

GENDER ISSUES IN TAEKWONDO ¹

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Abstract: The aim of this research³ was to examine the impact of gender issues on the experiences of male and female athletes in taekwondo, with a special focus on the perception of equality, stereotypes about martial arts, as well as challenges and opportunities for athlete development regardless of gender. The research sample included thirty taekwondo practitioners of both genders from the Taekwondo Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, representing five different clubs. The study was conducted using a qualitative approach, applying the in-depth interview technique. Based on qualitative coding methods, the final version of the coding tree identified three areas and five categories, with corresponding dimensions of gender issues in taekwondo. The research showed that gender equality and stereotypes in taekwondo are complex and dynamic issues. Although progress has been made in perception and practice, stereotypes still partially influence athletes' experiences, especially those of female athletes. The results indicate that family and community play a crucial role in overcoming these obstacles, while institutional investments and continuous education can further contribute to improving gender equality in this sport.

Keywords: *aspects of equality, competitors, martial arts*

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality in sport is an important research topic, especially in martial arts, which have traditionally been perceived as "male" sports (Kavoura et al., 2014). Research indicates that women in martial arts often experience stereotypes, prejudices, and unequal treatment, while men face pressures to always be physically dominant over women (Channon & Matthews, 2018; Đorđević, 2020). However, in the modern world, there is an increasing presence of women in martial arts. In combat disciplines such as taekwondo and boxing, women's achievements have led to the redefinition of gender roles (Mennesson, 2000; Paradis, 2012). Taekwondo, as a sport in which equality is formally regulated by law, provides an excellent foundation for analysing gender issues.

The aim of this research was to examine how male and female athletes of the Taekwondo Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina perceive gender equality in this sport, with a focus on stereotypes, community support, and opportunities for advancement. By using qualitative research methods, the attitudes of athletes from five different clubs were analysed, allowing for a comprehensive examination of this issue.

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³ The research was conducted as a mini-project within the Taekwondo Association of Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose aim was to achieve better understanding of gender equality and the experience of sportsmen and sportswomen in taekwondo.

METHOD

The methods applied in this research were selected in accordance with the defined problem, aim, and research tasks. These include the method of theoretical analysis and synthesis, as well as the survey or descriptive research method. Depending on the applied research methods and the context of studying and examining variables, the following scientific research techniques were used: survey technique and in-depth (qualitative) interview, document analysis, and content analysis.

Respondent Sample

The research sample was selected from the population of taekwondo athletes in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The sample consists of a total of 30 male and female athletes from five clubs. The age of the athletes ranges from 12 to 18 years, with an average age of 15 years.

Variables

In this non-experimental study, dependent and independent variables were defined. The dependent variables are the athletes' attitudes toward gender issues in taekwondo. The independent variables are the club, gender, age of the athlete, and years of training. The qualitative research procedure and field data collection were conducted during 2024.

Instruments

For the purposes of this research, independently created instruments were used: the Athlete Survey Questionnaire (ASQ) and the Athlete Interview Protocol (AIP). The Athlete Survey Questionnaire consists of four mixed-type questions. The defined questions in the questionnaire include: the club in which the athlete trains, the athlete's gender, the athlete's age, and years of experience in taekwondo.

The Athlete Interview Protocol consists of seven predefined questions (Table 1). Three groups of questions were identified: questions related to the experiences of boys and girls in taekwondo, questions about the existing stereotypes and prejudices in martial arts, and questions regarding the support of family, friends, and the community. The interview protocol is designed for individual and indirect examination of the attitudes of male and female taekwondo athletes. The collected data were processed through an analysis that included the following steps: transcription, coding, analysis, reaching conclusions, and report writing.

