human experience, making connections between human experience, nature and culture (Thorpe et al., 2020; Truman, 2019). This connection pertains to gendered dimensions of power relations and the relationship between moving bodies, the bodies of the environment, and the social and political structures that impact experiences and the environment (Thorpe et al., 2020). I employ three concepts from scholars who have contributed to the development of feminist new materialism to explore women’s experiences in martial arts: agential realism, situated and embodied knowledges, and speculative fabulation.

Agential realism is a feminist new materialism concept developed by Barad (2007) which indicates how agency does not exist within a single body but is dispersed through the relationships and bodies and intra-actions in their networks. Feminist new materialisms, specifically Hickey-Moody’s (2013) affective pedagogies, were employed in the research of Nichols et al. (2023) to study the embodied experiences of a group of women in a fight camp guided by a feminist philosophy and affective coaching approach.

Haraway’s theorization of situated embodied knowledges and speculative fabulation have been instrumental in highlighting materiality and fostering the development of feminist new materialism (Truman, 2019). Situated and embodied knowledges emphasize the importance of women’s experiences in generating valuable and specific knowledge (Haraway, 1988). Situated knowledges and feminist embodiment challenge disembodied objectivity that potentially incites irresponsible knowledge claims about lived reality (Haraway, 1988). According to Haraway (1988), relying on interpretations from insiders and the subjugated provides a stronger perspective for critiquing hierarchical power relations and providing insight for transforming knowledge systems to address gender justice issues in educational context.

Speculative fabulation is a method that supports imagining flourishing, which Haraway (2016) defines as a “mode of attention, a theory of history, and a practice of worlding” (p. 230). By drawing on sociological imagination, speculative fabulation challenges conventional and hegemonic notions of time and relationships in learning by incorporating aesthetics and affect (Cartens, 2020; Preda & Matei, 2023). This process involves creating narratives and rethinking the world. It is useful as a pedagogical endeavour because it offers “novel territories for thinking, feeling and doing differently” (Cartens, 2020, p. 75). Re-imagining gender roles and norms requires us to actively engage in practices that foster new ways of thinking to challenge gendered expectations which is why speculative fabulation has relevance for gender justice and implications as a pedagogical resource to support new directions for women learning martial arts.

Transformative learning in adult education

Transformative learning is an adult education theory with many themes and variations (Mezirow, 1991; Tisdell, 2012). Since Mezirow’s (1978) early work, several writers, particularly in women’s learning contexts, have theorized the role of the body in transformative learning (English & Irving, 2012). Discussing the significance of emotion from women’s transformative learning experiences, English and Irving (2012) emphasize the significance of “the arts in supporting

creativity” (p. 253). They specifically acknowledge Clover (2006) whose research into participatory photography and the arts improved learners’ agency and empowerment in learning.

The emotional dimension informed the direction of Dirkx’s (2008; 2012) work and much of his contributions to transformative learning theory. Although he did not focus specifically on women’s experiences, his research into transformative learning and the affective dimension and how it supports transformation is still supportive (English & Irving, 2012). This embodied perspective on transformative learning affords a different way of understanding transformation and making sense of experience by integrating thought, emotion, and behaviour for a more holistic way of knowing (Dirkx, 2008). Dirkx’s (2012) view on fostering transformative learning involves the imaginal method that uses emotion-laden images to help individuals develop deeper insights and connect with “aspects of the self of which [they] were previously unaware” (p. 125). My use of transformative learning theory is focused on embodied and emotional perspectives and imaginative engagement to support women’s learning of martial arts.

Communities of practice

Learning martial arts is both an individual and collective endeavour. Community is a significant component of learning martial arts and has profound effects on individuals who practise. Engagement in martial arts contexts deserves appreciation not only for the knowledge and skills that help improve personal skill and abilities but also for the socio-cultural practices and traditions connected to learning (Bowman; 2017; 2021). Appreciation for these dimensions aligns with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) perspective on situated learning and communities of practice (Wenger, 2016).

