

Prompt: The history of women in martial arts and their role today.

Redefining Strength: The Evolution of Women in Martial Arts

For much of history, the idea of women in combat has been treated as unusual or even unnatural, yet women have long participated in martial arts across cultures and time periods. Martial arts developed in a wide range of societies as systems of combat, self defense, and discipline, and is often tied to military and cultural traditions ¹. As these practices were historically linked to warfare and physical strength they became closely associated with masculinity, limiting women's visibility within them. The history of women in martial arts reveals that, although their participation has been constrained by gender norms and institutional barriers, women have consistently engaged in combat practices and, in recent decades, have gained increased visibility and influence.

Although often overlooked, women's participation in martial arts can be traced back to early historical accounts and cultural narratives. One example of this can be seen in legendary representations of female warriors. In *The Ballad of Mulan*, it states how Mulan "disguised [herself] as a man [and] joined the army in place of her father"². This suggests that women were capable of stepping into traditionally male roles, especially in times of necessity. However, Mulan is only able to do so after disguising herself as a man, highlighting the restrictions placed on women's participation in combat. This indicated that women were not openly accepted in martial arts, and in some cases had to conceal their identity simply in order to participate. A second example can be found in documented historical figures. In *The Tales of Heike*, Tomei Gozen is a female samurai described as "a warrior worth a thousand" and is known for her skill in archery and swordsmanship ³. This highlights that women could achieve recognition for their skill and strength in combat at a time when military roles were strongly associated with

masculinity. Simultaneously, the emphasis on her exceptional ability suggests that such cases were rare and noteworthy. As a result, these accounts demonstrate that women's participation in martial arts has long existed, even if it was not consistently acknowledged or widely recorded.

Despite this historical presence, women's participation in martial arts has been significantly shaped and limited by persistent gender norms and other barriers. One major barrier is the way masculinity has been socially constructed as dominant and is associated with strength and power. Researchers such as Rachel Jewkes and her colleagues explain that societies often promote ideals of masculinity that emphasize strength and dominance, shaping expectations around gender ⁵. This suggests that activities involving physical skill and discipline, such as martial arts, have been traditionally viewed as more appropriate for men. In other words, martial arts were not simply neutral practices but influenced by social beliefs that presented men as more suited to these disciplines. This reinforces the idea that women's exclusion from martial arts was driven by social expectations rather than a lack of ability. Another significant barrier is the expectation that women should conform to traditional ideas of femininity. As theorists such as Judith Butler suggest, gender roles are shaped by societal expectations which influence how individuals are expected to behave ⁶. This implies that women were discouraged from participating in martial arts as it conflicted with ideals of passivity and non-aggression. As a result, women who chose to engage in martial arts were often viewed as going against accepted norms. Therefore, these expectations not only limited women's participation but also shaped how their involvement in martial arts was perceived and valued.

However, in recent decades, women have gained increased visibility and legitimacy within martial arts, reflecting wider shifts in attitudes towards gender and sport. One significant development is the growing recognition of women within modern martial arts practice. For example, martial artists such as Cynthia Rothrock gained

recognition within traditional disciplines such as karate and kung fu. Rothrock is a highly accomplished martial artist who earned multiple world championships and became one of the first women to achieve international recognition in a field dominated by men ⁴. This demonstrates that women were capable of excelling in traditional martial arts at the highest levels. Moreover, her transition into martial arts films and roles helped increase the visibility of female practitioners and challenged the perception that martial arts is primarily suited for men ⁴. This highlights how individual achievement and visibility can reshape perceptions of women's roles within martial arts. In addition to gaining recognition, women are also taking on more active roles within martial arts communities. Many now work as instructors, coaches, and mentors, contributing to the teaching and development of martial arts traditions. This shows that women are not only participating but also helping to preserve and evolve these practices. Furthermore, their presence as leaders encourages greater participation among younger women as they have role models to aspire to within the discipline. Therefore, the expanding role of women in martial arts reflects not only progress within the disciplines themselves but also broader changes in societal attitudes towards gender and authority.

Overall, the history of women in martial arts demonstrates how their participation has been shaped by social restrictions, yet they have consistently engaged in these disciplines and are now gaining greater recognition and influence. Throughout history, women have participated in martial arts despite facing significant barriers based on gender expectations and societal norms. However, these limitations did not prevent their involvement, and, over time, an increase in visibility and representation has allowed women to take on more prominent and influential roles within martial arts

communities. Ultimately, as women continue to rise within martial arts, they are not just entering the fight but redefining what it means to fight.

Works Sited

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