Table 1. *Athlete Interview Protocol (AIP)*

Questions:
1. How do male and female athletes perceive their position in the club?
2. Is there a difference in the coach's approach toward boys and girls?
3. To what extent is equal opportunity for advancement (participation in seminars and competitions) available to male and female athletes?
4. What stereotypes have you encountered regarding martial arts?
5. Is there additional societal pressure for boys to be the strongest?
6. What are the comments from family and friends about practicing taekwondo in the context of gender?
7. Does the community equally support boys and girls in their sports ambitions?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research results indicate that male and female athletes recognize increasing equality in taekwondo, particularly in terms of training conditions and opportunities for competition and advancement. This is also confirmed by the studies conducted by Antekolović (2019) and Jovanović (2017), which highlight that institutional support contributes to a more equal treatment of athletes of all genders.

However, stereotypes are still present. Participants in this study pointed out that they often face the perception that martial arts are "rough" and "masculine," which is consistent with previous research (Lafferty & McKay, 2004; Savić, 2018). Girls, in particular, often encountered negative comments and discouragement from their surroundings at the beginning of their training, a trend also observed in the findings of Tadić (2018) and Owton (2015). On the other hand, the success of female athletes, such as winning Olympic medals, has significantly contributed to changes in these attitudes (Petrović, 2020). In martial arts like taekwondo, social and cultural barriers still exist for girls and women, as confirmed by Milenković's findings (2021). According to this author, inclusive policies and continuous education are essential for improving gender equality in combat sports.

Family and community support have been recognized as key factors in motivation and long-term engagement in sports. As noted by Kim and King (2016), achieving gender equality in sport requires the involvement of the broader community, which aligns with the results of this research. Participants emphasized that local communities recognize and reward athletes' achievements regardless of gender, although there is still a need for greater investment at the national level. This is consistent with the findings of Stojanović and Đorđević (2020), who identified the importance of systemic support in achieving gender equality in sports.

Challenges related to social pressures on boys to be stronger and physically dominant over girls are also present, as confirmed by the research conducted by Velija and Flynn (2020). Our results indicate that taekwondo athletes in Bosnia and Herzegovina perceive their roles in clubs as equal, with the same access to competitions and seminars, which contributes to changing perceptions of gender inequality.

Media attention and social recognition of female athletes' achievements have proven to be key aspects of promoting women in martial arts (Petrović, 2020). Although women in martial arts have made significant progress, they still face stereotypes that portray them as less capable than men. According to Radosavljević (2021), female athletes' success in competitions is crucial for breaking these prejudices, but ensuring greater social promotion and support for their careers remains essential.

Table 2. *Coding Tree – Girls' Experiences in Taekwondo, Stereotypes and Prejudices in Martial Arts, and Family and Local Community Support*

AREAS	CATEGORIES	DIMENSIONS
1. Experiences and perceptions of young athletes in taekwondo	1. Athlete's position in the club 2. Advancement opportunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equal position in training and competitions. • Respect for athletes' abilities. • Equal advancement opportunity.
2. Stereotypes in martial arts: gender, strength, and prejudices	3. Martial arts are "men's sports" 4. Pressure on boys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facing comments that martial arts are for men. • Martial arts are rough and aggressive sports. • Boys are more successful and stronger than girls.
3. The power of support: the role of family, friends, and community	5. Equal support for boys and girls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of support from family and friends. • The community equally values and rewards boys and girls.

In line with the specific research questions and the qualitative coding method, the defined areas, categories, and dimensions—i.e., athletes' opinions on gender issues in taekwondo—are presented in tabular form (Table 2).

1. Experiences and Perceptions of Youth in Taekwondo

Athlete's Position in the Club

Athlete 3: "The coach treats all athletes equally; he is respectful and professional in his interactions with both boys and girls."

Athlete 19: "The position of athletes in the club is equal regardless of gender. We have the same training opportunities."

Athlete 30: "The coach acknowledges the physical differences between boys and girls."

These responses indicate a positive approach in practice, where gender equality is respected at the club level while also considering athletes' physical differences. They also suggest that all athletes have an equal standing, which is crucial for fostering a supportive and competitive environment. However, it would be valuable to further investigate how such attitudes impact the long-term development of athletes and their competitive opportunities regardless of gender.

Opportunities for Advancement

Athlete 16: "All athletes, regardless of gender, have the same opportunity to attend competitions and sports seminars."

Athlete 29: "All athletes in the club have equal rights and opportunities for advancement."