Lave and Wenger (1991) view learning as a “situated activity” for which they consider the central defining characteristic to be a process termed “**legitimate peripheral participation**” (p. 29). Legitimate peripheral participation refers to the way a newcomer becomes part of a community of practice and progresses towards full community participation. Irrespective of the martial art, there is a natural progression and steps for a beginner or novice learner to become a master/expert learner. This matches Lave and Wenger’s (1991) description of legitimate peripheral participation associated with becoming a full member of a community of practice. Moreover, Wenger (2016) recognizes the inextricability of experience of being in the world and negotiation of meaning. *Engagement*, *imagination*, and *alignment* are the three modes of belonging within a community of practice which contribute to identity formation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Combining these dimensions of communities of practice support the aspects of feminist new materialism and transformative learning theory already presented and are relevant to explore women’s participation and learning in martial arts in greater detail.

Findings from the literature

Making sense of the literature on women’s learning experiences in martial arts is exceedingly complex, due to the diverse nature of the learning environment and style of martial arts which is situationally and contextually shaped (Lindsay et al., 2023). The predominance of research presented in this review came from mixed-sex learning environments, but there were several from women’s only learning contexts. To appreciate the educational significance of women practicing martial arts, Channon (2018) asserts the need to establish a connection between martial arts and gender studies and incorporate self-defense literature. Accordingly, the methodological approach for this review of the literature draws from these three areas of scholarship. For this literature review, my findings indicate both the benefits women derive from engaging in martial arts and challenges that women may encounter in learning martial arts and may impede their progress toward gender justice. Recognizing the successes as well as where the challenges reside is important for planning future directions in pedagogy and practice. This recognition is where the lens of adult education and feminist theory is warranted, as I will discuss in this paper’s final section.

Opportunities/ advantages

The fact that women can learn martial arts and that there is a diverse and expanding body of literature and scholarship on their experiences is encouraging (Channon & Matthews, 2015). The themes on the advantages derived from learning martial arts for women which I present in this section are: learning self-defense and physical feminism, empowerment, care and self-healing, embodied identity formation, transforming self-narratives, and the subversion of gender norms through strategic enactments of femininity.

Self-defense and physical feminism

Self-defense for women means learning to protect oneself, developing a greater sense of self-worth, and ultimately being “disruptive of the embodied ethos of rape culture” (McCaughey, 1997, p. 18), and is one of the most established reasons women learn martial arts (Channon & Phipps, 2017; Zhou, 2023). From a self-defense perspective, learning martial arts is transformative not only through recognition that a woman is physically powerful enough to defend herself and that women “have the right to self defense” (Guthrie, 2014, p. 112).

McCaughey’s (1997) ethnographic research connected self-defense training with the development of physical feminism. Since then, this concept has been used in the sports sociology literature on the benefits of women’s participation in martial arts. Physical feminism relates to the benefits that women obtain from engaging in physical activity and, particularly, the strength and confidence they develop to stand up for themselves and challenge patriarchal societal perceptions of men’s physical superiority (Aiba, 2014; McCaughey, 1997; Noel, 2009). The physical benefits of martial arts training are well recognized, but other benefits, such as the social and emotional benefits of martial arts, also deserve attention.

Women’s empowerment

Both in the self-defense literature and studies on women’s martial arts, learning can produce a sense of empowerment which is a prominent motive for how women can challenge hetero-patriarchal norms (Guthrie, 1995; Hamilton, 2022; Velija et al., 2013). Empowerment is conceptualized as the transformation in perspective women have of themselves by realizing that they are physically strong and physically and emotionally capable. For instance, Castelnuovo and Guthrie (1998) propose that in learning Karate, women experience empowerment in mind and body which improves perceptions of their bodies and their perception of other women. However, Hamilton (2022) makes the critique that often, her case with MMA, “any such empowerment is individualized rather than extended to women as a group, and those who benefit most from such empowerment – white, hetero-feminine women – are those who already benefit from the interlocking systems of privilege provided by white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy” (p. 655).

Neoliberal and post-feminist discourses complicate women’s empowerment with the concept that empowerment is individualized (Hamilton, 2022; Velija et al., 2013). Individualized empowerment does not connect with broader systems changes necessary to counteract systemic marginalization and enact real transformation for true gender justice. As such, collective resistance, which can be developed through feminist praxis and goes beyond individual physical empowerment, deserves attention (Velija et al., 2013).

Care of the self and healing

Another benefit from practicing martial arts, is a feminist “care of the self” (Guthrie, 1995, p. 108) which supports healing from gender-based violence and resistance to gender oppression. Maor (2019) notes how an ethics of care shaped her experience and helped her to become aware of herself and her training partner and become “reflective of unnecessary uses of authority and power” (p. 42) when practicing martial arts.

Cultivation is a concept associated with the transformative aspect of learning martial arts, more so in those martial arts of Eastern origin which have a foundation in Confucius thought (Jennings

et al., 2020). Pedrini and Jennings (2021) build a theoretical framework upon the notion of “care of the self” connected to the concept of cultivation. This framework presents four kinds of cultivation: self-cultivation, which relates to an individual’s personal development through martial arts mind-body activities; shared cultivation, which refers to the collective development experienced by a group learning martial arts; social cultivation, is referred to human transformation and transcendence as related “the transmission of cultural values and symbolic meanings” (p. 6) which happens through martial arts; and ecological cultivation, which is referred to as a kind of environmental sensitivity or awareness developed in learning martial arts. This framework is helpful as an assessment tool to identify health-promoting as well as unhealthy pedagogical practices and shows the multiple dimensions martial arts may support health and healing through individual and social change promoted in learning.

Embodied identity formation

Transformation in martial arts is associated with an embodied learning experience whereby martial arts present a creative way to embody a stronger and more resilient identity which has potential for challenging gendered norms imposed on the female body (Karoura et al. 2014). Cholet (2020) investigates personal transformation for women who earned a black belt in Taekwondo. These women experienced transformation through their bodies which influenced how they carried themselves in the world (Cholet, 2020). They expressed knowing themselves “through a significantly different perspective” (Cholet, 2020, p. 3) after Taekwondo training. Channon and Jennings (2014) support these findings with how “practitioners’ embodied experiences affect their own lives as well as the wider cultural settings and structures within which they are situated” (p. 1).

Participating in “hard” martial arts, sparring, and training for competition challenges normative expectations of femininity (Maor, 2019). Some female fighters and athletes, specifically in Muay Thai and MMA, find this exciting (Mierzwinski & Phipps, 2015). For instance, Nichols et al. (2023) conclude that “kinetically excessive movement life can generate moments of (un)learning habitual movement patterns and postures that have materialized through normative gender ideals” (p. 142). This counters historical performative patterns of gender in traditional Western contexts wherein women have been socialized to embody less confidence and less space (McDonough & Pappano, 2008; Nash, 2017). This transformation speaks to a novel type of embodied identity formation that breaks with normative gender patterns and ideals that have restricted women’s agency and self-determination. The body is a place to begin, but women’s embodied learning in martial arts does more than transform the way in which women think about and talk about themselves, in other words, their self-narratives.

Transforming self-narratives

Transformations in self-narratives have been observed relate to changes from being “fragile and fearful of harm” to “break out of traditional feminine training and to recreate [themselves]” (Guthrie, 1995, p. 113). These thoughts and feelings are evidence of the transformation of self-narratives. DeWelde (2003) who studied women’s self-defense courses, argues that in learning self-defense women develop “agency in constructing self-narratives is interpreted as resistance to dominant narratives” (p. 248). Transforming self-narratives, through greater self-esteem and self-acceptance is significant for shifting stories women tell about themselves is an important step for re-imagining and transforming their self-concept and the influence of gendered expectations and stereotyping.

As another example, Nash (2017) describes how she “developed a new self-image and a reformulated conception of what [her] body could do” (p. 743) through boxing. The change in her self-narrative shows an increased sense of self-confidence which is connected to her trusting her situated knowledge and interpretation of her learning for personal transformation (Harraway, 1988). This example also relates to the power of emotionally-laden images and the imaginal method in transformative learning theory through which a learner connects with a part of themselves with which they were previously unaware (Dirkx, 2012).

Subversive potentials and strategic use of femininity

The subversive potential for disrupting gender hierarchies through strategic uses of femininity, which goes by several names, shows creativity and has been studied in different martial arts (Channon & Phipps, 2017; Hamilton, 2022). The concept connects to **agential realism** (Barad, 2007) in that “performativity provides a critical counterpoint to representationalism in emphasizing the practices and actions through which means, boundaries and bodies are produced and substantiated” (Hinton, 2013, p. 174). In other words, by choosing how they enact femininity in particular contexts, women can use their bodies and the practice of martial arts to challenge the hegemony of heteropatriarchy by occupying spaces where male representation is unquestioned.