These responses confirm the existence of equal rights among athletes, which is a positive indication that fundamental principles of equality are upheld in taekwondo clubs in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Male and female taekwondo athletes in Bosnia and Herzegovina perceive their positions as equal, with the same opportunities for training, advancement, and competition. The participants' responses highlight that recognizing athletes' abilities is a key factor that contributes to a positive sports atmosphere and achieving top-level results.

Coaches in clubs demonstrate equal treatment toward all athletes, regardless of gender, while considering individual physical abilities. Athletes report being treated with respect and provided with the same opportunities for development and progress.

2. Stereotypes in Martial Arts: Gender, Strength, and Prejudices

Martial Arts as "Masculine Sports"

Athlete 6: "When I started practicing taekwondo, I often encountered comments that I was training a 'masculine' sport."

Athlete 14: "I heard comments that taekwondo is not for girls and that it is a rough sport."

These responses point to deeply rooted stereotypes that women in martial arts strive to break. This indicates the need to change the societal perceptions of women in combat sports.

Athlete 23: "I think these prejudices started to fade when Milica Mandić won an Olympic medal in combat."

The success of female athletes like Milica Mandić contributes to reducing gender biases in martial arts. This response highlights a positive shift and the role of media promotion in changing societal perceptions of women in sports.

Pressure on Boys

Athlete 1: "I don't think we (boys) are more successful than girls."

This response reflects progress in the thinking of young athletes. Young athletes recognize gender equality in martial arts, which is a sign of positive change in our region.

Athlete 22: "When I started training, I often heard comments that I must not be weaker than the girls."

This response indicates the pressure related to competition with girls. It highlights the existence of social norms that pressure male athletes to "prove" their strength.

Athlete 28: "Anyone familiar with martial arts knows that there are specific competition categories.

Boys' and girls' physical strength is never compared in competitions."

Such opinions emphasize the importance of respecting different competition categories, which can contribute to reducing stereotypes regarding athletes' physical abilities.

3. The Strength of Support: The Role of Family, Friends, and the Community

Equal Support for Boys and Girls

Athlete 11: "My brother and I receive great support from our parents in practicing taekwondo."

Athlete 18: "My parents suggested I start training taekwondo to learn basic self-defense techniques."

Athlete 25: "My mother says I have gained more confidence since I started training taekwondo. I have my parents' support."

These responses indicate a positive family support dynamic, which is crucial for an athlete's development regardless of gender. Family support can be motivating and confirms the importance of emotional backing in an athlete's progress.

Athlete 4: "The city equally rewards all achievements and athletes regardless of gender, age, or the sport they practice."

Athlete 9: "In our community, most sports achievements are recognized and valued."

Athlete 15: "The city supports athletes, and I would like to become the best female athlete in the city."

Athlete 25: "There is support from the local community, but I believe that at the national level, more investment should be made in athletes and their careers, regardless of gender."

These responses highlight the presence of fair social support and the recognition of sports achievements regardless of gender, which is a key factor in promoting equality in sports. The athletes' answers contribute to a deeper understanding of their attitudes and experiences related to gender issues in taekwondo, as well as the social and cultural norms influencing their careers.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that gender equality and stereotypes in taekwondo are complex and dynamic issues. The results show that male and female athletes perceive their positions in clubs as equal, with the same level of support from coaches, family, and the community. However, the broader socio-cultural context still imposes certain obstacles, particularly for girls and women, through deeply rooted stereotypes and expectations about gender roles in sports.

Although local communities recognize and reward athletic achievements regardless of gender, societal norms can still create pressure and discourage girls at the beginning of their involvement in martial arts. Family and community support have proven to be crucial factors in overcoming these barriers, while institutional investment and continuous education can further enhance gender equality.

These findings align with the work of several authors, including Spancer (2014) and Channon & Phipps (2017), who emphasize the need for further research and the implementation of inclusive strategies in sports communities. With increased awareness and systemic support at all levels, taekwondo can become an example of a sport that truly promotes gender equality, providing all athletes with equal opportunities for advancement and success.

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