Channon and Phipps (2017) use the term “alternative femininity” which they suggest is the method in which women specifically and purposefully choose how to enact femininity and resistance against patriarchy and male hegemony. These ways in which women in martial spaces learn how to embody and perform femininity in particular ways are seen “to destabilise normative sexual hierarchies rather than uncritically reproduce them” (Channon & Phipps, 2017, p. 29). This observation speaks to the entanglements of Barad’s (2007) **agential realism with the intra-action between matter and meaning and how shifting configurations of power and** “bodily specificities are materialisations of political significance and value” (Hinton, 2013, p. 184).

Davies and Deckert (2019) use the term “ingenious agency” to explore women’s strategic use of femininity which may appear to confirm to dominant stereotypical gender norms, but in fact is “reshaping the face ... of fighting and inspiring a younger generation of women to take up martial arts and combat sports” (p. 220). Using ingenious agency may support legitimate peripheral participation by providing a means for women to exercise more self-determination which contributes to stronger engagement in martial arts.

Women learning martial arts demonstrate creativity in their uses of femininity for the purpose of advancing their position. This approach to challenging normative gender and power dynamics could be typified as “covert resistance” (Ganoë, 2019, p. 593), which is a kind of social resistance often obscured from overt observation. However, there remain obstacles and misconceptions that women encounter in learning martial arts which need to be addressed to develop effective pedagogies to bring about more gender-positive learning experiences which could be important for encouraging women’s participation in martial arts.

Challenges and limitations

Although there are findings to support the transformative benefits and community-building aspects that are possible for women in learning martial arts, the literature indicates significant controversy and ambivalence towards women’s engagement in martial arts (Nichols et al., 2023). Women continue to be under-recognized and marginalized in martial arts contexts, as in many other sporting contexts (Maor, 2019; McDonough & Pappano, 2008, Tjønndal, 2019). Challenges identified in the literature, that may undermine the potential of women learning martial arts advancing gender justice relate to hegemonic masculinity associated with sport culture and martial arts, particularly in the MMA context, and the female athlete paradox. These challenges are entrenched in culture and society, which makes them complex to barrier to the potential learning martial arts has for disrupting hegemonic gender norms and structures.

Hegemonic masculinity in sporting culture and contexts

Sports, in general, have long been typified as perpetuating masculine norms and expectations (Hamilton, 2022; McDonough & Pappano, 2008). Martial arts, particularly when defined as MACS, are more readily associated with masculinity and frequently militarized contexts (Lindsay et al., 2023; Magnusson, 2018; Moar, 2019). Fewer women participating in martial arts than men has been attributed to this masculinist environment (Mierzwinski & Phipps, 2015). Martial arts spaces can be

exceptionally hierarchical, excluding women and preventing them from advancement (Lindsay et al., 2023; McDonough & Pappano, 2008). This presents an issue and detrimental to *engagement* as a mode of belonging which is why women in learning martial arts may encounter issues of belonging and social isolation which prevents women from reaching *full participation* in the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Nash (2017) documents her struggles as a woman in a boxing gym in Tasmania through autoethnography where hegemonic masculinity and performances of masculinity of the other boxers proved problematic at times negatively affecting and even deterring her from training. Tjønndal (2019) also explores social inclusion and exclusion in the context of women in elite boxing, finding that while women's boxing is now included in the Olympics, recognition, sports coverage, and engagement of female athletes is still far less than for male boxers at the same competitive level, indicating gendered power relations. Tjønndal (2019) argues that structural, organizational, and cultural changes are necessary, but that female athletes have minimal control over these changes. These experiences are not unexpected when evaluated from a feminist new materialist perspective which understands how the body and mind are not separate and there is human and environmental intra-action and inseparability (Barad, 2007). Consequences of hegemonic masculinity and how environments can undermine the potential of learning martial arts to challenge gender injustices become more apparent in the specific example of MMA.

The case of mixed martial arts

The case of MMA offers a counter discourse to the transformative potential of martial arts for addressing gender injustice and community development. The issue with MMA relates to the previous point of the hegemony of masculinity in sporting culture. Hamilton's (2022) research into women's experiences in MMA illustrates that the neoliberalism, post-feminist, and hegemonic masculinity of MMA culture and training environments diminishes the empowerment that women might gain from learning martial arts. The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) is a contemporary media outlet that overtly sexualizes women fighters, perpetuating a culture that further reifies gender categories, violence, and hetero-normative patriarchal control (Maor, 2019). As Channon and Mathews (2015) note, "sexualisation re-imposes an objectified, subordinating image of femininity" (p. 14) which is why the "women warrior" images in the media, when out of women's control, can further objectify women's bodies and impede gender justice, being at odds with the struggles of female athletes to gain respect and recognition.

The female-athlete paradox

The female-athlete paradox implies that being "athletic" is not "feminine" or "womanly" (Hamilton, 2022; Velija et al., 2013). Becoming muscular and strong is perceived as contradictory to hetero-normative femininity and therefore discouraged by gender expectations in dominant society (Channon & Phipps, 2017; Hamilton, 2022).

Some women are motivated to practice martial arts to lose weight or achieve a "toned" body which is a motivation that can perpetuate Western hetero-normative ideal of thinness and body dissatisfaction (Thompson et al., 2001; Velija et al., 2013). Not only does this intention for practice detract from the potential for transformative learning, community building and the gender subversive potential of martial arts, but these discourses also perpetuate the white hetero-normative ideals of conformity and a disciplined physique that have been a source of oppression to women (Velija et al., 2013). These ideologies challenge the *alignment* with practices to disrupt gendered norms and hierarchies. The individualized focus on personal fitness and individually working on one's body shatters the potential alliances and *alignment* important for developing community.

Discussion: Directions for pedagogy and practice

As evidenced by the literature, there are ways learning martial arts can support transformation towards gender justice, and there are ways martial arts systems reify ongoing gender inequities. The new direction research and scholarship should take is to evaluate the diverse findings through a pedagogical lens with recommendations for practice. In this final section, I reflect upon my findings

from the literature and suggest potential innovations for pedagogy and practice. These suggestions are informed by the theoretical perspectives I presented and my assertion that martial arts are discursive entities and a creative practice. I use Lave and Wenger's (1991) three modes of belonging – *engagement*, *imagination*, and *alignment* – to organize my thoughts and specific recommendations for pedagogical approaches to support women learning martial arts.

Engagement

Identifying the barriers that exist is the first step to improving women's participation and engagement in martial arts (Lindsay et al., 2023). Yet, the wider issues for women participating in professional sports and martial arts are beyond their control in society (Pape, 2020). It is beyond the scope of this article to fully interrogate the societal issues that must be addressed to improve engagement and respect for women in MACS including but not limited to training conditions, compensation, and education to encourage transformation in public perception. These are important topics which still require attention. My focus lies in strategies for creating relevant and engaging learning experiences for women currently involved in martial arts, especially those who are new or considering joining (i.e. in the peripheral participation stage). More positive learning experiences and engagement I argue will lead to greater female participation in martial arts, may eventually reshape public perception of what participating in combat sports does.

Promoting the self-defense benefits of learning martial arts is one way generate interest and engagement (Channon & Phipps, 2017). However, as was identified in the literature on self-defense and empowerment to better support engagement, the focus of feminist praxis in martial arts must move beyond individual narratives and personal agency, incorporating insights from third-wave feminist sports literature (Velija et al., 2013).

Even if gender parity exists in martial arts and sports, it does not necessarily imply and equate to equal learning experiences or full participation as Lave and Wenger (1991) conceptualize it. Women may still be marginalized and oppressed without attention to the quality of learning experiences (Maor, 2019). Based on feminist new materialist thought, it becomes evident that the environment and the social and political structures impact experiences within a context (Thorpe et al., 2020). Coaches and trainers should be aware of these effects so that they are not uncritically assimilating and perpetuating heteronormative behaviours and values. This applies to both female and male trainers because gender justice has erroneously been considered achieving gender justice is considered the priority for women only (Clavero & Galligan, 2021).

Mixed-gender training spaces may not be comfortable for some women, so a question for pedagogy and practice is how to make mixed-gender spaces more comfortable for women or create women-only learning spaces (Guthrie, 1995; Lindsay et al., 2023). One promising option is to have more female role models and coaches. Rasmussen et al. (2021) support this direction asserting that nontraditional female athletes can be role models to get women to engage in a broader range of sports and other activities.

Imagination

Reflecting upon Dirx's (2012) propositions on the imaginal method and work with emotion-laden images, I suggest that the use of imagery and imagination could be significant to pedagogical approaches and practices that support transformative learning in martial arts. This method could challenge negative stereotypes of fighting and women's bodies perpetuating gender injustice within martial spaces such as the "thin" and "toned" ideal, sexualization of female athletes and white femininity (Channon & Phipps, 2017; Velija et al., 2013).

To support current and future female martial artists requires critical understanding of their complex historical position and challenging heteronormative ideals within and beyond practice spaces, which can benefit from imagination. Approaches to challenging gender norms in martial arts learning might consider speculative fabulation to support imagining directions for women learning martial arts that are more supportive for challenging gender norms (Haraway, 2006; Truman, 2018).

Alignment

Lastly, a crucial pedagogical prerogative is the alignment of the teacher's commitment to feminist values and vision, which supports transformative learning in martial arts and gender justice (Guthrie, 1995). Nichols et al. (2023) recommend a “**feminist coaching pedagogy**” (p. 132) to create change and disrupt gender hierarchies in martial spaces. The intentional “implementation of feminist principles and pedagogies rather than simply providing a space for women to learn how to punch and kick” (Hamilton, 2022, p. 672) must be a focus for creating the critical consciousness that is necessary to challenge power and hegemony in the context of martial arts and beyond. Moreover, the use of feminist values and vision is a means to building alignment which Lave and Wenger (2006) recognize can “amplify our power and our sense of the possible” (p. 180). A feminist pedagogy will also support the “care of self” and potential healing for women to maintain alignment with their commitment to learning (Guthrie, 1995). Women coaches need support which will be furthered by must come from a feminist praxis that can foster community and *agential realism* (Barad, 2007).

Considering how intra-action between nature and culture is of importance to feminist new materialism shows how and why some women are able to benefit and grow stronger in mind, body, emotion, and spirit through their martial arts training and others are not because these benefits are aligned with a common socialization experience and the development of culture (Truman, 2019). For instance, the dojo culture was significant to enhancing women’s learning experiences in Taekwondo (Cholet, 2020). Therefore, coaches and practitioners should focus on the culture they create through their actions and teaching practices. Reasons for these teaching and training implications are apparent based on the situated learning theories of Lave and Wenger (1991) and communities of practice (Wenger, 2016).

Conclusion

This article took as its starting point an investigation into the literature on women’s experiences learning martial arts with a particular focus on evidence of transformative learning and community building and how these learning processes might disrupt gendered and hetero-patriarchal norms. This investigation produced evidence of both positive outcomes and controversies for women learning martial arts (Channon & Matthews, 2015; Lindsay et al., 2023). Higher numbers of women participating in martial arts are not enough for gender equality and equal treatment and the focus must push beyond the individual level with more work at the organizational and a societal level to transform the narratives surrounding women in sport and martial arts (McDonagh & Pappano, 2008; Pape, 2020).

Based on the evaluation of my findings, I made suggestions from my perspective as an adult education researcher using a feminist lens involving my understanding of creative approaches to supporting women in learning martial arts. I presented martial arts as a creative practice in this article. Creativity and invention in practice are needed to support women in learning and benefiting from martial arts. While certain creative practices, such as “alternative femininity” (Channon & Phipps, 2017) and “ingenious agency” (Davies & Deckert, 2019), engaging in martial arts, have been observed, implementing specific changes in martial arts pedagogy more women can experience the benefits of learning martial arts.

There is merit in considering creativity through implementing feminist values and praxis which presents a promising area for future research. This article provides some recommendations and points of departure for future studies. Lave and Wenger’s (2016) three modes of belonging — **engagement, imagination, and alignment** — structured my suggestions for creating a feminist ethos in martial arts and how these suggestions might help disrupt hetero-normative forces in learning martial arts.

Future interdisciplinary research and initiatives on feminist pedagogy and practice that connect feminist scholars and practitioners in martial arts will benefit this direction of scholarship and provide more evidence and examples. I was limited in this article by the fact that that I could not consider all kinds of martial arts. Additionally, the literature that I consulted was restricted to a Western context, which will have affected the questions asked and directions of scholarship.

Disrupting gendered and hetero-patriarchal norms in sport and society is an enormous and ongoing task. Creativity in pedagogy and practice is essential for negotiating these struggles for gender justice. Martial arts present one example of a creative practice wherein there is potential for challenging and renegotiating gender norms and expectations which will be furthered with support from the wider society. Context and situatedness must always be of consideration to determine the efficacy of action in transformative approaches for gender norms (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). Consistently reflecting on our praxis and looking for new evidence and examples of creative practices is essential for supporting research and scholarship into methods for fostering social and gender justice.

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